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YOU AREN'T REALLY BLACK, YOU AREN'T REALLY WHITE

RACIAL DENIALS AND EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE IN THE BLACK-WHITE MULTIRACIAL COMMUNITY

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MULTIRACIAL PERSONS, e.g., people with parents of multiple races, are a significant demographic group within the US. Nevertheless, philosophical work on race has largely, and problematically, elided this group: we have ignored their distinctive racial experiences, and we have failed to deeply engage with the philosophical issues raised by multiraciality. This essay begins to correct that neglect by seeking to understand one aspect of multiracial experience—specifically, racial denials. A racial denial occurs when a person's description of their racial identity (e.g., "I am Black") is challenged or called into doubt. While monoracial individuals can generally assert their race without being challenged (e.g., "I am Black," "I am White," "I am Asian"), multiracial individuals cannot always do so. Upon asserting "I am Black" or "I am White," a multiracial person may be met with the rejoinder, "You aren't *really* Black" or "You aren't *really* White."[1]

Through a consideration of racial denials, this essay aims to demonstrate that, in many cases, multiracial individuals face a hermeneutically unjust epistemic environment. This unjust epistemic environment is significant because it can undercut a person's ability to understand and communicate her racialized experiences. To make this argument, I will carefully tease apart how different kinds of racial denials operate. My focus will be on illuminating the *epistemic injustice*

1 There are a number of sociological treatments of racial denials among multiracial persons. For classic treatments, see Root, "The Multiracial Experience"; Hall, "Please Choose One." For more recent discussion, see Song, "Who Counts as Multiracial?"; Townsend, Markus, and Bergsieker, "My Choice, Your Categories."

Although this paper focuses on racial denials directed at multiracial people, it is important to note that multiracial individuals are not the only ones to experience racial denials, e.g., monoracial individuals with ambiguous racial appearance may also face racial denials.

involved in these racial denials. That is, I will be focusing on ways that multiracial individuals are damaged in their capacity as communicators and self-knowers.[2] Moreover, by providing a careful description of how epistemic injustice operates within certain racial denials, I will draw out a number of larger implications for how we might understand race and epistemic injustice generally.

Before I begin, here are several preliminary notes. First, for reasons of scope, this essay will focus on multiracial individuals with Black and White ancestry. Careful sociological work has highlighted the distinctive experiences of different multiracial groups. For instance, Strmic-Pawl has argued that persons of Asian-White descent are "closer" to Whiteness, and they thus experience their mixedness quite differently from those of Black-White descent.[3] In a different vein, Rudy Guevarra Jr., has argued that the historical influence of Spanish colonialism has created deep affinities between Mexican and Filipino culture; because of this, persons of mixed Mexican-Filipino descent have generally been well-accepted by both their cultures.[4] In light of work like this, it seems judicious to begin an inquiry into multiracial experience by focusing our gaze on a specific subgroup—namely, persons with one Black parent and one White parent.[5] While I suspect that much of what I say here will generalize to other multiracial groups, this should not be assumed. For the rest of this paper, I will use the term "multiracial" or "multiracial individual" to refer *only* to members of this subgroup. I will occasionally use the longer term "Black-White multiracial individual" to remind the reader of this focus.

Second, I aim to largely eschew the thorny question: What is race? Let us allow that there are races but be agnostic (for the most part) about the details—biology, social construction, ancestry, etc. I will have some remarks later to make about the metaphysics of race. For now, however, we need only the observation that many monoracial people are able to unproblematically claim a race (e.g., "I am White," "I am Black," "I am Asian"), but that people of mixed ancestry sometimes face racial denials—that is, their racial self-descriptions are rejected.

Finally, a word on the significance of this project. Decades ago, Black feminists, such as bell hooks, convincingly argued that feminist theory needed to move people of color "from the margins to the center." In a similar way, there

2 This language paraphrases that found in Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

3 Strmic-Pawl, *Multiracialism and Its Discontents.*

4 Guevarra, *Becoming Mexipino.*

5 To be fair, this definition is too narrow. For instance, a person may have a mixed parent or a Black grandparent. For the purposes of this paper, however, it will be helpful to have a clearly defined population for "multiracial." For more on the debate about how to define "multiracial," see Song, "Who Counts as Multiracial?"; Alba, *The Great Demographic Illusion*.

is both a theoretical and ethical imperative for philosophy of race to center the lives of multiracial people. The theoretical imperative arises because, as amply demonstrated by the last decades of feminist work, reflection on the lives of those at the margins has tremendous potential to enrich our understanding. That is, by examining a less-often scrutinized sector of life (i.e., women of color, multiracial experience), we can gain perspective and insight with respect to issues of broad philosophical significance. In this case, I will argue that analyzing racial denials can add nuance to our understanding of racial and epistemic injustice.

More importantly, there is an ethical imperative. In the case of feminism, it was necessary for White feminism to become more inclusive because, at bottom, the lives of women of color are just as interesting and important as those of White women—and therefore deserve equally substantive philosophical engagement. Similarly, the lives and experiences of multiracial persons deserve sustained attention. If this is right, then philosophy of race has an ethical imperative to reflect seriously upon the philosophical issues that arise within the experience of multiracial people. Further, I would argue that part of "centering" multiracial people is to devote philosophical energy and attention specifically to those phenomena that matter *within the lives of multiracial people*. The focus of this essay—racial denials—reflects this conviction. Specifically, autobiographical and fictional narratives of multiraciality commonly include accounts of racial denials, elegantly articulating the pain, confusion, and racial self-scrutiny they engender. If racial denials matter in the lives of multiracial people, and if multiracial people are to be centered in philosophy, then there is an ethical imperative to subject racial denials to sustained philosophical treatment.

1. RACIAL IDENTITIES AMONG BLACK-WHITE MULTIRACIAL INDIVIDUALS

Before making sense of racial denials per se, we must first understand the racial claims that multiracial individuals are apt to make. How do Black-White multiracial individuals racially identify? Existing literature suggests that contemporary Black-White multiracial individuals identify in a wide variety of ways. For instance, Davenport found that 25 percent of Black-White multiracial college freshmen identified as Black, 5 percent identified as White, and the remainder designated their race as "other" or as both "Black" and "White."[6]

To better understand such findings, it is helpful to move beyond statistical data and incorporate first-personal accounts from autobiography and

6 Davenport, *Politics beyond Black and White*, 49. Davenport's methodology is more fully described later in the book (192).

sociology.[7] One of the most thorough and sensitive investigations of racial identity among Black-White multiracial individuals was conducted by Rockquemore and Brunsma, who offer the following taxonomy.[8]

> *Singular Black Identity*: Multiracial individuals with a singular Black identity conceive of their racial identity as solely Black. For instance, Aisha has a White mother and Black father, and she strongly identifies as Black.[9] Aisha relates a personal history in which she has been largely rejected by her White family, and she describes herself as "looking mostly black."[10] She currently attends a mostly White college, where most people assume she is Black, and she has experienced multiple racist incidents.
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> *Singular White Identity*: Black-White multiracial individuals with a singular White identity conceive of their racial identity as solely White. While it is uncommon for a Black-White multiracial individual to identify solely as White, it is not unheard of; as noted earlier, roughly one out of twenty contemporary Black-White multiracial individuals identifies as White.[11]
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> As an example of someone who identifies as White, consider Michelle, the daughter of a Black father and White mother. Michelle grew up in an upper-middle-class home and went to schools that were almost all White. Her friends have mostly been White. She acknowledges that she is "part African American," but she ultimately identifies solely as White.[12] Rockquemore and Brunsma offer the following characterization of her reasoning: "Her logic for determining her racial identification is that she *looks* white, she is *identified by others* as white, she was *raised* in a white community, she is *culturally* white, and therefore, she *is* white."[13] In another telling passage, they write, "Michelle so deeply

7 In addition to the obvious descriptive richness of first-personal accounts, many scholars have emphasized the centrality of first-personal narratives in personal identity and ethics. See works such as Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Alcoff, *Visible Identities*; Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*; Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go*.

8 Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black*. While Rockquemore and Brunsma's book is more than twenty years old, their case studies are particularly vivid. Subsequent work has largely validated the analysis they offered. See Renn, *Mixed Race Students in College* and "Research on Biracial and Multiracial Identity Development."

9 Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black*, 39–40. All names are pseudonyms, as assigned by the researchers.

10 Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black*, 39.

11 Davenport, *Politics beyond Black and White*, 49.

12 Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black*, 41.

13 Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black*, 41.

and clearly self-identifies as white that she describes the act of claiming a Black identity on her college admissions forms as 'passing for black.'"[14] Michelle's language of passing for Black is striking in that it underscores her sense that she is not, in fact, Black.

Border Identity: Black-White individuals with a border identity may identify using terms like "mixed" or "biracial." Those with a border identity see it as an identity that is neither White nor Black, but a distinct way to exist racially: living between two racial identities. Rockquemore and Brunsma's most detailed case study of a border identity is Anthony. Anthony's father left his family when he was quite young, and he was raised predominantly by his White mother and her family. Anthony attends a predominantly White high school in a rural community in Ohio. Among the non-White students at his school, roughly half have multiracial families. Anthony and his multiracial peers strongly identify as biracial. Indeed, Anthony describes himself by saying, "I'm *not* black, I'm biracial."[15]

While Anthony sees his biracial identity as an alternative to being Black, other multiracial individuals and theorists have interpreted the term "biracial" or "mixed" as potentially inclusive of other racial identities. For instance, Tina Fernandes Botts has characterized Black-White multiracials as both "black and mixed," and the filmmaker Lacey Schwartz has described "biracial" as being a subtype of Black.[16] In these cases, a person treats a biracial identity as compatible with a Black identity.

Protean Identity: Individuals with a protean identity see themselves as shifting between multiple identities, depending on the setting. For example, when Mike was asked about his racial identification, he replied, "Well shit, it depends on what day it is and where I'm goin'."[17] Mike, the son of a minister, is comfortable shuttling between his town's all-White and all-Black communities. As he moves between these groups, he adjusts his behavior; in doing so, he is not just performing, or playing at, being Black and being White. He sincerely understands himself as Black when he is with Black individuals, as White when he is with White individuals, and as biracial when he is with biracial individuals. Moreover, he feels that others validate his identity as Black, White, or

14 Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black*, 42.

15 Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black*, 43. Anthony's desire to be "*not* black" may be ethically problematic. For a discussion of the ethics of rejecting Blackness, see Sundstrom, "Being and Being Mixed Race" and *The Browning of America*.

16 Botts, *Philosophy and the Mixed Race Experience*, 6; Schwartz, *Little White Lie.*

17 Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black*, 47.

> biracial across these contexts. This ability to be authentically at home in multiple racial identities is something he values about himself. Because he is authentically at home in various identities, and because he shifts between them, he thinks of himself as genuinely being Black, White, and biracial at different times.

In reading Rockquemore and Brunsma's case studies, it is tempting to challenge or reinterpret some of the claims made by interviewees. Mike, for instance, says that his racial identity "depends on what day it is, and where I'm goin'," but one might object that he cannot possibly mean this literally. Race, after all, simply is not the sort of thing that changes based on the day or setting. As another example, Michelle acknowledges that her parentage makes her "part African American"; given this, it may seem incoherent for her to characterize herself as White. That is, one might object that a person simply cannot have an African American parent and also be White. These kinds of responses are examples of *racial denials*.

In the remainder of this essay, I will examine the phenomenon of racial denials. I will argue that certain kinds of racial denials can be understood as products of unjust epistemic environments, although the exact form of the injustice varies according to the case. My analysis will begin by considering racial denials that call into question complex racial claims, such as those made by Mike (section 2), before turning to racial denials which target claims of being singularly White (section 3) or singularly Black (section 4).

2. Racial Denials: Monoraciality and Immutability

To understand racial denials that are directed at those with complex multiracial identities, it is helpful to first characterize two common assumptions about race: *monoraciality* and *immutability*. Monoraciality refers to the assumption that a person can only be one race; immutability refers to the assumption that a person's race cannot change.[18]

Monoraciality is challenged when a multiracial person asserts that she is of more than one race. For instance, as noted above, Botts describes Black-White multiracial people as both "mixed and Black," although she feels compelled to defend this, saying, "despite popular understandings of race in the United States, racial identity need not be an either/or proposition."[19] Botts's defensiveness is not misplaced—because of monoraciality, multiracial individuals who claim more than one racial identity face racial denials. For instance, Caroline

18 Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, and Fojas, "Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies," 12–14.

19 Botts, *Philosophy and the Mixed Race Experience*, 6.

Ware, who identifies as Black and biracial, describes being asked, "Which side do you identify with most?" That is, her peers attempt to reformulate her self-described identity in terms that are consistent with monoraciality.[20] More generally, sociologists Johnston and Nadal have described how monoraciality undergirds a pattern of microaggressions encountered by multiracial individuals, including the demand that "You have to choose. You can't be both."[21]

Another way in which some multiracial individuals challenge prevailing notions of race is by claiming that they can move from one race to another—that is, rejecting the assumption that racial identity is immutable. Mike is an example of someone who experiences, and describes, his racial identity as fluid. Similarly, we might consider this excerpt from an interview with a young woman, Jane:

> It was always "mixed" when I was growing up. I think as I've gotten older, there's been a bigger focus on being black because of hearing awful things that happen in the black community and to black people and just identifying with that and being so struck by it and hurt by it. . . . It varies on the situation. Like when people say discriminatory things about black people, I identify more strongly with being a black woman. And then when there are comments about being mixed-race, I comment on my experience with that.[22]

Other research has confirmed this pattern: for some multiracial individuals, racial identity is situationally dependent.[23] Indeed, fluid conceptions of race are not uncommon; for example, a recent analysis found that mixed-race adolescents were four times more likely to *shift* their race than to identify consistently over time.[24]

Let us allow that multiracial people sometimes make claims that challenge monoraciality and/or immutability. These kinds of claims can lead to racial denials, where a person's self-ascribed racial identity is rejected ("You have to choose, you can't be both") or challenged ("Mike can't *really* mean that race is fluid"). How should we understand the phenomenon of racial denials?

One way to take up this question is to use the concept of *hermeneutical injustice*, as developed by Miranda Fricker.[25] On Fricker's view, individuals draw

20 Williams and Ware, "A Tale of Two 'Halfs.'"

21 Johnston and Nadal, "Multiracial Microaggressions," 133.

22 Davenport, *Politics beyond Black and White*, 85.

23 See Renn, "Research on Biracial and Multiracial Identity Development"; and Davenport, "The Fluidity of Racial Classifications"

24 Hitlin, Brown, and Elder, "Racial Self-Categorization in Adolescence."

25 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice.*

on communal resources, such as shared concepts, to describe their own and others' experiences. Roughly, hermeneutical injustice occurs when a community's conceptual resources unfairly lack important concepts; because of this, a person's ability to understand or communicate some aspect of their experience is diminished.

To illustrate the notion of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker describes the development of the concept of sexual harassment. Before this concept was available, women who were victimized by sexually inappropriate behavior struggled to make sense of their experiences. For instance, one woman, Carmita Wood, had a supervisor who repeatedly jiggled his crotch, brushed her breasts, and at one point forcibly kissed her on the mouth. However, without the notion of sexual harassment, "Wood was at a loss to describe the hateful episode. She was ashamed and embarrassed."[26] Wood faces a gap, or lacuna, in the community's interpretive resources, and this gap makes it difficult for her to understand and communicate her experiences. The presence of a lacuna is a key characteristic of hermeneutical injustice: the collectively available resources do not include the concepts necessary to adequately understand and describe certain important aspects of people's lives.

The notion of hermeneutical injustice is important for our purposes because it calls attention to the way that gaps in communicative resources constrain our ability to communicate and to understand *ourselves*. When Wood was harassed, she had trouble articulating the experience to others; beyond this, she herself struggled to make sense of what was happening. For Fricker, limitations on conceptual resources impact our ability to communicate our experiences to others, as well as our self-understanding.

In a similar way, multiracial people often struggle to make sense of their racialized experiences and to communicate these experiences in ways that are intelligible to others. Consider, for instance, the words of Elliott Lewis in his autobiography. After facing a racial denial by a local business owner, he writes, "I didn't have the words . . . the intertwining of race, color and ancestry had rendered me speechless. I had no vocabulary to respond confidently or effectively to questions about my mixed and matched family."[27] Mariah Root, the noted multiracial activist, seems to be responding to a similar vocabulary failure when, in her well-known "Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," she writes, "I have the right to *create* a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial."[28] It is necessary to create a vocabulary precisely because there are gaps in the

26 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 150.

27 Lewis is quoted in McKibbin, *Shades of Gray,* 66–67.

28 Root, *The Multiracial Experience,* 7 (emphasis added).

existing available linguistic and conceptual resources. And Tina Grillo writes, "We have no stable conventions for describing multiracial persons, at least none that match what we perceive to be reality."[29]

The framework of hermeneutical injustice helps make sense of these examples. Put simply, our communal resources lack the concepts that these individuals need to describe themselves. The speakers have difficulty understanding and expressing their racial experiences because they face an emaciated vocabulary. Without shared communicative tools, listeners, in turn, have difficulty making sense of their claims. As Fricker writes, "Hermeneutical injustice most typically manifests in the speaker struggling to make herself intelligible in a testimonial exchange."[30] Indeed, even when a speaker uses language quite plainly, as Mike does, there may be little uptake from his hearers. Because of the conceptual gap in our shared resources, listeners may attempt to reinterpret Mike's racial claims in nonliteral ways (e.g., as a joke, bravado, or something similar). In short, listeners issue a racial denial. Racial denials, then, are a symptom of a deeper problem: speakers face a lacuna such that they lack adequate concepts to fully describe some important realm of their experience.

Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice includes a second important component. Specifically, hermeneutical injustice arises when (a) there is a gap in conceptual resources *and* (b) the gap is an unjust one. For instance, in the case of sexual harassment, the reason the concept was not yet available can be explained by the fact that women were hermeneutically marginalized; that is, they were systematically denied the ability to shape and contribute to the interpretive resources in the culture.[31] For example, women did not hold leadership in major media outlets—positions from which they might be able to exert influence on shared interpretative resources. Not every lacuna is due to marginalization or some other form of injustice. In some cases, as Fricker writes, a gap may simply be "a poignant case of circumstantial epistemic bad luck."[32]

If we are to understand the lacuna around multiraciality as a case of hermeneutical *injustice*, we must therefore investigate why, exactly, communal resources lack nuanced concepts to describe multiracial experience. Here, I want to suggest we take seriously the possibility that multiracial persons, particularly those reporting complex racial identities, have been hermeneutically marginalized with respect to questions of race. Multiracial individuals have been reporting, for decades, that they have a wide variety of racial

29 Grillo, "Anti-Essentialism and Intersectionality."

30 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 159.

31 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 155.

32 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 152.

self-understandings and that their self-understandings are sometimes characterized by multiple and/or fluid identities. Indeed, those who have attended carefully to this space (e.g., the sociologists who have studied this population) have routinely noted this fact. Nevertheless, multiracial testimony to this effect has failed to have a significant impact on ordinary, communally shared conceptual resources around race.

One possible explanation for this is that multiracial people, particularly those who exhibit complex identities, are marginalized with respect to shaping communal resources around race: that is, multiracial persons are assigned a subordinate role in the communicative practices that develop, establish, change, and reinforce notions of race. In particular, because multiracial people do not have "regular," "normal," "pure," or "unambiguous" racial identities, a multiracial person is not seen as having the standing to speak authoritatively about race—including, in particular, the question of what it is to be Black. This status, that of being authoritative with respect to some realm of experience, or of having the standing to speak to it, is a kind of power—a kind of power that may be denied to multiracial people in virtue of the fact that they are multiracial. This, then, is the sense in which multiracial people may be marginalized with respect to crafting communal resources around race: because they lack a "normal" racial background, they are seen as less authoritative with respect to questions of race.

If this is right, then we need to grapple with the power dynamics of who controls communal resources with respect to racial concepts in order to fully understand why norms of monoraciality and immutability remain unchallenged. Insofar as multiracial people are assigned a subordinate status with respect to crafting communal resources around race, this will form part of the explanation for why our collective resources for understanding race continue to be gappy. Of course, marginalization will only form part of the complete explanation. In particular, a full accounting must also describe the role such lacunae play in maintaining White-supremacist norms, a topic that forms the focus of the next section of this paper. Nevertheless, the ongoing epistemic marginalization of multiracial people vis-à-vis questions of race should also be considered. Were we to take seriously the authority of multiracial people to speak on matters of race, instead of issuing racial denials, our communal resources might prove more labile.

In summary, I have proposed that our hermeneutical environment has gaps and that these gaps may be partly due to the epistemic marginalization of multiracial people around questions of race. This analysis is important in two respects. First, it helps make sense of certain characteristic experiences of multiracial persons. For a multiracial person, this gap in hermeneutical resources may hinder one's ability to communicate certain important aspects of one's life,

leading to racial denials. In addition, it may make more difficult one's project of *self*-understanding. Second, if I am correct that multiracial persons have been unjustly marginalized in shaping our conceptual resources around race, this gives us reason to critically reexamine our concepts. Once we listen carefully to *all* voices about race, not just monoracial voices, this may lead us to a more sophisticated vocabulary around racial fluidity and racial multiplicity.

To conclude this section, I want to touch on several issues. First, it is important to situate Fricker's work against a Black feminist tradition. Decades before Fricker's work, Black feminists raised concerns about who circumscribes and controls the conceptual resources around race. [33] For instance, Angela P. Harris has argued that White feminists are too apt to project their own understanding of gender onto Black women in ways that flatten, obscure, and demean.[34] Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins has argued that Black women are subject to "*externally*-defined stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood" and that there is power and benefit to *self*-definition.[35] For Collins, it is politically and ethically unjust for one group of people to control the conceptual resources used to describe the experiences of some other group of people; in particular, it is unjust for White persons to generate derogatory stereotypes to characterize the lives of Black women.

This tradition, then, encourages us to think about epistemic injustice as a space in which one group of people defines and controls the conceptual resources used to understand another group. On the picture I have sketched, monoracial persons tend to dominate and control the conceptual resources around race: monoracial people define what race is and how it works. Further, monoracial people deploy these resources to describe and understand the experiences of multiracial people. This is particularly vivid in cases of racial denials: monoracial persons explicitly refuse a multiracial person the opportunity for self-definition. Reflecting on Fricker's work within the larger context of Black feminist thought brings this aspect of multiraciality into sharper focus.[36]

At the same time, there are important differences. In particular, Collins paints a picture on which just and liberatory concepts are already available within the Black community. That is, for Collins, the Black community has empowering images of Black womanhood, but these concepts are ignored or overridden by White outsiders; different communities operate with different

33 A number of authors have noted the debt that Fricker's work owes to Black feminists. See, for instance, Anderson, "Epistemic Injustice and the Philosophy of Race"; Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice"; and Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale."

34 Harris, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory."

35 Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within," S17 (emphasis added).

36 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer who encouraged this direction of analysis.

conceptual resources, and one community imposes its concepts on another. In contrast, I have painted a picture on which even multiracial people *themselves* lack adequate vocabulary to understand complex racialized experience. In this respect, the epistemic position of multiracial people is similar to that of women before the concept of sexual harassment: even the community most impacted by the phenomenon lacks the vocabulary to fully articulate it, both to themselves and to others.[37]

Finally, I want to revisit the thorny question set aside earlier: What is race? Racial terms are notoriously complex and admit of many different interpretations. One might worry that the project I have undertaken here makes substantive assumptions about the nature of race, and that those assumptions need to be brought to light. For instance, consider biological and ancestral accounts of race.[38] If these accounts are correct, it is simply false that race is fluid: ancestry and biology are fixed, and therefore cannot vary based on context. If so, it would appear that Mike is making a straightforward factual error when says his race "depends on what time it is and where I'm going." In contrast, on social constructionist accounts, it is feasible to envision sociopolitical roles as fluid and context sensitive. [39] Does my discussion therefore rest on a nonbiological notion of race?

While this is a natural concern, it can be laid to rest; my discussion aims to be agnostic, and a proponent of biological races can, indeed, endorse my account. To see this, consider two arguments—both of which point back to gappy hermeneutical resources. First, suppose that ancestral/biological accounts are correct and that Mike *is* saying something false. For the purposes of this essay, the important point here is that *he does so precisely because he lacks a sufficient vocabulary to describe his experience*. Mike is not trying to deceive us; he is trying—earnestly and sincerely—to communicate something important about himself. He simply lacks the vocabulary necessary to do so without uttering a purported falsehood. More generally, the aim of this essay is not to vindicate the truth of Mike's claim but rather to diagnose the state of conceptual resources available to Mike.

Second, Mike's claim is literally *true*, even on a biological account, if we take him to be speaking about racial identity—roughly, a person's subjective sense of their race in their thought, emotions, actions, and self-understanding. That

37 Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale," offers a rich discussion of this contrast between Fricker and Collins.

38 For instance, see Hardimon, "The Ordinary Concept of Race"; Spencer, "A Radical Solution to the Race Problem"; Andreasen, "The Meaning of 'Race'"; and Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture."

39 Haslanger, for instance, makes this context sensitivity explicit in "Gender and Race."

is, we can expand our conceptual resources to differentiate between race and racial identity.[40] For most monoracial people, there is no need to differentiate between race and racial identity: one is Black *and* one thinks of oneself as Black; one is White and one thinks of oneself as White. On the other hand, multiracial people sometimes need conceptual resources that tease race and racial identity apart. Whatever Mike's race is in biological terms (if, indeed, race is biological), his subjective sense of his racial *identity* shifts from context to context. The fact that most speakers lack the conceptual vocabulary to make this distinction is indicative of an important, ongoing gap in our hermeneutical resources.[41] (It is also, incidentally, a reason to value philosophy, and philosophy of race in particular.)

As both these responses illustrate, our focus is on diagnosing hermeneutical gaps. Questions of "What is race?" are, therefore, somewhat orthogonal. Perhaps it will turn out that some of the claims made by multiracial people are false—but this is to be expected when a person is working with inadequate resources. As philosophers, we can do useful work by identifying and diagnosing these gaps, and considering ways we might expand our conceptual resources.

3. RACIAL DENIALS: DENYING WHITENESS

In this section, I turn to a different kind of racial denial. As noted earlier, roughly 5 percent of Black-White multiracial individuals identify as White. For instance, Michelle (profiled above) has a Black and a White parent but identifies as singularly White. A substantive sociological literature attests to the racial denials faced by White-identifying multiracial individuals. As one woman relates, "I was never fully allowed to identify as white or as Caucasian because when people saw me, that wasn't what they saw."[42] In another study, an interviewee states, "People look at me crazy if I say I'm white."[43]

It is generally well-recognized that the notion of White excludes individuals of Black-White parentage. American racial categories are governed by the one-drop rule, under which one "drop" of Black blood is sufficient to render a

40 Appiah and Gutmann, "Race, Culture, Identity"; and Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity.*

41 I have focused this discussion on biological/ancestral accounts of race because their tension with racial fluidity is obvious. However, even on a social constructionist position, a notion of racial identity is needed. For instance, a multiracial person who appears White may be afforded White privilege and, in that regard, inhabit the social position of Whiteness. Nevertheless, she may identify as Black or biracial. Haslanger makes precisely this point ("You Mixed?").

42 Davenport, *Politics beyond Black and White,* 78.

43 Khanna, "Ethnicity and Race as 'Symbolic.'"

person Black. As Naomi Zack has pointed out, this means that racial categories are applied asymmetrically: having a Black ancestor is sufficient to make a person Black, but having a White ancestor does not render a person White.[44] The one-drop rule can be traced back to early American slavery, and it became widely accepted under Jim Crow.[45] More generally, this asymmetry is often put forward as a paradigmatic example of hypodescent—that is, American racial practices typically assign individuals of mixed heritages to the "lower" racial denomination.[46]

Given this, White-identifying Black-White multiracial individuals anticipate and encounter racial denials. How should we understand these racial denials, and do they arise out of hermeneutical injustice? The framework of hermeneutical injustice directs our attention to two key factors: Does a person like Michelle (1) face a hermeneutical gap, where (2) this gap exists because of injustice?[47] Both factors are relevant here. First, as just noted, the term "White" excludes individuals with significant Black ancestry; that is, there is no available concept in the US that allows one to describe the experience of existing as White, and that can be used by those with significant Black ancestry. Second, the *reason* that this gap exists is one grounded in injustice: the concept of Whiteness has been shaped by racial oppression. In particular, the asymmetry of the one-drop rule has ensured that individuals of mixed parentage are denied the privileges of Whiteness. Most notoriously, in the antebellum South, a child of a White father and Black slave was commonly deemed a slave.[48] Thus, the situation exhibits both features of Fricker's hermeneutical injustice.

Charles Mills has considered related issues in his essay, "But What Are You *Really*?" Mills argues that, given that races are not natural kinds, the rules that assign a person to a racial group, particularly a person of mixed parentage, will be arbitrary and politically motivated. For instance, while the US operates using hypodescent, Mills points out that *hyper*descent is an in-principle possibility, i.e., assigning a child to the highest racial group. Indeed, in some parts of the world, this possibility was actualized: in the Dutch East Indies, social elevation was the

44 Zack, *Race and Mixed Race.*

45 Davis, *Who Is Black?*

46 See, for instance, Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas*; Davis, *Who Is Black?*; Daniel, *More Than Black*; Khanna, *Biracial in America*; Jordan and Spickard, "Historical Origins of the One-Drop Racial Rule in the United States."

47 This analysis extends Fricker's account somewhat. A strict reading of Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* suggests that hermeneutical injustice arises *only* in cases of epistemic or hermeneutical marginalization. The injustice of the one-drop rule is, however, not limited to marginalization.

48 Davis, *Who Is Black?*

norm, and Dutch Asian offspring were treated as Dutch.[49] In general, rules for racial categorization, particularly the racial categorization of people of mixed descent, are arbitrary social creations—where these creations are shaped by the political interests of the elite. In the US, the conceptual architecture of hypodescent has served to hoard material and social advantage within White families.

In the previous section, my focus was primarily on the individual: in cases of hermeneutical injustice, one's ability to communicate to others may be impaired, and one's self-understanding may be damaged. While these issues also arise for denials of Whiteness, Mills's work draws our attention beyond the individual, i.e., to the broader social function of racial denials. Racial denials, particularly denials of Whiteness, serve to police and enforce existing racial categories. Insofar as these categories function, as Mills argues, to uphold the interest of political elites, racial denials are one mechanism by which White supremacy is stabilized.

More specifically, racial denials uphold extant racial categories by rendering invisible the very phenomena which might otherwise pose a challenge. That is, in a world of enforced hypodescent, Black-White persons "disappear" into existing racial categories; there is no need to revise or revisit our racial vocabularies. In this way, we face a kind of feedback loop: practices of hypodescent ensure that multiracial people are accommodated within existing racial categories, and the fact that multiracial people fit into existing racial categories tends to stabilize and legitimate these very categories.[50] Put differently, our gappy hermeneutical environment obscures certain aspects of our racial reality, which thereby leaves us with the impression that this racial vocabulary is adequate.

Such a picture may seem to suggest that we have compelling reason to accept Michelle's claim of Whiteness. After all, to issue a racial denial would be to uphold problematic racial categories and, ultimately, problematic practices of racial privilege. However, existing scholarship suggests that there are also important reasons to be wary of extending Whiteness in this way.[51] For instance, one might worry that multiracial persons who identify as White are moved by

49 Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 52.

50 I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point and offering some of the specific language employed here.

51 There is extant scholarship critiquing multiracial persons who identify as other than Black, although this literature typically focuses on those who characterize themselves as biracial/mixed instead of Black. Of course, these same concerns can be extended to those who identify as White. See, for instance, discussion in Sundstrom, "The Browning of America"; Davenport, "The Fluidity of Racial Classifications"; Zack, "Race and Mixed Race"; and Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk*. The phrase "escape hatch" was coined by Degler, *Neither Black nor White*.

internalized anti-Black sentiment or opportunism. In a different vein, some have argued that allowing multiracial people to identify in this way might serve as an "escape hatch" from Blackness, thereby undermining Black solidarity and Black political power. Finally, insofar as the concept of White inevitably invokes a hierarchy between Whiteness and other races, one might find it implausible to suggest that one can promote racial justice by expanding the scope of Whiteness.[52]

This essay cannot fully assess the question of whether, in the final analysis, the balance of reasons favors extending the concept of Whiteness to persons such as Michelle. I can, however, offer a clarification. A person like Michelle faces a hermeneutically unjust environment: she lives in a society with conceptual gaps rooted in injustice. This is true regardless of Michelle's particular motives for claiming Whiteness. However, in recognizing this, *one need not conclude that the only or best course of action is to thereby extend the extant concept of Whiteness to Michelle*. Perhaps this is the best course, but other responses are available. In particular, one might try to develop new, more liberatory concepts in order to make sense of experiences such as Michelle's. For instance, we might understand Michelle's experience of Whiteness using a cultural account of race, similar to that proposed by Chike Jeffers.[53] Jeffers argues that, while races do function hierarchically, racial groups can also function as cultural groups; we might use his account to suggest that Michelle identifies culturally as White through White-identified hobbies, music, and the like. The details and adequacy of Jeffers's account are not significant here. Rather, my point is that our response to a hermeneutical gap can be larger and more imaginative than simply granting Michelle admittance into an extant and problematic concept of Whiteness. When a person like Michelle offers a racial claim, we are not limited to merely issuing denials or offering uncritical acceptance. Instead, we can take her claim seriously, using it as an opening to critique our existing concepts of Whiteness and to create a richer vocabulary to capture the complexity of racial experience.

4. Racial Denials: Denying Blackness

A very different form of racial denial arises around denials of Blackness. Although roughly one out of four Black-White individuals identifies as singularly Black, multiracial individuals are not always accepted as Black.[54] For

52 For instance, both Haslanger and McPherson have treated hierarchy as central to Whiteness. See Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*; McPherson, "Deflating 'Race.'"

53 Jeffers, "Cultural Constructionism."

54 Davenport, *Politics beyond Black and White*.

instance, Sarah Ratliff relates an encounter with her roommate, who had failed to invite Ratliff to an event held by the Congressional Black Caucus:

> "Girl, you wouldn't have fit in there. You do know that membership is only open to African-Americans, don't you?"
> "Yeah, I know that. Why wouldn't I fit in?" I asked.
> "Girl, I know you think you are Black, but for real? Girl, you ain't really Black!" She left the room laughing and talking to herself. "Girlfriend, light as she is, thinks she's Black!"[55]

Sarah is the child of a White father and a mother who identified as Black, although her mother was also of mixed heritage. While both Sarah's parents were American, the family spent time in Nigeria, which is where Sarah was born. After Sarah's parents divorced, Sarah was influenced by a (presumably Black) man she terms her "surrogate father," who was active in the Black Panther movement and fostered her sense of Black pride. As the exchange above suggests, Sarah has an ambiguous appearance, and she can sometimes be seen as White. Sarah describes her Black identity as rooted in a sense of Black pride and solidarity, although racial denials such as these have led her to question whether she can legitimately lay claim to a Black identity.

Does Sarah face hermeneutical injustice? And in what way does her situation differ from Michelle's? To begin, we should note a key difference between the two cases: while it is generally thought that one cannot have significant Black ancestry and be White, it is fairly common to accept that one can have significant White ancestry and still be Black (i.e., the one-drop rule). Sarah's roommate, therefore, is using the term Black in a way that is contested and arguably nonstandard. Whereas Michelle faced a lacuna in communal conceptual resources, here the difficulty is that the conceptual resources are contested and fractured. There are multiple conceptions of Blackness, and Sarah and her roommate are using different definitions. For instance, we might construe her roommate as suggesting that Blackness has a necessary condition: one can only be Black if one's phenotype leaves one vulnerable to racism. Sarah, in contrast, has a conception of Blackness that does not include this condition.

If this is so, Sarah does not face hermeneutical injustice because there is no lacuna. Under the one-drop rule, which is widely (if problematically) accepted, Sarah's Black ancestry is a sufficient condition to render her Black; like many other Black people in the US, she has relatively light skin, but her family tree includes significant Black heritage, and she lives her life as a Black person. Thus, there is no *gap* in the conceptual resources available for Sarah to understand

55 Ratliff, *Being Biracial*, 34.

herself: she can describe herself as Black by utilizing this widely accepted notion of Blackness.

More generally, notice that a racial denial cannot create hermeneutical injustice. Hermeneutical injustice is a social phenomenon, a characteristic of the collective conceptual resources available to a person to understand herself. A racial denial, in contrast, is a local phenomenon, often taking place between just two individuals. Put concretely, a single individual (e.g., Sarah's roommate), utilizing one of several contested interpretations of a concept, cannot thereby create a gap in the community's conceptual resources. In this case, despite the roommate's racial denial, other understandings of Blackness still exist—the conceptual resources within Sarah's community have not changed.

While a racial denial cannot, on its own, create a hermeneutical gap, it can play an important, and related, role. In particular, while the roommate's racial denial cannot change the fact that multiple definitions of Blackness *exist* in the communal resources, the fact that these multiple definitions exist does not mean that Sarah, herself, can *access* all of these definitions. As a practical matter, it will be difficult for Sarah to understand herself as Black if the definition of Blackness she relies upon is not accepted by those close to her. Thus, while it is important to note that a racial denial by an individual does not change the communal resources that *exist*, it is equally important to note that racial denials—when issued in cases where there are multiple, contested conceptions—can function to ensure that certain racial conceptions are not *accessible* to an individual.

This gap, between what exists in conceptual resources and what a person can use to understand their lives, occurs in other contexts as well. For instance, a new parent of a disabled child might be aware of advocates who frame disability as a mere difference—as opposed to a difference that makes one worse off—but the parent might not yet find such a reconceptualization of disability personally compelling.[56] Or, to take a more mundane example, a well-meaning teacher might characterize a teen's difficult experience in class as "a learning opportunity." In contrast, the teen might characterize the same experience as "an embarrassing failure." While the teen is well aware of his teacher's conception, he simply does not see his experience in that way. He is capable of deploying the concept of a "learning opportunity," but it is not one that he is able to adopt into his worldview nor use to sincerely interpret his own experience. Similarly, Sarah is likely aware that there are many definitions of Blackness in the communal resources. Her difficulty is that racial denials from those close

56 For a philosophical defense of the status of disability as mere difference, see Barnes, *The Minority Body*.

to her have made it difficult for her to adopt into her own worldview an understanding of Blackness that would include herself.

Given that racial denials can make certain conceptions less accessible to a person, racial denials can make self-knowledge more difficult and can, therefore, harm the person in their capacity as a self-knower. That is, a racial denial issued at a person like Sarah harms her in various obvious senses (it wounds her feelings, it prevents her from entering into solidarity with other Black persons, etc.). Beyond this, a racial denial harms Sarah as a self-knower; insofar as she is unable to access and use socially available conceptions of Blackness, Sarah will be hindered in her capacity to make sense of her own racialized experience.

Given that these kinds of racial denials can be harmful, is the harm inflicted unjustly? In the exchange above, the roommate's attitude toward Sarah is dismissive: she fails to take into account, or at least minimizes, Sarah's ancestry and experiences. In failing to take Sarah's autobiography into account, she does not give her her due and, thereby, treats Sarah unjustly. She also fails to take into account that Sarah has a claim upon Blackness that is widely recognized on other notions of "Black." In using an interpretation of Blackness that harms Sarah, and in failing to take seriously her autobiography and her use of another communally available definition of Blackness, she treats Sarah unjustly. In committing this injustice, she does not change the communal hermeneutical resources, but her dismissiveness does unfairly and culpably inflict harm on Sarah.

As a final note, these discussions of racial denials may bring to mind the case of Nkechi Amare Diallo, better known as Rachel Dolezal. Diallo is of White parentage, although she identifies as Black. Many individuals (including many Black individuals) deny Diallo's claim to be Black—that is, they issue the racial denial "You aren't *really* Black." Can this account of racial denials help us understand Diallo's case?

Racial denials directed toward Diallo are very different from the racial denial that Sarah encountered. Sarah's case involved multiple conceptions of Blackness. In contrast, Diallo was not laying claim to some preexisting notion of Blackness, but rather trying to extend the concept beyond the boundaries that are currently available in communal resources. In this, her efforts have more in common with Michelle, who tries to extend the boundaries of Whiteness to include herself; both individuals propose using terms in ways that are not accepted by widespread community standards.

In the case of Michelle, I suggested that the situation is one of hermeneutical injustice because the historical reason that White is not available to her is rooted in racist oppression: defining White in this way served a historical and social goal of preventing Black-White multiracial people from having access to the goods that White people enjoyed. In contrast, while the concept of Black

is not available to Diallo, this is not because of racist oppression. That is, there is no known, significant American history in which persons of White descent have been denied the moniker "Black" as a way of limiting material and social privilege. Thus, while Diallo may face a gap in how she can self-identify, a gap she experiences as painful, this gap is not one of hermeneutical injustice since it is not due to unjust historical circumstances.[57]

In summary, racial denials targeting Blackness are not best understood as arising from hermeneutical injustice. Because of the one-drop rule, notions of Blackness are widely available that allow multiracial individuals to claim a Black identity. Nevertheless, these racial denials can damage a person in her capacity as a self-knower in a different, albeit related, way: by making certain conceptions of Blackness less *accessible* to the person, in the sense that one is less able to adopt such conceptions into one's own worldview. More generally, consideration of these kinds of racial denials demonstrates the importance of the accessibility, and not just existence, of conceptual resources for self-understanding.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that, in many cases, racial denials arise from underlying and unjust gaps in the hermeneutical environment; in these cases, racial denials are a symptom of an unjustly gappy conceptual vocabulary. In other cases, such as denials of Blackness, the hermeneutical environment is robust, although a racial denial may still be significant: it makes a certain conception of race less accessible to an individual. In general, it is fruitful to reflect on racial denials insofar as they call attention to the question of, not just what race is, but who has epistemic power and authority to control conceptual resources around race—both historically and in contemporary times.

In addition to understanding the phenomenon of racial denials, I aimed to demonstrate that centering multiraciality can yield broad insights regarding the philosophy of race and epistemic injustice. For instance, reflecting on multiraciality should lead us to conceptualize race, or at least racial identity, as multiple and fluid. With respect to epistemic injustice, I suggested that we distinguish between cases in which conceptual resources do not exist versus cases in which resources are inaccessible to the individual; this distinction is also useful in nonracial contexts where conceptual resources are fractured and contested.

Insofar as a multiracial person lives in a hermeneutically unjust conceptual environment, she will be subject to certain characteristic struggles. Racial

57 Of course, as in Sarah's case, individual interlocutors might treat Diallo unjustly, e.g., by being dismissive, condescending, or inconsiderate.

self-knowledge, in the face of an emaciated conceptual vocabulary, will be more difficult. Communicating one's race to others, including establishing race-based solidarity, may also be challenging. Finally, insofar as (some) multiracial people lack the resources necessary to articulate and communicate their identities, it seems likely that they will also be hindered in their ability to articulate, communicate, and ultimately combat the forms of racial discrimination and racialized harm they experience.

To conclude, I want to offer two remarks. First, although my discussion has focused on racial denials, including the harm that they can inflict on multiracial individuals, I do not mean to suggest that many or most multiracial individuals have mental lives irrepressibly burdened by inchoate and misunderstood racial identities. The pathologization of multiracial identity has a long history, tracing back to the tragic mulatto figure in the 1800s and the Marginal Man hypothesis of the 1900s. Stereotypically, multiracial individuals are portrayed as torn between two worlds, with their mental lives dominated by a tragic sense of fragmentation. For many multiracial writers, it is crucial to replace such stereotypes with a more nuanced understanding of multiracial experience.

The account I have offered may, however, seem to contribute to such stereotypes. In particular, my account implies that multiracial individuals *do* face a challenging hermeneutical environment. However, the claim that multiracial individuals may have more difficulty in racial self-understanding/communication is distinct from the stereotypical claim that multiracial individuals have mental lives marked by a sense of fragmentation. The question of the *significance* of gappy racial hermeneutical environments for one's mental life is, after all, very much dependent upon the person, her circumstances, and what she cares about. For instance, whether the difficulty of articulating one's racial identity dominates one's mental life, and whether one encounters it as *tragic* (as opposed to, for instance, exciting or interesting), will depend on many factors. Some multiracial individuals do grapple, painfully, with racial self-understanding and self-expression. Others do not. For these latter, perhaps, their sense of belonging within the world does not depend so much on racialized self-understanding or the racial acceptance of others.

Indeed, it is worth remembering that even for those individuals who do grapple painfully with questions of racial identity, these questions take their place among many others, and their importance may ebb and flow. The biracial writer Rebecca Walker is one such example. As she willingly attests, she has spent a significant portion of her life with an "unhealthy sense of [racial] fragmentation."[58] As the author of an autobiography on multiracial identity,

58 Walker, "Introduction," 17.

she has arguably immersed herself in racial questions more deeply than most. Nevertheless, writing six years after the publication of that book, Walker muses:

> I rarely think about being mixed these days, other than to notice the effect it has on others and to consider the assumed implications of it in a racially charged situation. When I do contemplate my mixedness, it is like visiting an old friend, familiar, but no longer involved in the day-to-day goings-on of my life.[59]

That is, we must not lose sight of the banal point that questions of racial self-understanding, no matter how complex or challenging, ultimately constitute just one aspect of a person's life and that the relative importance of racial questions may shift over one's life course.

As a second closing comment, it is worth returning to the larger endeavor that opened this essay—that is, moving multiracial experience from margin to center. How might philosophy of race be enhanced by treating the experiences and understandings of those who are multiracial as central, instead of marginal or exceptional? At the very least, an enhanced focus on multiraciality would raise questions about the relationship between appearance and racial identity (e.g., for multiracial individuals, appearance is not determinative of racial identity), about the role of choice in racial identity (e.g., many multiracial individuals describe a process of exploring different racial identities, raising the possibility that one's racial identity may be partly voluntary), and about the political and pragmatic significance of *declaring* one's racial identity (for monoracial individuals, it is typically not necessary to use speech to claim racial identity since it is assumed on the basis of appearance; in contrast, for multiracial individuals, declarations serve complex political and pragmatic functions). Probing these aspects of multiracial experience has the theoretical potential to deepen our understanding of race. Perhaps more importantly, doing so expresses an ethical commitment to the value of multiracial lives as equally significant within the practice of philosophy.[60]

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59 Walker, "Introduction," 18.

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