Should We Conserve the Notion of Race?

David E. McClean

Geneticists have told us that race does not exist, that it has no “reality.” I do not agree that race has no “reality” because I see no reason to overprivilege the scientific account of race’s status—no more reason to limit the discussion of race to the scientist’s vocabulary than to limit the question of whether we should make more bombs or grow more corn to that vocabulary (because the answer to the question has more to do with what is relevant to who we are than what we are). Race, while a legitimate subject for scientific study, has taken on a meaning and a life far greater than the mere scientific pronouncement of its death can do much about. It has become an entrenched cultural, social, and political matter, eclipsing, in many respects, its scientific allure. On the other hand, it makes little sense to ignore the scientific pronouncement, and almost no one versed in the literature does, even racial conservatism (those who wish to retain race as a social category). Indeed, it makes no more sense to ignore the scientific pronouncement about race than to ignore the scientific conclusion that disease is caused by germs, genetic anomalies, and poisons in the environment, rather than by evil spirits. I will argue that the implications of the scientific pronouncement, along with other social-historic factors that surround the history of the idea of race, can be read differently than many racial conservatives have tended to read it. On my alternative reading, race serves no useful or salutary purpose, particularly in a liberal or cosmopolitan civilization that has certain philosophical and political commitments concerning that in which the moral worth of individuals and communities consist.

I do not believe that the concept of race should be scorned (it is not completely analogous to evil spirits), but in the face of the scientific evidence the questions and answers that attend the question of racial conservation should probably be, and at the hands of some scholars have been, rephrased. As intimated, race has far more to do with culture and politics than with natural science, and culture and politics are largely contextual affairs—they concern some “us,” however erratic the borders that surround that “us” might appear. So, given the geneticist’s conclusion, it seems reasonable to frame the question of the conservation of race (i.e., should we conserve the notion of race?) in terms of “our” particular axiological commitments and aspirations as evidenced by our public rhetoric and the instruments and narratives that we agree establish our important social and political institutions, and regulate and frame our communal ones. On my reading, this accords with certain pragmatist preferences. The pragmatist, like some of her Continental counterparts, prefers to ask questions about who we think we are and about whether a concept, ideology, practice, or even myth (1) contributes to that self-conception, (2) detracts from it, or (3) is not very relevant to it.1 Put differently, the pragmatist wants to plumb the contextual “cash value” of social ideas. Given these criteria, I want to argue that the idea of race is no longer very useful, no longer very salutory for our axiological project, notwithstanding the modern racial conservationists’ belief that it is.

I am, of course, aware of the possible charge of petitio here, that I am not permitting the “we” or “our” to be construed as or limited to a racial community (or other type of community constructed around different specific and narrow predicates, such as ethnicity or affinity) and already imply at the outset that it can’t be, that the axiology to which I refer is and should be based on a much larger social and political framework. I have no foundationalist answer to this charge, and in fact such “we’s” and “ours” may very well be built around all sorts of predicates, and are so built all over the world. I am taking certain things for granted here, namely, that pluralism and democratic practices are first-order social goods—for “us.” My “we” is larger than any racial or other narrow predicate because it has been amply demonstrated that communities that are based upon such narrow predicates rest within axiological or values frameworks that do not necessarily lend themselves to the pluralism and democratic practices that we in the West claim to hold in the highest regard. So the contextual “we” to which I refer is the political community that provides the general normative and political framework of our (racialized, sexualized, classified, professionalized, etc.) lives, a framework that we strive diligently to perfect and more or less protect, one that provides enough overlapping consensus to evoke solidarity and what John Rawls calls “fraternity” among diverse agents and populations. On this account, it is the particular nation-state in which we live, that is, America as well as other similarly situated, liberal democratic states. It is only too obvious that there can be different axiological “we’s” that can form such a framework (tribes, theocracies, monarchies, religions, even guilds). I also acknowledge, and in fact presuppose here, that no such large “we” is devoid of small communities, each having its own idiom, and each taking stances of assent and dissent within that larger “we.” This, too, seems obvious. Such idioms and such dissent are what, as we might say in the West, “makes a horse race”—but are what in other political configurations make for outcomes far more unfortunate than such a cliché can properly capture.

Race: Definiendum or Dogma?

All racial typologies have had mischievous careers,2 whether Kant’s, Blumenbach’s, Linnaeus’s, Coon’s, Agassiz’s, or Du Bois’s, to name but several. To
one degree or another, they have all fizzle out in the presence of the modern genetic pronouncement that there is no scientifically valid concept of race, no genetically tenable basis for racial distinctions. What there are, we find, are clines—gradual changes, across space, in certain characteristics exhibited by members of populations—and collections of phenotypic characteristics that have been inbred within a geographically more or less segregated population (and which can be and have been just as easily bred out). While there are clearly differences in appearance between certain geographically separated populations whose members evolved in relative conjugal isolation, the phenotypic expressions by which these are and have been divided into races are arbitrary. Nevertheless, for reasons both malicious (Nazi eugenics) and not (Du Bois’s “vindication” anthropology), some people have wondered whether there may nevertheless be resulting differences that make a difference. That is, they have wondered about such questions as “Is group X smarter than group Y?” or “Is group X more prone to incivility?” What we have found is that intellectual heft is nicely and randomly distributed around the globe, right along with incivility.3 We have found that the fact that the refrigerator wasn’t invented in Nubia and that paper wasn’t invented in Britannia are contingent facts and not genetic manifestations simpliciter of the people of Nubia and Britannia—that the inventions of the refrigerator and paper are based on cultural values and choices given existing technological advancements that have nothing to do with a race to the top of some predetermined, universally valorizable cultural summit (because there is no such summit).

Without providing a long discussion regarding the incoherence of racial typologies, I will simply utilize one exemplar, taken from the previous list, who wrestled with these confusions: that of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois gave us a composite concept of race in his famous address/essay The Conservation of Races. Race for Du Bois had several and disparately weighted features that provide its definition. In that essay he understood race as a collection of contingent but somewhat stable and replicated social practices, originating roughly within a specified geographical area in conjunction with what we today call certain recurring phenotypic expressions. On his account, to be a member of a particular race meant a mixture of these components in a way that would reliably identify a person as such a member. To put it another way, the defining elements of a race are (1) common blood, (2) common language, (3) shared history, (4) shared traditions, and (5) striving together toward the fulfillment of shared ideals of life, so much so that human history is more properly described as the history of races. Further, for Du Bois, each race has its own special genius and its own gifts to contribute to humankind that only it can contribute (this is Du Bois’s racial teleology). I agree with those who argue that Du Bois did not intend to limit race to “common blood.” Tommy Lott, for example, provides an interesting and useful analysis of Du Bois’s use of racial types and common blood that goes well beyond The Conservation of Races to make this point.4 Yet I do not see a tenable way to fully unlink common blood from, say, a common language or common traditions in Du Bois’s account, in part because Du Bois could not drop the idea of common blood (expressed as morphological characteristics) as part and parcel of the definition of race within his vindication project: that is, he used physical characteristics as “an essential feature of his project to correct the systematic erasure of black people from history.”5 Should one assent to the idea that race begins with or must be understood in terms of a Real or scientific definiendum, one would be able to follow Du Bois to his conclusion that while this is so, the important features of race are sociocultural and not biological. But as there is no such Real scientific definiendum called race, there is nothing for sociocultural practices to hook on to. So, with the benefit of hindsight and modern genetics, we can say that in terms of Du Bois’s vindication project, while necessarily referring to physical characteristics, he could have argued not that the Negro race, in its various shades and forms, has done and will do great things, but rather that “people who looked like us, whom whites call Negroes and denigrate as barbarians, established great civilizations in Egypt,” etc. This would have done the trick. No racial categories required.

But as Du Bois assumed the contextual framework and categories of race-talk, of talking about races as though they were Real, he was stuck laboring inside the belief that there are in fact essential biological categories into which sociocultural practices can be parsed, a notion that of course begs for the labeling of those categories. To put it another way, race was a kind of “substance” to which sociocultural “predicates” were supposed to have attached. But notwithstanding Du Bois’s own objections to emphasizing biology over those sociocultural predicates, it is hard to see that what substance was supposed to be in Du Bois’s account if not essential morphological types. It is difficult to see how those predicates hook up to biology, and, in the final analysis, it seems that Du Bois himself couldn’t see how either.6 Clearly, Du Bois got stuck speaking the language of race even though it was conceptually possible for him to have made his case without it, without interposing a category called race in front of human in his serious anthropology or his vindication project. As we look back at his work it is easy for us to see that he could have done without it. Although Du Bois may have ultimately wanted to “define” race away from biology and toward sociocultural practices and achievements, it was in a way an attempt to define a nondefiniendum—an interpositioned category that, violating the basic warning of Ockham’s razor, caused more trouble than it was worth. Of course, Du Bois is no more to be faulted for falling into this dogmatic trap than the other race theorists of his time. The dogma was simply not exposed as such, and it is difficult to see how it could have been, given the political and social climate in which Du Bois was laboring, and especially given the scientific knowledge and tools available (notwithstanding Franz Boas’s contributions).7 Or, as Peirce might have put it apropos Du Bois, race was among the “things which it does not occur to us can be questioned.”

We can now turn to another aspect of Du Bois’s account of race. Given Du Bois’s vindication project, when I raise the hood, so to speak, on Du Bois’s conception of race the salient motor that seems to drive it is racial teleology,
that each race has something special (spiritual) to offer humanity. The pragmatist has trouble with this notion. That is to say, we think that it is notoriously difficult to understand the ideals of any more or less coherent population—for example, a nation-state—as though the ideals are essential features of the members of the population. Rather, its ideals will be shaped, over time, by its intercourse with other populations with different contingent ideals and practices. No population may be said to have immutable or fixed ideals, although it will certainly have ideals. Further, the idea that a coherent population—what Du Bois would call a race, for example (even if "defined" nonbiologically)—has a particular spiritual or metaphysical gift to bestow upon civilization is one that, if not understood metaphorically or propagandistically, smacks of bad metaphysics. Is a recounting of the anthropological facts about a culturally distinguishable people to tell a story of that people that is to be understood as a chapter in a larger book that tells the greater teleological story of humankind in general? Although this may constitute useful rhetoric to be employed to foment a needed sense of purpose in a people, on many important levels it may also be described as a species of jingoism. To argue that a race (or a nation, or nation-state, or tribe) is destined to (supposed to, predisposed to) contribute a "missing" component to human culture is to argue something quite fantastic. It would be at the very least the hypostatization of goals and practices. There can in fact be no missing components since there is in fact nothing that humans are destined to be.10

There are no elements that make up Du Bois's concept of race that are not contingent. Obviously, phenotypic expressions are contingent upon the selection of sex partners, and while the selection of sex partners from within one's own cultural community has proven to be more probable than the selection of sex partners from outside, there is no reason that the odds will long remain in the favor of in-group mating, not in an era of globalization; but Du Bois himself seemed aware of this in his own time, within the context of America, where Africans, Native populations, Europeans, and others intermarried and/or mated across racial boundaries, and still do (Du Bois himself was of mixed ancestry). In addition, the geographical locations of groups are contingent upon political maps, which are themselves fluid, as well as upon patterns of migration.

It is true, however, that belief that each of the defining elements of race referenced above is far less contingent (or is in fact culturally necessary or culturally critical) than most pragmatists might be able to accept is a powerfully conservative device—a device that might so slow the rate of change as to cast the illusion of permanence around cultural practices or self-conceptions. Norms and cultural practices are frequently thought of as reflecting something about the way the world really is in itself, or something immutable concerning human nature. Even a pragmatist is forced to acknowledge the retarding power of cultural conservatism, as well as some of its benefits (such as resoluteness of moral purpose among the members of the population—important in times of crisis—or a feeling of belonging in a seemingly nihilistic universe, etc.). But whether not such conservatism leads to salutary or harmful states of affairs, few pragmatists are likely to accept the notion that the cultural status quo should escape critique, regardless of what conservatives may believe about the status of their cultures or about the world. This, I think, was as true for John Dewey as it is for Richard Rorty, who have rather different views about the manner in which cultural practices are or should be established. Yet, as we shall see, it is in some way the cultural conservative voice that contemporary race conservationists employ in their efforts to maintain the legitimacy of socially constructed racial types in spite of the incoherence and unsavory history of the idea of race.

The Prevailing Social Constructivist Conclusion

The preceding and cursory analysis of Du Bois's view of race was intended only to begin to demonstrate the problems presented when the notion of race is conserved, even when an attempt is made to define race nonessentially. I selected Du Bois not to make light of his analysis or goals but because, in my view, Du Bois was extremely sensitive to the critical importance of properly interpreting the data compiled during various anthropological inquiries into race and culture that were going on during his career, as well as to the dangers that quick and erroneous conclusions regarding those data would present in the realm of politics and social intercourse between so-called racial groups. There were some who did attempt to use the "science" of race as justification to perpetuate various myths of racial hierarchy that were, needless to say, unfavorable as regards people of African origin (as "African origin" was generally understood at the time, that is, as merely the birthplace of black people rather than the entire species).

But even if Du Bois's conclusions regarding race are not tenable, it does not mean that the notion of race can be so easily dismissed, since to believe in race and to inject racial thinking into the construction of important institutions and communal social practices is to make race real even though it does not correspond to a natural kind, that is, is not Real. This is done easily, when race is thought of as socially constructed. As I have said, I am not one to suppose that what is real need be adjudicated as such by the methods or standards of the natural sciences alone. When we attempt to do that, to allow such reductionist adjudication, we wind up throwing out the baby with the bathwater—we wind up chucking much of culture. Anything that tends to govern behavior—class, professional categories, etc.—and that may serve as an organizing or a unifying principle is real.11 Even though I think Du Bois's account of race is untenable the idea of race nevertheless does some taxonomic work, just like believing in an afterlife or natural law does some psychological or ethical work. This, also, is obvious. But one thing seems clear: something "does some work" is an insufficient reason to move it beyond the pale of scrutiny, revision, or rejection. Whether a pervasive cultural notion should be embraced or rejected should, on my account, depend considerably upon whether it contributes to, detracts from, or is relevant to the achievement of larger social and political aspirations as well as, I would add, jibes with the moral beliefs that we, by a consensus reflectively

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and democratically formed, have come to hold as central to the kind of people we wish to become.

Given the tests I find it most useful to apply, the tests of how race (or any other social construct) contributes to detracts from who we want to be, and given how I understand “we,” I am in the camp that thinks that whatever work race does, it has compiled more minuses than pluses on its score card. It has served as the basis for invidious social strife and murder; it has divided families, poisoned the flowering of possible and actual friendships and love relationships; it has imbued certain cultures with a false sense of absolute superiority and others with the bitter taste of imputed inferiority. It divides neighborhoods and cities down factional lines of demarcation. It has been used to defer dreams and stultify plans, hopes, and prospects. It has been used to limit the live opportunities of countless millions of children by distorting their self-images. In short, it has done the same kind of damage as (less complex) cultural inflations, such as nationalism and tribalism, but with less to show for itself in terms of salutary productions than the basic notion of nation or tribe has been able to show.

Looking at race as a social construct says very little about whether it should stay one as a matter of practice, and arguments along social constructivist lines tend to be, at times, merely descriptive, leaving us, as Du Bois was, stuck within a problematic discourse. I think that the following observations, by Linda Martin Alcoff, will help me to make this point:

Anti-essentialism has corroded the sense of visible difference as the “sign” of a deeper, more fundamental difference. . . However, at the same time, and in a striking parallel to the earlier modernist contradictions regarding the significance of race, in the very midst of our contemporary skepticism toward race as a natural kind stands the compelling social reality that race, or racialized identities have as much political, sociological, and economic salience as they ever had. As [David Theo] Goldberg puts it, liberal Western societies maintain the paradoxical position whereby “Race is irrelevant, but all is race.” The legitimacy and moral relevance of racial concepts is officially denied even while race continues to determine job prospects, career possibilities, available places to live [etc].

Alcoff then goes on to state that

Race is socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and produced through learned perceptual practice. Whether or not it is valid to use racial concepts, and whether or not their use will have positive or negative political effects, depends on the context. . . [This position]—what I will call a contextualism about race—is clearly the best option both politically and as a metaphysical description. . . One can hold without contradiction that racialized identities are produced, sustained, and sometimes transformed through social beliefs and practices and yet that race is real, as real as anything else, in lived experience, with operative effects in the social world.

These observations boil down to the following: (1) The idea of race as Real is pretty much dead, but (2) the damage race has done still remains, although notwithstanding that damage, (3) race, as a social construct, could be something we might choose to keep around.

While one may be unable to fashion a logically unassailable, noncontextual argument that the concept of race should go, one can, as a participant in the context in which racial discourse is extant, try to persuade others to take a look at why the concept of race should go given precisely that context. One can try to persuade others as feminists tried to persuade male chauvinists that people are not precluded from running for the Senate or becoming military generals simply because they have vaginas. It may be the case that the work race is supposed to do remains of value to some people, people who prefer to emphasize the pluses rather than the minuses of racial typologies, whatever they might be, but given its historical uses it seems quite reasonable to suggest that race should be relegated to, at best, the realm of quirky private preferences. Its “cash value,” the ingredient that it is supposed to add to our salutary democratic projects and intimate relationships, is hard to discern, even though its role in our self-descriptions isn’t. But there is not much one can do, by dint of logical rigor, to force someone to stop taking complexion and hair type, for example, as important conditioners of their own identities and/or how they will be recognized. But one can recommend to those who believe that race is important to the construction of their self-conceptions that they try to rethink why they need it. One can try to persuade others to do away with them by showing them how life might be without them. If they get the point of David Theo Goldberg’s observation, as I think we all do, one might try to persuade those who cling to the idea of race to nevertheless understand the layers of racialized reality that operate in their lives so that they might better see the difference between those levels upon which racialization is inescapable—for now—and those that they can peel back and discard.

Some might argue that stripping our “core selves” of cultural furniture like race is to ask that we give up the features of ourselves that are most important, that make us interesting individuals and, as groups, unique subsets of humanity, and that add flavor to human social intercourse. They might further argue that whether or not one’s being racialized causes others discomfort or “gets in the way” is not the problem of the self-racialized subject, but is the respondent’s problem. These seem like fair points, but in some ways they dodge the issue. I am critiquing this choice to be racialized in view of what we now know about (i.e., the present discourse concerning) race. I am asking how and why it is, in a world where the foundations of racialized thinking are under assault, one might still choose to be taken seriously as a racialized subject. I am wondering how racialization can long remain outside of the bag of personal eccentricities—how racialized people can long remain off the list of social eccentricities (just as male chauvinists have become, more or less, eccentrics). We are clearly not there yet, but I think that’s probably where we are headed, and should be.

Goldberg’s observation, as quoted by Alcoff, that “Race is irrelevant, yet all
is race" presupposes that we continue to see problems of social justice that have a racial prehistory as "racial problems" or problems of "racism," rather than as simply "stupid, unpardonable bias unacceptable to a civilization like ours." Shifting our descriptions of these sorts of injustices away from racial language and categories— to, in a sense, change the subject—is, I think, critical to deflating race itself, to removing the cloud of race from around our social intercourse and politics. In my view, this is an experiment that we have, as a society, yet to attempt. Because we have not attempted it, the pedestrian view that is still rife with notions of racial essentialism is not likely to go any time soon. And it is at the level of the daily social actors, these pedestrians, that make up Alcoff's "context," that race thinking continues to do the most damage. To hark back to Wittgenstein, if we all indeed do live in a house of language, it is hard to see why we should not take the language game of race more seriously as one begging for therapeutic critique.

Lucius Outlaw's Racial Conservation

There are some who might argue that to shift from talking about "racism" to "stupid, unpardonable bias unacceptable to a civilization like ours" is to make a poten response to past or present race-based injustices impossible, or at least more difficult (take the American context as an example). I do not agree. I think that racism can easily be redefined as the practice of illegitimate morphological parsing, or some similar phrase. This is consistent with my previously stated views regarding Du Bois's vindication project. I see no reason why, for example, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 could not be rewritten to remove the word "racism" (and so "race") every place it appears and replace it with something like "morphological parsing" or "the practice of morphological parsing." "Race" itself would become "morphology." This, in my view, does not take very much imagination. I cannot see why every moral critique of racism is not best reconceived and redefined as a moral critique of illegitimate parsing. In doing so, we drop "race" without dropping the redress of past or present injustices. (Bear in mind that Title VII captures nearly all the other human predicates on the basis of which discrimination and bigotry have hounded people in America [so far]—color, religion, sex, and national origin. As Title VII already addresses color, it already explicitly acknowledges morphology if conceived in its broadest sense.) This is perhaps fodder for a rather sweeping legal and public policy discussion with significant statutory implications. Unfortunately, that discussion cannot be developed here.

Further, there are those who would argue that to completely exorcize race as part of one's identity is sort of akin to inflicting a social handicap upon oneself, particularly where racialized thinking and racism have been serious historical problems. It is to replace Realpolitik with naïveté. On this account, not to be aware that one lives in a racialized society with racialized history will ultimately prove problematic since it will create certain expectations that cannot be realized (such as fair treatment in a variety of contexts). One had better acknow-

ledge one's ascribed racial identity, one's blackness or whiteness (etc.), since one is racialized from the outside in, whether or not one finds one's racial assignment agreeable, and this has certain concrete implications. Further, it is often argued that to bristle at one's racial assignment is to attempt to step outside of the history of race and racism or is an attempt to scorn or deride race-based institutions, or even race-based remedies to past race-based injustice, as mentioned. I often hear this from other Americans of African descent. I think that some of these criticisms have merit, and certainly the concerns that drive them do. But it is often the case that in the heated public discourse concerning race certain distinctions are lost that would allow for greater understanding of both the nature of the rejection of racial assignments by many of those who do the rejecting as well as the understandable suspicion on the part of some who see that rejection as, possibly, bad faith and a lack of historical sensibility.

I want to go back to my suggestion that there are certain layers of racial ascription that can be peeled back and discarded. Usually the rejection of racial assignments is a rejection of those assignments at only one moral level, or one layer, and is not intended to be a total rejection of racial assignments on all (e.g., sociopolitical) levels. An American of Chinese descent, for example, may take a cosmopolitan view of race as something that says very little about who she is in view of her private life choices, projects, interests, personal yearnings, and actual choice of associates. While her "tinted" skin and "almond-shaped" eyes may be acknowledged as an aspect of her social identity or taxonomy that may conjure notions of possible national or geographic origins, on a more personal level she may in fact merely see her morphology (and certain cultural practices) as having only a personal aesthetic significance, as one might view being a redhead or naturally muscular, and not significant because it marks her as a kind of human being. On the other hand, she may at the same time possess a level-headedness to match her cosmopolitanism. She may recognize that people who look like her share a history of struggle in the United States that has created certain bonds, social conditions, and cultural habits and practices, and that to consciously turn her back on that history may be problematic as it may, inter alia, lead her to exist in a psychologically defused and sociopolitically dangerous state of mind (as long as the types of slights and oppression that shaped that history remain extant or as long as there is a probability of their return). Therefore, her acceptance of that history and of her "Asianness" as more than aesthetic features is a way to embrace and revalorize the features of herself that have been most denigrated by Euro-American society.

I can see no reason why approaching racialization (for as long as we are stuck with the idea of race) in this more nuanced way should prove problematic. But note, given what I have argued, that the revalorization discussed can be accomplished without any reference to a "yellow race." Yet there are those who do not think that revalorization can take place without such references. The philosopher Lucius Outlaw argues that race informs and shapes the life-worlds of many people accustomed to seeing themselves in important ways as members of racial groups. I view Outlaw's analysis regarding race as part and parcel of the gen-
eral postmodernist move toward contextualization and certain robust communitarian preferences. This postmodernist move, while doing in my opinion some important cultural and philosophical work, has also led to what can be characterized as context fetishization, to disparate groups hypervitalizing the specific and peculiar markers of their identities over and against those of others, to a defense of one’s context (community, religious perspective, political ideology, race) “weapon in hand,” as Stanley Fish’s version of communitarianism seems to trumpet.  

While Outlaw does not believe that racial identities should be invidiously hypervitalized in this way, and he believes that such hypervitalization is avoidable, he would probably disagree with my conclusion that racial identities should be deflated (or should be abandoned), since he would probably argue, inter alia, that my deflation of race is too much of a nod to the intellectual and cultural privileging of the Enlightenment project, is part and parcel of a worldview that valorizes totalizing rationalist axiologies that leave little room for “non-rational” bases of communal solidarity and communally derived sources of meaning. To the contrary, my quarrel is not with cultural and ethnic participation, which I think both useful and emotionally fulfilling, but specifically with the notion that race should be one of the important fixtures of that participation. What I think Outlaw needs to address is why he thinks the charge of harboring a vulgar modernist sensibility (particularly stinging to people, like me, schooled to understand Enlightenment excesses) should stick concerning those who challenge race in the various ways it is being challenged today.

I would like to explore more directly Outlaw’s reasons for this and his general championing of the conservation of races, and offer some criticisms of his position. In his On Race and Philosophy, Outlaw makes the following statements (pp. 10 and 11):

I Why, then, endow raciosity and ethnicity with highly honorific philosophical significance? The answer, simply put: because we must . . .

II But it has not come to pass that physical and cultural differences among groups of peoples in terms of which they continue to be identified, and to identify themselves, as races and ethnicities have either ceased to exist or ceased to be taken as highly important in the organization of society . . .

III Of course, some protest that such identities are inappropriate, in part because the notions of the racial or ethnic group involved in them lack science-certified empirical confirmation or philosophically certified logical precision. However, it strikes me that these protesters, while well-intentioned, are nonetheless misguided, for they have forgotten a very important injunction from Aristotle that for any given science or systematic attempt to achieve certified knowledge one should seek no more precision than the subject matter allows . . .

IV On the basis of a revised philosophical anthropology that draws on an enhanced social ontology mindful of social collectivities, then, perhaps those who philosophize would not mislead themselves in thinking that the elimination of antagonisms tied to invidious valorizations of raciosity and ethnicity can be facilitated by “lexical surgery” that removes “race” from usage and

replaces it, instead, with references to, say, “communities of meaning” as offered by Kwame Anthony Appiah . . . or as he has proposed more recently, to “ethnic identities,” since he claims there is no such thing as race . . . I worry that efforts of this kind may well come to have unintended effects that are too much of a kind with racial and ethnic cleansing in terms of their impacts on raciosity and ethnicity as important means through which we construct and validate ourselves.

I think these four excerpts fairly portray some of Outlaw’s principal concerns regarding the deflation of race.

As regards (1), Outlaw is referring to some of the problems that attend a Eurocentric flattening or homogenizing of cultural difference in the name of universal reason (which was itself—that is, universal reason—given a “highly honorific” status)—the kind of homogenization that attends positivism and scientism, for example. He argues for the legitimacy of consulting communal (racial/ethnic) sensibilities, rationalities, and perspectives in the course of philosophical inquiry. He goes on to make this point over and again in On Race and Philosophy. Indeed, as Outlaw points out, this coupling of the valorization of universal reason with Eurocentric chauvinism was a weapon used to deride the cultural and intellectual productions of non-European peoples and to serve as a justification for their subjugation wherever such subjugation was possible. Outlaw, rightly, seeks to unmask. He shifts the attention from universal reason, the mask worn by Eurocentric chauvinists who offered themselves as the cultural standard for the whole world, toward and in favor of culturally based and culturally informed philosophical and intellectual approaches not necessarily based on or privileging the laws of logic and Western scientific methods. The mask removed, it is easy to see that chauvinism for what it is/was. Outlaw’s unmasking is an attempt to push back European culture, and in particular some of the more robust, science-mad, and Eurocentric metanarrative productions of the Enlightenment and modernity, in an effort to make space for and revalorize the cultural and intellectual productions of non-European peoples as important to the existential world-views that give them meaning. He is attempting to privilege first and foremost and to hold in regard the internal consensuses of non-European cultures as what is relevant to those cultures, regardless of and in some sense in spite of the gravitational pull of modernity.

I have little quarrel with these goals, for the intellectual paths that a culture takes will depend on what is relevant to that culture, not what universal reason dictates, and what is relevant to a culture, or to use Outlaw’s word, to ethnies, need not be determined or vetted entirely by the dictates of so-called pure reason, although my concerns about the effects of the Enlightenment project are, I believe, somewhat less than Outlaw’s. Where I do not follow Outlaw is in his claim that raciosity/ethnicity “must” be given “highly honorific philosophical significance.” It seems enough that we have learned, with the help of people like Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and James, that one can only philosophize from where one is, that one begins thinking about the world with a bag full of biases, values, and preconditions; that one, to recall Hegel’s more lucid historicism, is a son of
his times. Why these biases, values, and preconditions should be "highly honorific" is not only curious, but may also be dangerous if one's philosophizing is arbitrarily prevented from overcoming or deconstructing at least some of these biases, values, and preconditions. A proper response to the Enlightenment's excesses and totalizations cannot be to lock ourselves, more or less, into the monological intellectual and cultural productions of a Volk. I take one of the primary goals, and serious obligations, of the intellectual life to be such attempts to overcome the bounds of metaphorically "static" contexts to the extent possible as situated beings. I cannot conceive of a philosophical life chained (and I use that word quite deliberately) by such robust racial or völkisch loyalties that philosophy and inquiry turn into arbitrarily truncated activities or discourses.

In any event, "Enlightenment-style" reason need not be totalizing and is unlikely to be put away as an important tool, among other tools, in figuring out our world and negotiating ourselves through it. "Reason" is not and never was the problem, and if it is we are all in trouble since I have no idea how we can proceed without it. Reason is just that creative and problem-solving capacity that all sane human beings possess. Hegel's Idea notwithstanding. Rather, the problem has always been the privileging of logical and scientific approaches in all types of inquiry, the creation of a totalizing rationalism, as though meaning and value are or can be limited to the determinations and products of such approaches. Pragmatism's holism, from Dewey on, has had a response to this that seems to have worked pretty well in addressing the cult of Reason, and without a call for "highly honorific" philosophical significance attached to race and ethnicity, but rather with a call to understand that the nature of scientific and philosophical inquiry is, in general, of a piece with other types of social practices and of a society's aspirations.

Critical or philosophical inquiry should avoid placing, to the fullest extent practicable, any cultural practice (and race-seeing is one such practice) in the category of "highly honorific" (which is precisely where the Enlightenment, ironically, placed science and rationalism) inasmuch as such inquiry must often destabilize cultural practices by asking the culture rude questions so that it may look at and critique itself, perhaps leading to new and "better" cultural practices ("better" in view of its own axiological and moral commitments and of its own experiences with trying to achieve and sometimes change them). This does not mean that cultural critique must itself be totalizing, evocating core values and beliefs in one large critical sweep. The process of inquiry, of critiquing cultural practices, is usually best done piecemeal, akin to the way Neurath describes the manner in which philosophical conceptual schemes are changed.  

It is incoherent to, at the same time, (1) assent to the demise of race as Real, (2) profess that race nevertheless has sociocultural reality, and argue that (3) as a sociocultural reality race is beyond serious rational critique. Whereas (1) and (2) are together coherent (if arguable), the conjunction of (3) is not. It defeats the whole point of serious cultural critique and social criticism. Although sociocultural practices are protected from merely logical or scientific analysis, they are not unassailable from the axiological rationality that drives the culture of simple critical inquiry. That Outlaw, as a philosopher, either does not see merit in this distinction or seems to want to claim otherwise leads one to ask some rather critical questions. Are all critical assessments of cultural productions, race included, manifestations of the Enlightenment disease? Have the Enlightenment and reason become bogeymen, or might it not be best to simply avoid its excesses and to bracket and discard some of the more idiotic, pseudo-scientific claims of some of its heroes?

In (II), Outlaw asserts that racial/ethnic bonds continue to hold communities together, and that physical features are caught up in the formation of those bonds. In (III) Outlaw asserts to those who would do away with racial/ethnic groups by dint of logical reasoning that they are violating the Aristotelian principle that we must determine whether the subject of an inquiry is a techne or an episteme— that race/ethnicies are more appropriately analyzed as morals and politics are examined, that is, with appropriate reference to the needs, character, and purposes of individuals and communities. These, of course, cannot be divined by recourse to bare epistemic (read, scientific) reasoning. In (IV) Outlaw accuses those who are attempting an eliminativist attack on race of something of a kind with mass murder. Although I take Outlaw's remarks as figurative, the sharp rhetorical flourish of "ethnic cleansing" is noted. For the invocation of "ethnic cleansing" tips off the reader to just how much Outlaw is committed to robust racially and ethically based identities—so much so that, as I have suggested, he seems to view them as almost inviolable, as having almost inalienable rights to exist as they are and to be protected from eroding assaults from the outside, and especially by those who use Eurocentric notions of reason and scientific method.

The answer to some of my perplexity in reading Outlaw's arguments for the conservation of race may be found in this: One may note that in (I) through (IV) Outlaw always pairs race with ethnicity (which is why I have explained Outlaw's account with reference to "racial/ethnic" imperatives above). I think this is problematic and an important but useful flaw in his argument, one which allows him to rhetorically conserve the moral legitimacy of race by frequently pairing race and culture in an effort to suggest that one cannot do without the other. On his account, to criticize the idea of race seems akin to criticizing ethnnicities or cultures themselves. But, of course, it isn't.

We recall that for many years race was understood to be precisely Real. Its demise as Real is based precisely upon the advancements made in scientific inquiry, and it is precisely what can be inferred by the logic of that inquiry (which we all generally accept) that leads to the conclusion that one of the two legs of racial thinking (races as natural kinds) has been lopped off (leaving behind only, perhaps, race as a social construction). Anthony Appiah's (and others', Naomi Zack's, for example) critiques of race as a social construct, the only remaining leg, generally begin here. It is a beginning that accepts but does not overprivilege good, solid scientific arguments and allows for the formulation of cultural critiques on the basis of reasonable inferences and possible implications drawn from those arguments. Appiah and others do not offer scientific argu-
ments for the elimination of the social construct leg upon which race stands. They simply begin with the question, in view of those arguments, Why should one keep racial thinking around? Their arguments take for granted that race is at best a violable construct, just like any other.

Unquestionably, racial thinking has led to certain cultural productions, certain memes, certain literatures and has been tied up, seemingly inextricably, with ethnic identities. These can be thought of as the output of a certain metaphysical view of the world, as certain artifacts of that view, that is, the view that races are Real. It has its cognates. At one time, we believed that sickness was caused by evil spirits, as mentioned earlier, and the treatment for disease was delivered by incantations and prayers by shamans. But in a society that holds to the rudiments of germ pathology—the fruit of epistemic thought and solid, scientific arguments—it is hard to argue that shamans and medicine men should continue to be given the same stature that they once had, even if they have contributions to make in holistic healing. To ignore germ theory itself, to hold on to the artifacts of outdated metaphysical views as though no change had occurred, would be more than puzzling. It would be ridiculous. So, too, is a view that any cultural or social construct, even when enshrined in the embrace of a particular culture or ethnic, is beyond critique. If critiques of cultures or ethnicities are to be taken as forms of intellectual imperialism, I am not quite sure where that leaves philosophers and intellectuals, or any other thinking person in the modern world. Outlaw, I know, does not generally view culture critique to be intellectual imperialism (he engages in it himself, and well). This is why I remain perplexed by his line of reasoning as regards the conservation of race.

Clearly, race need not be thought of, even as a construct, as critical to the survival of a culture or an ethnic group. Many persons around the globe value their cultural practices and productions with hardly any thought to something called race. Outlaw is right in suggesting that it is inappropriate to charge collections of cultural behaviors and values as collections of “errors” according to epistemic standards. One cannot say that French or Italian cultures are “erroneous,” since to do so is to commit a category mistake. And one certainly cannot call into question, all at once, the totality of one’s cultural practices and values. Yet one can call some of them into question when the evidence suggests it is time to do so. To not do so may well be a mark of reactionism. What Outlaw has to account for, in my view, is why race, as a construct, as part and parcel of cultural practice, must remain a category and a value within a culture or ethnic. This is precisely what he does not do. Few people puzzle about the existence of culture, of ethnic groups, and of the attachments people feel to them. But many people who understand the status of race in the sciences and the history of race as a social construct do wonder what race actually adds to identity, and in that regard Appiah is quite right in his general critique of race. Appiah is not engaged in lexical excision, as Outlaw argues, when he questions the concept of race and the continued use of the word. He is quite aware that belligerent cultural conflicts, even those that concern morphology, will not disappear by removing race from the lexicon. But he does labor under the belief that by continuing to announce the death of race as a Real basis for human segregation and division, as well as demonstrating the truly enormous complexities that attend ethnic and cultural identity, people may be persuaded to rethink some of their biases and bigotries—some of the objects of their “highly honorific” commitments. This seems entirely reasonable.

Culture is ubiquitous, a sine qua non of the human condition. Race is not or need not be. It is simply not true that racial identity is and has always been “taken as highly important in the organization of society.” Why have people taken as highly important, then? What is indeed true in (II) is that ethnic identification has been important in such organization, and still is. But again, Outlaw’s hitching race to ethnicity is a move that preserves or enhances the moral legitimacy of racial identification. What works in the favor of his argument is that such hitching forces images of ethnic groups into our heads and in such images we picture a people’s physicality (as in my example of the Asian woman), and we may believe that physicality is essential to their forms of life that it seems inconceivable that the two can be separated. When we think of Chinese or Bajan culture and when we view Chinese or Bajan individuals as members of ethnic groups we move to picture thinking. Indeed, Outlaw would be right in noting that physicality is often integral to Chinese and Bajan ethnic identities. He wants to argue that it should remain so. He views nosy questions about why physicality should matter at all as rude, the first salvo in a philosophical war of “ethnic cleansing.”

But why should sincere intellectuals shrink from asking these rude questions—even the Chinese and Bajan intellectuals who exist within Chinese and Bajan cultures? It is hard to see why intellectuals should shrink from asking rude questions about any aspect of human culture, whether it be race, religious fundamentalist dogma, Western materialism, patriarchy, untouchables, wife burning, the sacrifice of virgins, temple prostitution, fossil fuel consumption, vivisection, female circumcision, foot binding, the infallibility of the Pope, or any other “valued” bit of cultural practice or metaphysics. I can’t figure out why such critique should incite the use of terms like “ethnic cleansing.”

The fact that racial identities actually continue to shape the life-worlds of people is precisely because of the mythologies and dogmas that have surrounded race for the past two hundred-plus years. We have been stuck with race, whether we wanted to be or not. Race was a lens by which we came to view ourselves as determined beings. But the geneticist’s pronouncement of the metaphysically fictitious status of race, for many, meant the bursting of the constraints of an illusion. Many viewed the demise of race-as-Real to be potentially liberating. For us, race is a nonsalutary encumbrance, an incoherent sociocultural idea. Yet if one were to be persuaded by Outlaw’s arguments, one would conclude that it is precisely the constraints and determinations of race that should be preferred, so long as we can avoid the risks of bringing some of its nasty baggage along. Is this some kind of stalemate? Does the debate simply hinge on a choice? Do
we simply say that one person's chains are another's wings? If that be so, then it may simply be that no line of reasoning will serve to undo racial commitments; one would only choose to be determined by race, or choose not to be.

Regarding Outlaw's belief (against the facts of the history of the race concept) that race can be preserved without invidious result, I have serious doubts about whether it makes sense to take the chance to see if he is right or wrong, especially when racial valorization is increasingly thought to be untenable and we are so close to finding ways to educate "pedestrians" (and especially our children) to do away with it altogether. Since, in my view, the question of whether we should keep or get rid of race presents the rare opportunity to dispose of a troublesome basis for social division and strife, I am not willing to place much confidence in that assertion. I have no doubt that Outlaw himself could pull it off. But what gets done with race on the street is not out of Outlaw's (or anyone else's) hands. Given my fears here, although race may remain a potent social category for the foreseeable future, the cost-benefit analysis that has been performed on race leads me to seriously question why anyone would want to hold on to it, especially given that it is difficult to see any real psychological or social harms that attend its deflation. I don't see how one would be cut adrift existentially, how one would cease loving one's dialect and language, the foods and music and values and tales and spirituality of one's ethnic group, the fact that one is still a son or daughter of Scotland or India if, in the very next instant, racial thinking and racism, in every form and manifestation, would disappear forever.

Since we are, after all, talking about a social construct, something that we may keep or get rid of given the reaching of a certain consensus, we need to ask some hard questions about what the mystery ingredient is—call it "R"—that race is supposed to bring to the table in establishing the kind of cosmopolitan-democratic order that we claim to want. Is "R" a sense of physical pride? If it is, why should one take pride in phenotypic or physical expressions? Is "R" a sense of shared history? What's wrong with just shared history? Is shared history enough to constitute a race? If so, then is not, as critics have pointed out, being an American or a Spaniard to belong to a race of people? Does "R" serve as a rampart that protects diversity and pluralism? But again, there are all kinds of pluralisms that will always exist as long as individuals and communities exist. Is there a fear of a monochromatic "beige" society? Whatever rush we get out of a broad morphological spectrum within the human species (green eyes, rosy nipples, woolly or flaxen hair) is certainly replaceable (if it ever comes to that) by new ways of expressing our salutary or other morally inert differences even if the ends of the spectrum were bred away through blethe procreative disregard.

If I am right, then in fact there is no "R," and race adds nothing worth preserving, with the possible exception of weak taxonomic distinctions no different than the size of feet or the frequency of overbite. It does nothing, in a civilization like ours, to help us achieve the kinds of social goals we wish, but it may serve a great purpose in a society unlike ours, with different social and cultural aspirations. So if it is held on to as a social construct (and, as Outlaw prefers, it may be) rather than as a fact of natural science, which it is not, the greatest burden of justification should rest upon those who refuse to let it go rather than those who would see it deflated or exorcized—whether they are inside or outside of the academy.

NOTES

1. Here a critic could argue that the "who" we wish to be could just as easily be despotic as democratic. Indeed, it could be. Is this mere relativism? I assert, with Richard Rorty, to the Habermasian conclusion that such "whos" as these (i.e., despot's) will be less likely to emerge as we approach an ideal condition wherein increasingly open and honest discourse is permitted by whatever regime is in power. This agreement has less to do with obedience to the call of reason than with what seems to be a tendency in creatures like us to watch out for our own necks, however long it may take us to fashion better ways to do so. Monarchies were once thought to be a good way, but our acquaintance with a slate of Caligulas and George III's over the ages has made us rethink that notion and experiment with alternative regimes. As a species, we now have some experience with despots and we are coming to learn that permitting the conditions wherein despots become appealing alternatives will sooner or later make preserving our necks difficult. But one can be assured that some of us will forget, and indeed frequently do forget, our lessons—that we will one day welcome them back under different guises using "principled" and "well-reasoned" arguments. I am reasonably certain that there is no definitive philosophical response to such political realities, none that will trump the "wisdom" of a culture that leads it to conclude that all this democracy and freedom stuff simply goes too far. I do know that the lack of such a response has nothing to do with my willingness to die to keep despotism out of my political culture or with my fervent desire to strengthen and broaden liberal democratic practices and cosmopolitan sensibilities.

2. For a foundational understanding of racial typologies as developing out of the eighteenth century, see Milford Wolpoff and Rachel Caspari, Race and Human Evolution (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

3. According to the United Nations' 1999 Global Report on Crime and Justice, "There is remarkable agreement around the world concerning the comparative seriousness of crimes. All major and minor types of crimes: burglary, robbery, assault, car theft, are recognized all over the world, no matter what region. No matter what part of the world, over a five year period, two out of three of the inhabitants of big cities are victimized by crime at least once." As for intelligence, what is meant by "intelligence" depends upon contextual factors, such as what cognitive skills are actually valued. These factors vary from culture to culture and from period to period. See the Journal of the...

5. Ibid., p. 71.

6. I use "Real" (vs. "real") to mean something that the natural sciences would consider to be a proper subject of study, for example, a natural kind.

7. In *Dusk of Dawn* Du Bois tells us regarding Africa and Africans: "The mark of their heritage is upon me in color and hair. These are obvious things, but of little meaning in themselves; only important as they stand for real and more subtle differences from other races. Whether they do or not, I do not know nor does science know today"; in *Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), p. 639. The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah says that "Du Bois takes race for granted and seeks to revalue one pole of the opposition of white to black. The received concept is a hierarchy, a vertical structure, and Du Bois wishes to rotate the axis, to give race a 'horizontal' reading. Challenge the assumption that there can be an axis, however oriented in the space of values, and the project fails for loss of presuppositions. In his later writings, Du Bois—whose life's work was, in a sense, an attempt at just this impossible project—was unable to escape the notion of race he explicitly rejected"; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 46.

8. Boas, an anthropologist working at the turn of the last century, concluded after significant study that there are no pure races and that no race is intrinsically similar to another.


10. Lott (73) points out that Du Bois, for some interesting reasons having to do with a shifting view of the course and status of modernity itself, later attempted to distance himself from the notion of racial teleology.

11. I am reminded of Foucault's preface to *The Order of Things*: "This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a certain Chinese encyclopaedia in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sires, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification...'. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the table, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that"; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970), p. xv.


13. Ibid., p. 270.

14. Lucius T. Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Outlaw's communitarianism is clear when he quotes Du Bois with apparent agreement concerning the need for "combined race action" (155) and when he tells us that what is critically important concerning the conservation of race is that such conservation is about (156) "the end in view... in this case the historical development and well-being of a relatively distinct group of people who suffer oppression at the hands of persons of another group." He then ends the discussion in the chapter with the following: "Thus must the race be mobilized and organized.... Thus must the race of African peoples—all races—be conserved." For many persons—and I place myself in this group—the continued existence of discernable race and ethnic-based communities of meaning is highly desirable even if, in the very next instant, racism and perversion, invidious ethnocentrism in every form and manifestation would disappear forever." It is terribly unclear why race is provided as a sine qua non for communities of meaning. One of the other odd things here is that Outlaw seems to take racial communities as a kind of natural, organic given, yet he argues for their conservation with fervor, as though they are things that must be vigorously defended. As a deflationist, whenever I hear such vigor my suspicions get aroused—my antennae go up. What seems at stake for Outlaw, as for Du Bois, is the "unfinished project" of the advancement and vindication of a particular race. That vindication cannot take place in his view, or so it seems, if the notion of race is razed. Although he references "all races" it is difficult for me to imagine that Outlaw was motivated to write *On Race and Philosophy* with primary regard to the need for Asians and Caucasians to lock arms racially and show the world their stuff.


16. Quine's essay "Identity, Ostension and Hypostasis" is helpful here: "Yet we must not leap to the fatalistic conclusion that we are stuck with the conceptual scheme that we grew up in. We can change it bit by bit, plank by plank, though meanwhile there is nothing to carry us along but the evolving conceptual scheme itself. The philosopher's task was well compared by Neurath to that of a mariner who must rebuild his ship on the open sea"; Willard Van Orman Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 78.

17. I assume that the reference is to Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; "For a well-schooled man is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits: it is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of probability from a mathematician as to demand strict demonstrations from an orator." I do not think that the critics of race as social construct are guilty of an error with any family resemblance to this admonition.