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Source: *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Spring, 2004), pp. 171-192

Published by: Blackwell Publishing

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3557949>

Accessed: 11/08/2010 23:59

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## Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity

In his Tanner Lectures, “The State and the Shaping of Identity,” Kwame Anthony Appiah defends a version of liberalism that would give the state a substantial role in deliberately sustaining, reshaping, and even creating the social identities of its citizens—our identities as African American, women, Hispanic, gay, Jewish, and the like.<sup>1</sup> He calls this role “soul-making,” which is “the political project of intervening in the process of interpretation through which each citizen develops an identity with the aim of increasing her chances of living an ethically successful life.”<sup>2</sup>

Appiah believes that an ethically successful life is integral to an objectively good life. “A life has gone well,” he tells us, “if a person has mostly done for others what she owed them (and thus is morally successful) and has succeeded in creating things of significance and in fulfilling her ambitions (and is thus ethically successful).”<sup>3</sup> He supports a liberal democratic, soul-making state that not only would seek to protect persons from harming themselves but also would seek to promote for citizens the kinds of lives that are good or valuable, perhaps even if these citizens failed to recognize how such governmental interventions would contribute to their objective well-being.

We wish to express our gratitude to the members of our Cambridge, Massachusetts, philosophy and race reading group: to Larry Blum and Jorge Garcia for written comments and to Sally Haslanger, Koffi Maglo, Ifeanyi Menkiti, and Ajume Wingo for discussion. We also thank Erin Kelly, Aretha C. McPherson, Ryan White, and the Editors of *Philosophy & Public Affairs* for their comments and suggestions. The Ford Foundation and the Harvard University Center for Ethics and the Professions provided us generous fellowship support.

1. Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The State and the Shaping of Identity,” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 23, ed. Grethe B. Peterson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), pp. 234–99.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

According to Appiah, our social identities can themselves be a major obstacle to our pursuit of an ethically successful life. This is likely to happen when a social identity is incoherent, when it has “a set of norms associated with it, such that, in the actual world, attempting to conform to some subset of those norms undermines one’s capacity to conform to others.”<sup>4</sup> He believes that many existing social identities are incoherent in just this way. Further, he maintains that people who suffer from an incoherent social identity should want to be suitably informed about its incoherence, because social identities are among the tools with which we shape and give meaning to our lives. “The incoherence of a social identity,” he argues, “can lead to incoherence in individual identities: to someone’s having an identity that generates projects and ambitions that undermine one another.”<sup>5</sup> In previous writings Appiah advocated tolerance, not state soul-making, for confused or incoherent social identities.<sup>6</sup> But here he argues that, when ordinary dissemination of the relevant facts fails to reform faulty social identities, it may be legitimate for the state to intervene in order to increase the chances that citizens will attain their autonomous ethical aims.

If members of a socially disadvantaged group, such as African Americans, were to possess an incoherent social identity, this would be particularly unfortunate. African Americans already suffer from great disparities in wealth, income, employment, education, and health care, and thus it is especially important, for them and the society generally, that their projects be successful.<sup>7</sup> Appiah argues that contemporary African American social identity, given its reliance on the problematic concept of race, is indeed incoherent. Because the persistence of this

4. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

6. See, for example, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 30–105.

7. For important discussions of contemporary racial inequality in America with special emphasis on the plight of African Americans, see William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Marcellus Andrews, *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America* (New York: NYU Press, 1999); Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

incoherence creates an unnecessary obstacle to the success of the ethical aims of African Americans, the government may need to intervene to reshape the souls of black folk.

Appiah expresses reservations about making social policy recommendations, preferring as a philosopher to map the conceptual and normative space surrounding an important public issue.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, he does not offer specific proposals for how the state might reform African American identity. But take an example that has been urged by others: the state might explain through public service announcements why “race” is *verbum non grata*, to be replaced by “ethnicity” for all official business.<sup>9</sup> Or, going further than Appiah would favor, the state might no longer recognize “black” or “African American” as a relevant social distinction within the public sphere, perhaps ceasing to collect “racial” demographic data altogether.<sup>10</sup>

While we, following Appiah, will concentrate on the case of African Americans, careful consideration of the difficulties with this case has more general implications for soul-making as a government project. Appiah is quite specific about when the state could intervene for this purpose: to educate children with the aim of reducing their ignorance or intolerance of identities of value (e.g., religious); to recognize officially a group (e.g., Hispanics) or a social practice (e.g., marriage) in order to promote self-respect in or equal respect for persons; to subsidize cultural life with the aim of sustaining the arts; and to compensate for our rational deficiencies in order to aid our pursuit of our own ambitions. His discussion of African American identity centers on intervention to correct rational deficiencies, restricted to a certain kind of irrationality: namely, when pre-reflective action in accordance with a given social identity would routinely violate fairly minimal “rules of reason” (e.g., basic deduction, instrumental rationality, transitivity of preference). The rules of reason are normative constraints that any agent must largely

8. See “The State and the Shaping of Identity,” pp. 249–50.

9. See, e.g., Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America's “Racial” Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas, 1997), pp. 173–81.

10. The California constitutional initiative Proposition 54, called the “Racial Privacy Initiative,” would prohibit state and local governments from classifying any individual by race, ethnicity, color, or national origin in the operation of public education, public contracting, public employment, or any other government activity. (Various exemptions apply.) See <http://www.racialprivacy.org/>; and <http://www.voterguide.ss.ca.gov/propositions/propositions.html>. The “Racial Privacy Initiative” was defeated in October 2003.

conform to in order to pursue her aims effectively. Appiah thinks state action can shape our environments “in ways that mean that our actual cognitive systems will more often settle on the right answer, as understood by applying the rules of reason,” so that “government could be seen to be helping us to make the lives we really want.”<sup>11</sup>

There are grounds to be skeptical, however, about the state taking on this soul-making project. Soul-makers have to determine which social identities are sufficiently incoherent to justify reform. The central problem for the state lies in interpreting the content of the norms (e.g., norms of solidarity) that define a given social identity, for what constitutes the correct interpretation often will be controversial. That Appiah himself may in fact be mistaken about the coherence of African American social identity would powerfully exhibit this point. Further, the tools available to a liberal democratic state for correcting those identities that habitually breach rules of reason seem overmatched by the deep, personal attachment of many individuals to their existing social identities.

Such grounds for skepticism about soul-making are particularly strong with respect to groups that have long been the object of government mistreatment on the basis of identities ascribed to them. Members of historically subordinate groups, against the background of this mistreatment, develop their own and often rival conceptions of what their social identities are or should be. Dominant conceptions from within such a group are thus likely to diverge in significant ways from what the state would envision for the group. It is one thing for African Americans, homosexuals, or women, for instance, to look to the state for legal protections from abuse and discrimination. It is quite another for citizens in these groups to be receptive to a historically hostile or indifferent state's attempts to intervene now for the sake of reshaping their social identities. Regardless of whether a contested social identity breaches rules of reason, the state hardly seems the ideal agent for intervening in this area of the lives of embattled citizens.

Although we thus are wary of the project of state soul-making, the focus of our article is on the alleged incoherence of African American social identity. Appiah has made many important contributions to our understanding of social identities in general and racial identity in

11. “The State and the Shaping of Identity,” p. 267.

particular.<sup>12</sup> But his interpretation of African American identity in these lectures misconstrues important elements of that identity. We argue that his characterization of the relationship that exists between African American views about the concept of race and how African Americans relate practically to their social identity is inaccurate.

On our view, the social identity of a group is most clearly revealed in the behavioral dispositions of its members, not in abstract conceptual propositions to which they might assent if queried by a clever philosopher or probing social scientist. Through two, real-world thought experiments, we explore what social practices would likely be embraced by a group whose members were seriously committed to the conception of African American identity that Appiah attributes to them.<sup>13</sup> We contend that the social practices of this imagined group would be considerably different from those currently accepted by most African Americans. If we are right, the social conception of African American identity that most blacks identify with is not particularly incoherent in practice and thus is not in need of state intervention to reform or de-institutionalize it, at least not insofar as the justification for state action is helping black citizens to live ethically successful lives.

## I. THE DISCOURSE OF BLACK AUTHENTICITY

Before proceeding further, we need to make a few distinctions that will help to sharpen the issue before us. First, we should explain what we mean by a “social identity.” Here we follow Appiah’s analytical framework, which conceptualizes social identities in terms of three elements.<sup>14</sup> A social identity exists in a society when (1) a classificatory label “L” is associated with a *social conception* of those who are generally consid-

12. See, e.g., “Race, Culture, Identity”; “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 149–63; *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and “‘But Would That Still Be Me?’ Notes on Gender, ‘Race,’ and Ethnicity, as Sources of ‘Identity,’” *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 493–99.

13. The usefulness of the method of thought experiment for uncovering our intersubjective criteria for racial identity is persuasively defended and illustrated in Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), ch. 4.

14. “The State and the Shaping of Identity,” pp. 241–44.

ered Ls, i.e., there are widely shared (though not necessarily uncontroversial) views about who is an L and what typical Ls are or should be like; (2) some individuals who bear the label *identify as* Ls, i.e., their self-conception as an L shapes their attitudes and actions; and (3) some individuals are, for better or worse, *treated as* Ls, i.e., there are patterns of conduct toward Ls that are motivated, at least in part, by some social conception of Ls.

African American identity is complex and intensely contested. We understand this social identity to have at least five interrelated dimensions, which might here be called modes of blackness.<sup>15</sup> First, there is the *racial* dimension, which most people take to be related to the somatic or genetic characteristics and continental origins of human groups. Hence the racial label “African American” applies to Americans who satisfy certain physical criteria and are descended from inhabitants of Africa. Second, there is an *ethnic* dimension, which is based on the presumption of a shared culture and of common biological descent. In its paradigmatic form, members of the African American ethnic community are expected to be committed to reproducing their distinctive culture and, perhaps, to maintaining the group’s integrity by observing the norm of black endogamy. But there are social conceptions of these ethnic descent relations that do not imply the existence or value of a shared genotype, and there are conceptions of the group’s culture that do not attempt to explain its distinctive features in terms of an underlying biological essence. Third, there is a *national* dimension, which generally includes the ascriptive criteria of the racial or ethnic dimensions but, in addition, emphasizes the territorial origins of the group or its culture. In particular, the relevant geographical region is usually viewed as an ancestral “homeland” and a source of group pride—typically, some part of sub-Saharan Africa but at times some part of the black diaspora (e.g., Haiti, Jamaica, or Brazil). Fourth, there is a *cultural* dimension, the social conceptions of which are not necessarily tied to shared physical traits, descent relations, or geographical origins. Hence a person—such

15. These distinctions are developed in Tommie Shelby, “Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity or Common Oppression?” *Ethics* 112 (2002): 231–66. Also see Manning Marable, “Race, Identity, and Political Culture,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 292–302; and Robert Gooding-Williams, “Race, Multiculturalism and Democracy,” *Constellations* 5 (1998): 18–41.

as the hip-hop artist Eminem or former president Bill Clinton—could be regarded and could regard himself as having an African American cultural identity without his “looking black” or having African ancestry, provided his attitudes and conduct are significantly and self-consciously shaped by African American structures of meaning (e.g., linguistic patterns, aesthetic sensibility, or religious traditions). Fifth, there is a *political* dimension to African American identity. This is generally taken to involve a commitment to certain political values (e.g., equal civil rights, group political empowerment) and to particular strategies of resistance against oppression (e.g., organized public protest, group solidarity). There is disagreement among African Americans about what a commitment to these political values and strategies of resistance precisely entails, in much the same way that there is disagreement among liberals about the exact meaning of equality, liberty, and tolerance. But some sort of commitment to these values and strategies is widely accepted as necessary for the label “black,” in the political sense, properly to apply, though these norms generally fall short of requiring that blacks support specific social policies.

The fact that African American identity is multidimensional and that the normative content of each mode is disputed has three consequences that are relevant to our discussion. First, an individual may exemplify only a subset of the five modes of black identity, e.g., embodying the racial dimension without identifying with the cultural or political dimension. Some African Americans maintain, and some deny, that anyone who identifies with blackness in one mode should also, perhaps as a test of group loyalty or trustworthiness, identify with the other modes in order to be, as it were, “fully” black. Second, an individual’s self-identity may exemplify each of these modes but to different extents, e.g., a person of African descent might have very dark skin and strongly advocate for equal civil rights yet have only moderate fondness for Africa and no interest at all in jazz. This too can give rise in some contexts, particularly those in which nationalist projects figure prominently, to talk of “degrees” of blackness. And third, because the parameters of each mode are both vague and greatly contested, there is sometimes deep disagreement among African Americans about exactly when the label “African American” applies in a given case, a circumstance that can produce vexing questions about whether certain persons are “really” black.



Appiah, in other writings, has been sharply critical of this popular discourse of black authenticity.<sup>16</sup> We would not defend the complete legitimacy of this social practice either, but we do hope to show that there are components of it that are coherent, defensible, and relevant to interpreting African American identity. In this article, our main concern is with (i) the specifically “racial” mode of African American identity; (ii) its connection to the “political” mode of this identity; and (iii) the relevance of both modes for prospective soul-making projects of the state. The racial and political modes of African American identity are related to Appiah’s idea of an ethical aim, in that he believes some African Americans support certain social policies and political programs “as a black person,” i.e., as a normative stance that is an element of or entailed by their racial identification. For purposes of this discussion, then, we leave aside the ethnic, national, and cultural modes of African American social identity and any inconsistencies that might exist within or between them.

We should emphasize that we do accept the powerful arguments Appiah has developed elsewhere against the empirical soundness and coherence of the concept of race as a biological natural kind. However, we are not convinced that this pseudo-scientific theory of human variety—which crystallized only during the nineteenth century, long after the idea of race had emerged—is the sole conception of race that now has social currency.<sup>17</sup> Nor are we persuaded that all popular conceptions of race are conceptually tied to racist notions in such a way that they stand or fall together with racial essentialism.<sup>18</sup> We do believe, along with Appiah, that there is no consensus on the precise meaning or reference of race in America today, only a vague, shared sense that race

16. See, e.g., his “Identity, Authenticity, and Survival”; “Race, Culture, Identity”; and “But Would That Still Be Me?”

17. For more on this point, see David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), ch. 4; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr., *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Paul C. Taylor, “Appiah’s Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Reality of Race,” *Social Theory and Practice* 26 (2000): 103–28; and Ronald Sundstrom, “‘Racial’ Nominalism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002): 193–210.

18. Appiah defines racialism as the doctrine that “there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race. These traits and tendencies characteristic of a race constitute, on the racist view, a sort of racial

is somehow related to visible, inherited physical characteristics (e.g., skin color, hair type, physique) and continental origins (i.e., Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia). And we certainly admit that the inter-subjective social criteria for racial classification in America are arbitrary and misleading from the standpoint of the biological sciences.

But, contrary to Appiah's contentions, we maintain that these relatively vague and scientifically dubious criteria for assigning racial membership are not so infected by racialist notions that they threaten the ethical aim of African Americans that Appiah discusses: namely, the widely shared desire among African Americans to maintain, and perhaps strengthen, their political solidarity.<sup>19</sup> These differences in our views on the metaphysics, semantics, and politics of race will be explicated in our argument.

## II. APPIAH'S ARGUMENT

The case that Appiah makes to demonstrate the incoherence of African American racial identity proceeds as follows. He argues that the common-sense criteria for ascribing African American racial identity are inconsistent with the facts. This argument rests on the claim that many Americans, including most African Americans, accept the so-called one-drop rule for black racial designation: a person is black if and only if she has at least one traceable black ancestor.<sup>20</sup> The rule has the peculiar

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essence; it is part of the content of racialism that the essential heritable characteristics of the 'Races of Man' account for more than the visible morphological characteristics—skin color, hair type, facial features—on the basis of which we make our informal classifications." *In My Father's House*, p. 13. Following Appiah, we use the terms "racialism" and "racial essentialism" interchangeably.

19. There is strong empirical support for the claim that norms of solidarity are widely embraced by African Americans, even across class divisions. See Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

20. For a classic discussion of this rule and its social meaning, see Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, vol. I (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996), ch. 5. For a recent discussion of the legal status of the rule, see F. James Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991). And for a discussion of the rule in relation to the practices of racial classification of the Census Bureau, see Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

consequence that some African Americans may be physically indistinguishable from whites.

Now, Appiah notes that while many Americans are aware that some African Americans can and do “pass for white,” most Americans assume that persons who by the one-drop rule are African American generally are physically identifiable as black. However, this popular assumption is mistaken:

[V]ery many—perhaps even a majority—of the Americans who are descended from African slaves “look white,” are treated as white, and identify as such. . . . [M]ost people who are African-American by the one-drop rule are, are regarded as, and regard themselves as white. Most people in the United States have a social conception of the African-American identity that entails that this is not so. . . . [I]t is also part of the social conception of African-American identity that there are some people of African-American ancestry who were raised as white people, not knowing of their African ancestry; who look like other white people and thus have the skin-privilege associated with whiteness; and are, as a result, not really African-American.<sup>21</sup>

Appiah anticipates that most people, upon reflection, may realize that the one-drop rule does not represent a strict standard for determining the racial identity of African Americans. Yet, he claims, they regard vagueness in their understanding of who counts as African American as “a minor anomaly that makes little practical difference.”<sup>22</sup> His conclusion follows:

The result is that the norm of solidarity for African-Americans entails that African-Americans very often have, in the one-drop rule, a reason for identity-based generosity to people they believe, on the basis of another part of their social conception, to be white. If they acted on the one-drop rule-based norms, their identity-based generosity would be directed more often than not toward people they regard as whites.<sup>23</sup>

21. “The State and the Shaping of Identity,” p. 284.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

This, he maintains, is incoherent and could frustrate other ethical aims of African Americans. For example, it is counterproductive to policies some blacks support, such as affirmative action, that seek to benefit African Americans in order to redress the historical injustices and forms of social disadvantage from which they continue to suffer. An African American social identity based on the one-drop rule cannot accurately target the persons who are the intended beneficiaries of such policies, namely, persons that have experienced, or are likely to experience, racial discrimination because they are treated as black. Instead, persons who are treated as white despite their satisfaction of the one-drop criterion—given their greater representation in the population and their skin-privilege that also partially explains why they are likely to be better qualified under such policies—would be the overwhelming beneficiaries. Moreover, some who identify as African American are “race men” or “race women”—i.e., “nationalists” who seek to ensure that their people do well, not simply as a matter of social justice, but “*because they are their people*.”<sup>24</sup> The ethical aims of such persons would be especially frustrated by this incoherence in African American identity.

### III. “RACIAL” IDENTITY AND GROUP SOLIDARITY

We question, however, whether African American social identity is incoherent in the way Appiah describes. First, we want to insist that not only do African Americans recognize vagueness in their conception of race, as Appiah allows, but most also do not accept, at least by now, a literal interpretation of the one-drop rule. The rule largely operates as a metaphor for the salient social fact of racial stigma, a stigma that is marked by certain heritable, physical features (e.g., dark brown skin, wooly hair, a broad nose, full lips).<sup>25</sup> In other words, if a person’s “blackness” is visibly detectable, this is sometimes taken as a sign in our

24. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

25. The idea of “race” as a trope of difference is developed in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” in *“Race,” Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp. 1–20. Appiah would concede that racial language is often used metaphorically, but he insists that such discourse also typically purports to be referential. He argues that when we use racial terms, such as “African American,” to refer to persons or peoples, either we fail to refer to anything in the world at all or our meaning is contradictory. In short, “race” has no referent or coherent sense.

racialized culture that she likely suffers from the purportedly biologically based, deleterious effects of African ancestry, for instance, lower intelligence compared to whites and Asians.<sup>26</sup>

For many African Americans the “rule” seems to be no more than a trope that stands in for a set of genealogical and somatic characteristics that has social meaning in America. The one-drop criterion picks out persons with relatively recent African ancestry (usually dating from the era of modern slavery, though not always), as evident through readily observable, physical features associated with the “Dark Continent” or, absent this physical manifestation, through local knowledge of a family’s history, where the locals have these physical features in mind. Indeed, it is now a commonplace belief, at least among the educated, that humankind’s origins are in Africa. So if the rule were taken literally, there would be a drop of “black blood,” i.e., African-originated genetic material, in everyone. But clearly this fact is irrelevant to contemporary social schemes of racial classification in the United States.

Second, as Appiah recognizes but does not make explicit, the one-drop criterion by itself cannot define who is black, since it includes the undefined category “black” as a central component of its necessary and sufficient conditions. If someone uninitiated in U.S. racial classification wanted to know who was black in our society, it would hardly help to tell her “those who have black ancestors.” One would surely explain that blacks are those with a certain gross morphology and who are of African descent. So the primary function of the one-drop rule is not to fix, even vaguely, the reference of “black people” but, rather, to clarify matters in cases of racial ambiguity. Persons who do not “look black” are typically classified as black if they are known to have African ancestors who fit the phenotypic profile.

26. Here we follow Lawrence Blum’s definition of *racialization*: “the treating of groups as if there were inherent and immutable differences between them; *as if* certain somatic characteristics marked the presence of significant characteristics of mind, emotion, and character; and *as if* some were of greater worth than others.” See his “*I’m Not a Racist, But . . .*”: *The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 147; emphasis in the original.

The idea that “race,” like “sex,” is a social system of classification that “marks” the human body is defended in Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 133–52; also see Linda Martín Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” *Radical Philosophy* 95 (1999): 15–26; and Sally Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?” *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

Third, we maintain that black nationalism is compatible with various understandings of black racial identity—from an essentialist, biological conception to the view that race has social meaning but no biological significance. To be clear, the form of nationalism in question is not necessarily tied to claims of territorial sovereignty or collective self-government, as many nationalisms are. The label “black nationalism” applies in its broadest sense when the idiom of nationhood—its characteristic narratives, tropes, and symbolism—is deployed to define a black African descent group as a “people,” to identify its collective interests and will, and to forge and sustain bonds of political solidarity among those in this would-be community. For us, and for Appiah, the label of “nationalism” is appropriate even if the collective political goal stops short, perhaps far short, of the creation of a separate, self-determining corporate unit.<sup>27</sup> But on our view, the black nationalism that Appiah discusses is no less viable on the view that race is merely a negative social marker that has been engendered by a history of subjection and exploitation. All that is required for a sufficiently coherent black particularism is some rough means for determining who is African American for the purposes of political solidarity.

We propose the following thought experiment to get at the core of what African Americans believe about their racial identity and its relation to their ethical aim of solidarity. Persons who identify racially as African American and who would be so classified by others could be given a choice: (1) Reject the literal interpretation of the one-drop rule and thereby reject solidarity with functional whites (i.e., people who would be black by the one-drop rule but, unbeknownst to them, are currently “passing”); or (2) reaffirm the one-drop rule and thereby accept solidarity with functional whites. We think it is obvious that the African Americans under consideration would overwhelmingly choose the first option.

Most African Americans may indeed be surprised to learn that many people who would qualify as black by a strict application of the one-drop rule are in fact functional whites. Some African Americans would

27. This view of the black nationalist tradition is defended in Tommie Shelby, “Two Conceptions of Black Nationalism: Martin Delany on the Meaning of Black Political Solidarity,” *Political Theory* 31 (2003): 664–92. Also see the essays in *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie Glaude, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

probably accept the view, as Appiah contends, that functional whites are sort-of-but-not-really African American.<sup>28</sup> But if the salient issue is how best to carry out the ethical aim of black solidarity, the reason these functional whites would not be considered bona fide African Americans would have little to do with any inconsistencies that may exist in the criteria for ascribing racial identity. Instead, the reason would have mainly to do with the fact that functional whites lack the appropriate *political* identity, an identity that requires, at a minimum, that they acknowledge publicly, when the occasion calls for it, that they are racially black. Since functional whites—and, by definition, everyone else—are unaware of their possession of “black blood,” they cannot acknowledge its existence. And this public acknowledgment seems a necessary (though perhaps not a sufficient) condition for being included within the ethical aim of black solidarity that most self-identified African Americans endorse. Once apprised of the extent of racial passing, African Americans would not need, therefore, to revise their intersubjective criteria for racial ascription in order to pursue coherently their aim of group solidarity. Nor would they need to alter their conception of black solidarity. In light of this new information, they need only revise their belief about how many people in America have black ancestors.

The force of Appiah’s argument relies on an apparent dilemma regarding inconsistent sets of beliefs “about the prevalence of passing” and “about how to ascribe African-American identity.”<sup>29</sup> Yet there is no dilemma here: those who publicly identify as African Americans are much more committed to solidarity with other, non-passing African Americans than they are to a rigid reading of the one-drop rule that would confound this solidarity.

Thus most African Americans are not “nationalists” in the sense that Appiah thinks they are. The sense in which they would like other blacks to prosper “because they are their people” is more contextually contingent and pragmatic than he allows. First, it seems clear that if the country were largely free of racism, racial inequalities, and black ghetto poverty, most African Americans probably would have very little attachment to their specifically *racial* identity, at least no greater attachment than other

28. However, if a functional white were to discover her black African origins and to affirm publicly her black identity, some African Americans would regard her as having a black racial identity (though, no doubt, with qualification).

29. “The State and the Shaping of Identity,” p. 287.

ethnoracial groups have to theirs.<sup>30</sup> The preoccupation of African Americans with their racial identity seems largely, if not entirely, the result of the historical and contemporary obsession of other groups, especially whites, with the heritable characteristics of those of African descent. This is not of course to say that if the longstanding “Negro problem” were finally resolved, blacks would then cease to care about their ethnic, cultural, or national identities. In fact, many might become more attached to these other dimensions of African American identity, since in the post-racial utopia these modes of blackness would no longer be stigmatized by their association with a low status, racialized group.

Second, contemporary African American solidarity is rooted in the collective struggle for racial equality and therefore requires that those who would benefit from this solidarity do their part, when possible, to sustain black advancement toward this goal. If a person who qualified as black by the one-drop rule were knowingly to pass for white in order to escape antiblack prejudice, she would thereby forfeit her claim to black communal support. Her actions would be generally regarded as disloyal, as she would be viewed as turning her back on her disadvantaged “racial kin” and, worse yet, benefiting from the advantages of whiteness.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the black nationalist commitment to seeing blacks prosper must be interpreted within the relevant sociohistorical context, which necessarily includes the persistence of antiblack racism and the negative impact of its legacy. Even within this context, the mutual commitment of loyalty, trust, and special concern is not unqualified but depends crucially on the attitudes and conduct of its would-be beneficiaries.

Perhaps most persons who identify as African American may concede that individuals who now pass as white but are black by the one-drop rule are, in some sense, African American. Yet prototypical African Americans would not readily concede that these quasi- or erstwhile African Americans have the necessary political identity that would

30. Appiah acknowledges this point but insists that as long as such nationalism exists, the incoherence in African American identity remains.

31. Whether passing will be considered disloyal depends on the social circumstances prevailing at the time. For instance, under severe racial oppression, e.g., slavery and murderous repression, the obligation to “stay black” may be relaxed to save lives. For an illuminating, and deeply intimate, set of personal and philosophical reflections on racial passing in America, see Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” *Transition* 58 (1992): 4–32.



entitle them to the benefits of group solidarity. The mistake Appiah makes here is in thinking that most nationalist oriented African Americans believe that their common racial identity *alone* justifies their special in-group loyalty and their commitment to promote each other's welfare, when in fact a shared racial identity is only a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for such solidarity. Within black political consciousness, even among many militant black nationalists, the relationship between African American racial identity and African American political solidarity is considerably more complicated than Appiah's description would suggest.<sup>32</sup>

#### IV. THE CONCEPT OF "RACE" AND AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

Why, then, does Appiah overestimate the significance of the one-drop rule for African American identity? An answer is suggested by his reflections on the reception of his work on the concept of race. Appiah observes that he had previously assumed most educated people already knew and accepted that biological classifications of race are incoherent and empirically unsupported. He was surprised to learn that many educated Americans he talked to were not familiar with or did not accept this idea, despite much recent academic discussion of race as a social construction. That is, he was struck by the stubborn persistence of conceptual confusion about race; and he thinks there is a short step from this confusion to the incoherence of African American social identity. He finds that black nationalists in particular—counting many educated, middle-class African Americans among them—seem ardently attached to an incoherent biological essentialism about race, as represented by their commitment to the one-drop rule, notwithstanding the circulation of corrective information.

We do not dispute Appiah's findings about the prevalence of confusion among African Americans about the semantic content of the concept of race, that is, about the necessary and sufficient conditions for

32. Shelby has attempted to clarify the normative basis of black American political solidarity in "Foundations of Black Solidarity." Also see Yalonda Howze and David Weberman, "On Racial Kinship," *Social Theory and Practice* 27 (2001): 419–36. McPherson has argued that social relationships, and not the fact alone of "bare" relations like common racial identity, can be a source of morally salient reasons for special concern that are expressed, for instance, as political solidarity. See his "The Moral Insignificance of 'Bare' Personal Reasons," *Philosophical Studies* 110 (2002): 29–47.

a subgroup of humanity to constitute a “racial” group, biologically understood. Where we diverge is over the conclusion he draws from this. We maintain that conceptual confusion about race as a biological natural kind need not, nor does it generally, lead to an incoherent African American identity. Let us grant that many African Americans are confused about the idea of race. The existence of such confusion should hardly be surprising since some, perhaps many, black Americans would quite naturally have absorbed some of the racist assumptions that circulate in our society. Nevertheless, our thought experiment showed that self-identifying African Americans would act as if they were decisively more committed to solidarity with other non-passing African Americans than to an understanding of racial identity that would undermine this group unity.

African Americans do not seem to care much in social practice about the scientific standing of the concept of race. They may have false views about the cogency of the biological notion, but they nonetheless have a sufficiently clear idea of who counts as black for social and political purposes. Typically, this will be any person with relatively recent, sub-Saharan African ancestry who manifests the physical features associated with persons of that region of the world or who, while not “looking black” herself, is known to have ancestors who fit the relevant somatic profile; for it is the satisfaction of this criterion that suffices to render her susceptible to racial stigma and discrimination.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, it would be better if people were not inclined to accept false propositions about racial identity—a firm disposition to seek truth is, after all, a virtue. Appiah’s explanation of the recalcitrance of these mistaken beliefs is that “many people have not bothered to do their own conceptual housekeeping” because “they assume it is being done elsewhere,” in particular, by biologists, physical anthropologists, or various medical professionals.<sup>34</sup> He takes this to be a charitable reading of their failure to appreciate the scientific facts about race.

However, this reading seems to misunderstand how many people actually think about race in the everyday context of our racialized social world, the context in which the ethical aims of African Americans are formed and carried out. We reject the notion that blacks are simply

33. For a similar view, see Bernard R. Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice*, rev. ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), p. 178.

34. “The State and the Shaping of Identity,” p. 288.

deferring—because of “cognitive limitations” in terms of time, rationality, and technical competence—to experts on the precise denotation of racial terms.<sup>35</sup> If the relevant scientific community were to announce publicly, using every media outlet available, that half of the persons normally thought of as black in America are not, given their genetic make-up, in fact black but of some other race or no race at all, this would make little practical difference to how African Americans understand their racial identity as long as antiblack racism had not changed. Indeed, given the complicity of some scientists in perpetuating and legitimating the idea that blacks are naturally inferior, many blacks probably would be suspicious of any such pronouncement, just as they would be of any attempt by the government to institutionalize it.

In our view, a more charitable and accurate reading of the persistence of African American confusion about race is this: the racial self-identity of African Americans primarily tracks the progress—or lack thereof—of race relations, not advances in biological science. The self-understanding of black Americans will likely catch up to the scientific consensus about the myth that race is a natural kind once those who are generally regarded as black in our society are no longer vulnerable to being victimized by antiblack race prejudice.<sup>36</sup>

We believe that Appiah misconstrues the significance for African Americans of the vagueness that they almost certainly realize is part of their understanding of who counts as African American. This vagueness, or what might better be called flexibility, functions to respond to the vicissitudes of racial antagonism and racial politics. Many African Americans, we have tried to demonstrate, would not accept a literal interpretation of the one-drop rule. Though essentialism no doubt continues to affect their thinking about racial matters, they are not committed biological essentialists about race. African Americans seem very willing to concede that there is a route, at least in principle, to *not* being black: persons with recent black African ancestry who pass as white and are not vulnerable to being outed by genealogical evidence—say, because such evidence has been lost, destroyed, or is otherwise unavailable—are, for all practical purposes, white.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

36. For a similar perspective, see Frank M. Kirkland, “Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black,” *The Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992–93): 136–65.

Now, Appiah might insist, as he does elsewhere, that in the absence of a more essentialist conception of race, African Americans lack a rational or non-mythological basis for limiting their political solidarity to those who identify as, and are treated as, racially “black.”<sup>37</sup> After all, black Americans are not the only recognized group in the United States that is racially stigmatized and vulnerable to racial discrimination. The illusions of race also harm many non-black groups. Why not transcend the black–white binary and extend solidarity to these groups as well? Indeed, why not extend such solidarity to committed anti-racist whites?

We take it that most African Americans have no objection, in principle, to multiracial solidarity against racism and racial inequality. But the practical reality is—and this is one place where the shifting context of racial politics matters—that there are many people, including members of non-black minority groups, who direct race-based contempt specifically toward African Americans. That is, non-blacks sometimes mobilize around a social conception of blackness that denigrates persons who are labeled as black, in an effort to advance their own group interests at the expense of African Americans.<sup>38</sup> We accept that black Americans should extend solidarity to non-blacks who have demonstrated a commitment to racial justice. But given how frequently black political marginalization has been exploited, even by other racially or ethnically subordinate groups, it is not irrational, and is arguably necessary, for blacks also to maintain their more narrow, group solidarity as a pragmatic means of defending their own interests.<sup>39</sup>

## V. SOCIAL PRACTICE AND CONCEPTUAL COMMITMENTS

Like Appiah, we have been referring to what black Americans believe about race and their social identity. It is fair to ask whether his observations or our own are backed by any compelling empirical evidence. Information could be gathered about what people claim to believe about the criteria for applying racial terms, and this public opinion data might

37. Appiah, *In My Father's House*, p. 42.

38. See, e.g., Lawrence Bobo, “Race and Beliefs about Affirmative Action: Assessing the Effects of Interests, Group Threat, Ideology, and Racism,” in *Racialized Politics: The Debate about Racism in America*, ed. David Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Lawrence Bobo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 137–64.

39. For more on this point, see Shelby, “Foundations of Black Solidarity,” pp. 261–63; and “Two Conceptions of Black Nationalism,” pp. 680–84.

be a helpful guide to understanding what they really believe. So far as we are aware, such data are not available. However, even if they were, there is a notorious difficulty in interpreting survey data on racial attitudes, namely, there can sometimes be a gap between first-person reported beliefs and convictions as revealed in practice, i.e., between what people say and what people do.<sup>40</sup>

In trying to make sense of African American attitudes about their racial identity and its relation to their ethical aims, it may be more revealing to work from observed social practices to conceptual commitments, rather than the other way around. As a thought experiment, imagine a group of persons who regard themselves as belonging to the same race and who live within a larger multiracial society. Further suppose that within this racial community, call it the “black nation,” racial essentialism is both widely accepted and treated as practically important. We would expect the lives of such a people to be, in some significant respects, structured around this shared belief and joint practical concern. Within the black nation there would be sharply defined, public criteria for racial identity. Community leaders would seek to regulate carefully the criteria for proper racial ascription. Using these criteria, members of the community would closely track the racial lineage—for instance, at birth and marriage—of fellow members. There would probably be norms against both interracial marriage and interracial sex, given the latter’s propensity to produce hybrid offspring.<sup>41</sup> Members of the black nation would not only contest any assertion or suggestion that

40. See the discussion of this matter in Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, and Maria Krysan, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 1–8.

41. There is, of course, a norm of endogamy among blacks, which might be thought to vitiate our account. However, this norm need not be rooted in a shared desire to maintain the purity of the black racial essence. This norm can be rooted instead in such concerns as strengthening a fragile, group solidarity; maintaining the integrity of black culture, reproduced in part within the family; publicly demonstrating black pride in the face of antiblack contempt; combating racialized aesthetic norms that denigrate black (especially women’s) beauty; and ensuring that there are available partners for all members of the community. We cannot fully make the case for this interpretation here. But we think it is sufficient for our argument to show that black racial endogamy is compatible with non-essentialist conceptions of race. For useful discussions of this issue, see Charles W. Mills, “Do Black Men Have a Moral Duty to Marry Black Women?” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 25th Anniversary Special Issue (1994): 131–53; and Anita L. Allen, *Why Privacy Isn’t Everything: Feminist Reflections on Personal Accountability* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 97–107.

blacks are naturally inferior but also would insist on the recognition of the natural, i.e., biologically based, virtues of blackness. There would be commercial enterprises whose business consisted in researching the racial ancestry of prospective political leaders, spouses, and in-laws. Terms such as “mulatto,” “quadroon,” and “octoroon” (or their functional equivalents) would be the standard nomenclature for referring to interracial progeny, rather than the more vague terms “mixed race” and “multiracial” that now have some currency; and these designations would not be understood as falling under the racial category “black,” as this would be a misnomer. Dissemination of the facts about the prevalence of passing and interracial reproduction would be cause for alarm, not merely surprise, within the black nation.

In short, if most black Americans were committed to the view that race is a biological natural kind and, more importantly, were committed to the practical significance of this view, they would care about the heritable characteristics of their would-be black brothers and sisters a lot more than they now appear to. That they do not supports our contention that in the context of social intercourse and practical decision making, most African Americans are not only perfectly competent but also quite comfortable in their use of relatively vague and theoretically naïve criteria for assigning racial group membership. This is not to say that there are no black individuals or subcommunities who have eccentric views about race. But most blacks would seem to possess no unambiguous, pre-theoretic understanding of biological race. That is, the practical conception of race that most African Americans utilize when sorting individuals and groups into racial categories is theoretically noncommittal: it does not contain, nor is it necessarily tied to, a particular theory or analysis of the meaning of race. When they consider their ethical aim of solidarity, they employ no rigid, racist classification scheme in the case of persons with relatively recent black African ancestry but who can pass as white: such a person’s public identification as black is generally considered sufficient to count her among those who should receive the benefits of black solidarity (though some militants might of course require more).

If these observations are right, it is misleading to claim that most African Americans share a freestanding commitment to any particular theoretical understanding of race. Their often confused theoretical views trail their primary concern with concrete social identities—their own

and that of others—and with current political realities. If they were similarly concerned to revise their self-conception to fit the biological facts, they would no doubt realize that they lack a precise and coherent account of the specifically racial mode of their social identity. They would not be disturbed by this indeterminacy, however, as the practical terms of racial group membership are not especially hard to grasp or negotiate. The coherence of black identity and solidarity does not therefore depend on any theoretical commitment of the sort entailed by an essentialist interpretation of the one-drop rule.

These reflections lead us to worry about the dangers of allowing the state to interpret the challenge of blackness: the challenge of negotiating the parameters and limitations of an African American identity. It may be that the best or most appropriate way for the state to help African Americans successfully pursue their ethical aims is not to reshape their social identity but to combat racial discrimination more aggressively and to affirm publicly a commitment to racial equality. If, after the liberal ideals of freedom, equality, and tolerance have been realized, African Americans still fail to reform their identity to fit the scientific facts about race and heritability, perhaps the time will have come to revisit the prospect of state soul-making.