

Divesting from Whiteness:

The Tortured Logic of Exclusion

“...the bad news is that...the effort to get people to come together under the banner of whiteness has...always been about power and exploitation... I don’t know what that means about trying to salvage the idea of...good whiteness...that’s something that you’ve gotta wrestle with.” –Chenjerai Kumanyika

I have come to believe that no one should think of themselves as a member white race nor apply the label to others. Why? It is not to dodge responsibility for white privilege or to avoid the reality of racial injustice in the United States and elsewhere. It is because the very concept of whiteness is paradoxical, and any application of the term invites mistaken inferences and biased actions (in oneself and others) that would be better left out in the cold.

1. Recent Interchanges on Racial Discourse

Before I defend this conclusion, consider some recent interchanges about whether to eliminate or conserve racial discourse. First, there is a shared understanding that sets the stage for conflicts about race talk: the ordinary concept of race includes what Appiah calls *racialism*. (Appiah 1994, 80) Mallon characterizes racialism as the belief that each race shares a *biobehavioral essence*: “underlying natural (and perhaps genetic) properties that (1) are heritable, biological features, (2) are shared by all and only the members of a race, and (3) explain behavioral, characterological, and cultural predispositions of individual persons and racial groups.” (Mallon 2006, 528–29) Not only is there broad agreement that racialism is part of the ordinary concept of race, there is even broader agreement that racialism is false and that there are no biobehavioral essences for races. Eliminativists and conservationists about race talk draw different conclusions from this consensus, often based on different assumptions about the semantics of race.

Consider one prominent eliminativist maneuver. First, they point out that there are two families of semantic theories that would determine the meaning of race terms. On descriptivist or ideational theories, the meaning of a term is whatever satisfies the descriptions associated with that term. If this is right, then racial terms like White, Black, Asian, etc. pick out whichever entities satisfy descriptions associated with those terms. By contrast, a causal-historical theory of race allows that two people may use a term with a shared meaning, even though they associate different, and even incompatible, descriptions with the term. In other words, according to causal-historical theories, meaning isn't determined by satisfaction of associated descriptions. Instead, meaning is determined in part by reality. Even if we differ in the descriptions we associate with a term like "cat," there is a real set of entities that cause the phenomena linked with the original or central uses of that term. In the ordinary domestic case, the entities are members of the species *Felis catus*. Apparently, these two broad approaches to the semantics of kind terms are the only games in town. So, eliminativists argue that races do not exist on either of these semantic theories.

On a descriptivist semantics, the eliminativist argument goes like this:

D1: A term or concept is associated with a description: a proposition or set of propositions about the properties of the referent.

D2: The term or concept refers to the unique thing that satisfies (or best satisfies) the elements of the description.

D3: If no unique thing satisfies the elements of the description, the term or concept does not refer.

(Mallon 2006, 530)

The eliminativist need only point out that ordinary race concepts are laden with the assumption of racialism. But if all agree that there are no biobehavioral essences, then nothing satisfies the descriptions associated with ordinary race concepts. Therefore, races do not exist.

On a causal-historical semantics, the eliminativist argument goes like this:

CH1: A kind term is introduced to pick out some unified kind of thing.

CH2: If the term successfully picks out a kind when introduced, it continues to pick out that same kind as the term is passed on to others (regardless of whether or not the thing satisfies the description associated with the term).

CH3: If there is no single kind of thing successfully picked out by the term, the term does not refer.

(Mallon 2006, 531)

There are two main kinds that eliminativists consider as possible referents for race terms (Appiah 1994; Zack 2002). On the one hand are thin racial kinds the members of which share superficial properties associated with racial categories (such as skin color, hair type, and other morphological traits or perhaps the genes that cause such traits). According to Appiah, thin racial kinds would have several problematic features: They are neither unified in any important sense since these traits can be inherited separately, nor do they correlate strongly with the social and psychological phenomena that guide the use of race terms in ordinary life. Third, many people in the United States would be left out of these racial categories, since they have mixtures of traits from different racial groupings (Appiah 1994, 101). In light of CH1-CH3, it is obviously problematic that thin racial kinds are not unified. The other two features are problematic because they indicate a mismatch between the intended referent of racial terms and their actual referents. For instance, if thin racial kinds do not correlate with the relevant social and psychological phenomena, they do not provide a good causal explanation of the observable phenomena referred to in ordinary uses of race terms.

On the other hand are what I will call *thick racial kinds* constituted by populations of individuals that have been reproductively isolated enough to cause biologically significant differences among those populations. Eliminativists point out that it is implausible that any racial group in the United States

corresponds to such a population (E.g., Appiah 1994; Zack 2002).¹ They then conclude that race terms do not refer.

At this point, we find a lacuna in the eliminativist argument. Only a brief perusal of the social science of race reveals its powerful influence on outcomes as diverse as wealth, home ownership, educational attainment, and likelihood of imprisonment. Surely, there is some more or less unified cause of these social phenomena. But if there is some causal explanation for why racial categories continue to be associated with these effects, then such an explanation may supply a referent or supply a satisfying description associated with race terms.

Here, social constructionist accounts of race stand ready to fill the gap. The most plausible explanation for many of these effects is that psychology or culture or social institutions reproduce these effects through differential treatment of people based on categorization criteria that are public knowledge.² If these explanations are correct, then races may not refer to unified natural or biological kinds, but they do likely refer to unified kinds that figure into our best (social) scientific explanations of statistically different outcomes for different races. So on a causal historical semantics, there is likely to be a referent that corresponds with some contemporary racial groupings.³

On a descriptivist semantics, the lacuna is no smaller. Even if we admit that racialism is false and that straightforward descriptions associated with racial groupings (e.g. involving biobehavioral essences) are not satisfied by anything real, the constructionist can still offer a perfectly adequate description: racial group R is the group *widely believed to share* the biobehavioral essence E, namely the “underlying natural (and perhaps genetic) properties that (1) are heritable, biological features, (2) are shared by all

¹ This point is supported by scientific study of the last 600,000 years of human evolution which reveals consistent and extensive admixture (Templeton 2013).

² For a naturalistic account of socially constructed kinds like race and gender, see (Mallon 2016).

³ Important for later, this is most obvious as it concerns white people, because the differences in outcome between white people and other racial groups are so vast.

and only the members of [the] race, and (3) explain behavioral, characterological, and cultural predispositions of individual persons and racial groups.” If categorization criteria are public knowledge and ordinary race concepts are committed to racialism, then this description will be reliably associated with racial groups. So the social constructivist has a ready reply to some of the most important arguments of the eliminativist.

Of course, the debate does not end there, but we can now articulate a conclusion that could only be fully substantiated by a much more detailed accounting of the debate. To wit, this approach to the debate makes racial discourse hostage to unsteady assumptions about semantics.⁴ Moreover, the semantic assumptions are in fact ancillary to the most important questions about race talk, namely normative ones. Mallon puts this point as follows:

Resolving this disagreement [between eliminativists and conservationists about racial discourse] requires a complex assessment of many factors, including, the epistemic value of ‘race’ talk in various domains, the benefits and costs of racial identification and of the social enforcement of such identification, the value of racialized identities and communities fostered by ‘race’ talk, the role of ‘race’ talk in promoting or undermining racism, the benefits or costs of ‘race’ talk in a process of rectification for past injustice, the cognitive or aesthetic value of ‘race’ talk, and the degree of entrenchment of ‘race’ talk in everyday discourse. (Mallon 2006, 550)

As Mallon points out, the weight of these normative considerations can justify us in ignoring the semantics of race terms when deciding whether to use them. Moreover, assessing these normative considerations presents formidable challenges for any neat resolution of how we ought to think and talk about race.

⁴ For more detailed support for this conclusion, see (Mallon 2006, sec. VI)

2. Semantic Awareness and the Concept of Whiteness

As intractable as the normative questions may be for race talk in general, I believe they have straightforward answers for how we should think and talk about the white race. While there is a coherent grouping that answers to this kind term, it is not possible for someone who is *semantically aware* to identify as a member of such a group with honesty and integrity or to apply the term to others (at least in most ordinary circumstances), nor is there any legitimate and promising normative project in which this kind term figures.

What I mean by semantic awareness is knowledge of the historical and cultural circumstances in which the concept of whiteness originated, the resulting descriptions associated with the term, and the causal powers of these associations (focusing mostly on the etiology of the term within the United States). Allow me to summarize those circumstances. First, the concept of a black race probably preceded that of a white race, and the image of an “inferior black race” was probably transported to the Americas of the 17th century in the minds of British and European colonists (Kendi 2016, 24). Those colonists were quick to sketch out and embellish the counterpoised image of the white race soon upon their arrival. Here are a few of the more distinct strokes in that portrait:

1) John Punch was an indentured servant of African descent who fled Virginia with two other indentured servants, one a Dutchman and the other a Scotsman. In 1640, a court in Virginia sentenced him and his fellow fugitives. Whereas Punch was convicted to a lifetime of servitude, the Scotsman and Dutchman received four years of additional servitude as their sentence, apparently because they were considered white.

2) Elizabeth Key, an indentured servant of African descent and also the daughter of a white legislator, successfully petitioned for her freedom in 1656. A short time later in 1662, the Virginia House of Burgesses responded to this and other cases by passing a law that dramatically revised English

common law. Whereas English common law figured inheritance and bondage through the father, the Virginia law decreed that social status as bond or free was transferred through the mother.

3) In 1691, the Virginia house of Burgesses produced the first official document mentioning white people. To prevent what they called the “abominable mixture” of “negroes, mulattoes, and Indians” on the one hand and “English, or other white” on the other, they banned interracial marriage on pain of banishment and made it illegal for white women to have “a bastard child by any negro or mulatto” on pain of fines and 30 years of servitude for their children. The Virginia House of Burgesses and subsequent legislative bodies (and the courts that interpreted their laws) thereby secured a reliable source of free labor for slave holding whites.

4) According to Biewen, early in US history “...states limited the amount of African ancestry a person could have and still be considered white (typically one fourth or one eighth).” (Biewen 2017) In the twentieth century, these limitations crystalized into the “one drop rule” of the segregation era.

5) In 1790, the Naturalization Act made it possible to grant citizenship (and its accompanying benefits) to “any alien, being a free white person.” However, the act left it up to the courts to decide who qualifies as white. In one supreme court case, *Ozawa v. United States* (1922), a Japanese-American, Takao Ozawa challenged a judgment that he was ineligible for citizenship by claiming that Japanese people are “free white persons.” In his majority decision, Justice Sutherland ruled that “the words ‘white person’ were meant to indicate only a person of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race.” (According to the racial “science” of that day, Japanese people were not of the Caucasian race.) The following year, another Supreme Court decision (also written by Justice Sutherland) further restricted the definition of whiteness by ruling that “high-caste” Indians, putatively of Indo-European descent (or equivalently, Caucasian or Aryan descent, according to the racial science of that day), did *not* count as Caucasian in the “common understanding.” This determination appears to have been made in part on the basis of inferences from skin color: “...while the [Aryan] invaders seem to have met with more

success in the effort to preserve their racial purity, intermarriages did occur producing an intermingling of the two and destroying to a greater or less degree the purity of the 'Aryan' blood. The rules of caste, while calculated to prevent this intermixture, *seem* not to have been entirely successful..."⁵

In effect, the white race was constructed in the United States in contrast with "Indian" and "negro" (among other racial distinctions) to ensure that any people of African (etc.) descent would be born slaves (or otherwise born without citizenship) and that certain social benefits (e.g., benefits of citizenship) would be sequestered for those with Anglo heritage (later to include many other pale-skinned lineages). Most of these early measures effectively secured the alliances of indentured or poor whites by decreasing reliance on white indentured servants and giving whites access to rights denied to people of color. In sum, the history and science surrounding whiteness reveals it to be a project in social engineering hundreds of years in the making and not even decades into the process of breaking.

Moreover, the concept of whiteness remains a cause of inequality. Affiliation of whites with whites on the basis of perceived kinship (or shared "essence") perpetuates racial inequalities. Such affiliation is an obvious cause of de facto segregation (which sequesters access to wealth, power, and influence) and consequently, of many disadvantages that accrue to black people and other people of color.⁶ These disadvantages are particularly strong for black people. According to Alba, "A growing body of data reveals that individuals from mixed families look more like whites than they do like minorities — except for those who are partly black. The exception [of those who are partly black] demonstrates, it should be emphasized, the persistent and severe racism that confronts Americans with visible African

⁵ *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, emphasis mine

⁶ See e.g., (Anderson 2010) However, white advantage is probably not all explained by white solidarity and segregation. There are also demonstrable out-group biases, which clearly operate along perceived racial lines, leading to subtle but measurable effects (e.g., Greenwald and Krieger 2006; Payne 2006). Some of these biases have only small effects on overt behavior (Oswald, Mitchell, Blanton, Jaccard, & Tetlock, 2013). Nevertheless, it is easy to see how they can lead to larger-scale effects on the aggregate (see, e.g., Valian, 1998).

heritage...” (Alba 2017).⁷ While the “one drop” rule is no longer in effect legally, its effects are still clearly visible.

These adverse effects on people of color are not only explained by selective affiliation, but also by the indirect effects of white solidarity. Regardless of one’s ethnicity, people have unconscious but demonstrable biases against out-groups, which develop early in childhood, which can clearly operate along perceived racial lines, and which lead to subtle but measurable effects. For example, people tend to take pleasure in the misfortunes of people in out-groups but sympathize with the misfortunes of people in their in-group (e.g. Cikara and Fiske 2013). People also tend to empathize less with out-group members than in-group members (e.g., Xu et al. 2009). Moreover, all of these effects tend to operate under the threshold of conscious awareness. Even though these biases seem to operate across almost any in-group/out-group contrast, we should expect disproportionate effects on people of color. Why? Very early in development, children learn to implicitly prefer and selectively affiliate with dominant groups (Dunham, Baron, and Banaji 2008). It stands to reason that children will also desire to be members of a dominant group. So, given that so-called white people are perceived to be a dominant cultural group, white/non-white categorization will be a highly salient contrast class for determining one’s in-group from very early in development. Moreover, since the majority of Americans (though a diminishing one) can pass as white, the effects of out-group biases will tend to be focused on non-white people generally. By contrast, if pale-skinned ethnicities were not consolidated into the white race, out-group biases would be more diffuse, operating between pale-skinned people and not being solely focused on people of color.⁸ Some of these biases have only small effects on overt behavior (Oswald et

⁷ To me, this evidence seems to justify a focus on black disadvantage as perhaps the main ongoing effect of the concept of whiteness. Nevertheless, this is not to say that other people of color are unaffected.

⁸ This is not to mention that the racial system of the United States also makes out-group biases against white people more diffuse by maintaining divisions between people of color. For example, the out-group biases of Asians will not only be directed at white people, but also at black people.

al. 2013). Nevertheless, it is easy to see how they can lead to larger-scale effects on the aggregate (see, e.g., Valian 1998).

Once one is apprised of these facts, the semantics of whiteness become fairly clear cut. The most prominent description associated with the ordinary concept of whiteness is the following incoherent set: the group which shares the biobehavioral essence W, namely the “underlying natural (and perhaps genetic) properties that (1) are heritable, biological features, (2) are shared by all and only the members of [W],...(3) explain behavioral, characterological, and cultural predispositions of individual persons and [W]...” (Mallon 2006, 528–29) and (4) are not possessed by any of the offspring of black or Native American parentage. This set is inconsistent because whiteness thus conceived is inherited asymmetrically between certain offspring. Offspring of two white parents inherit whiteness fully, whereas the offspring of white and black parents do not inherit whiteness to any degree. Moreover, there is no plausible mechanism of inheritance that would allow such an asymmetry.⁹ Thus whiteness is and is not heritable at the same time and in (any of) the same sense(s). If defined by the descriptions above, whiteness does not refer.

Logical incoherence presents little obstacle to a plausible social constructionist account of whiteness. Such an account need only add that it is the group *widely believed to share* the biobehavioral essence W, characterized by the properties listed in 1-4 above. While based on a logically inconsistent set of beliefs, there is nothing logically inconsistent about this description (i.e., “the group widely

⁹ According to Mendelian genetics, for instance whiteness could be a trait governed by a recessive allele, but then that would mean one quarter of second-generation crosses would be fully white. There is a similar problem with the proposal that whiteness is governed by more than one independently-assorted, Mendelian alleles. Finally, according to racialism, whiteness is less like a phenotypic trait (usually understood as being directly observable) and more like a gene (usually understood as a hidden cause of phenotypic traits), and one can inherit a gene without manifesting the traits typical of it. This suggests that even on a Mendelian understanding, whiteness should be heritable from a white parent, regardless of the race of the other.

believed to share...”). Moreover, this description is clearly satisfied by all and only the people referred to as white in the contemporary US.

Similarly, the most plausible referent of whiteness on a causal-historical account is precisely the group of people picked out by the description above. The group of people *believed to possess* the properties described in 1-4 provide “the best causal explanation of the central features of that word.” The central features of the word are the following: a) it originated to pick out a group of people who benefitted from slave labor or considered themselves of the same race as those who benefitted from slavery (and from the exclusion of Native Americans), all of whom considered themselves a different race than the slaves and Indians, b) its apparent extension continues to exclude mixed race individuals of white and black parentage (among others), and c) it is a partial cause of racial inequalities that accrue along those lines and which further enforce the distinctness of the categories.

Once one is apprised of these facts, once they are *semantically aware*, it is easy to see the following: d) identifying as white is difficult to sustain (because one must “play along” with belief in a logically inconsistent set), e) epistemic norms against believing or perpetuating falsehoods push unequivocally against labelling oneself and others in this way (though obviously not in certain critical contexts), and f) by labelling oneself and others in this way, one participates in the racial inequalities caused by labelling practices such as these.

In the second instance, if white people are widely believed to have certain essential characteristics and if these characteristics are part of the meaning of the term (as outlined in either way above), then by identifying as white (in an unqualified way) one fails to defuse the inferences that inevitably follow from that identification (at least in most contexts). One invites other people to think of oneself as a member of a racial group that does not include any people of color (e.g., even those who have close pale-skinned ancestors).

In the last instance, it seems clear to me that using the label “white” can only support the tendencies of self-identified white people to affiliate with other whites, thus exacerbating the disadvantages that accrue because of segregation. This is most clear to me when I think about the difference between being white and being pale-skinned. The latter is a feature that I am not inclined to essentialize. Were I to say that I am pale-skinned, I would not be tempted to think that there is something essential shared between me and other pale-skinned individuals, any more than I am tempted to think I share something essential with other people of a similar height. By contrast, were I to think of myself as white it would carry with it these indelible habits of mind, and I am fairly confident that I am not alone in this. If I am right, it seems clear that white people should no longer use the label to think about their social identity.

3. Objections and Replies

Alcoff raises an important worry about the position I have defended so far:

A more reasonable approach [than eliminativism about whiteness] is to understand whiteness as an organically emergent phenomenon. Its economic and political power can be measured by social scientists, its arrival as a commonly used term can be dated by historians, and its characteristic subjective contours can be discerned through the experiments of social psychology. There is a facticity of whiteness, whether or not it factors into a person’s self-ascription. Whiteness is lived, and not merely represented. It is a prominent feature of one’s way of being in the world, of how one navigates that world, and of how one is navigated around by others. (Alcoff 2015, 9)

The idea here is that whiteness is real because it has undeniable and powerful effects in peoples’ lives. Yet, it seems equally clear that these effects come about because of beliefs and dispositions concerning whiteness (e.g., beliefs about racial “purity” that underlie practices of hypodescent) rather than because of a category that exists independently of those beliefs. Ney and Hazlett make this point concisely: “Just

as the behavior of those involved in witch-hunts can be explained by appeal to their false beliefs about witches, the behavior of those involved in racial oppression can be explained by appeal to their false beliefs about race.” (Ney and Hazlett 2014, 276–77) Eliminating the concept of whiteness in ordinary discourse does not require that we deny the powerful effects of the concepts nor does it cripple our ability to adequately identify the source of those effects.

Another objection is that this position will exacerbate the failures of white people to take responsibility for their whiteness and for their place in a system that disadvantages people of color (see e.g., Alcoff 2015, 211 and 215). Many have suggested that the advantages of whiteness are easy to ignore or overlook because white people are able to maintain a kind of ignorance of their own racial classification and its effects on themselves and others (e.g., DiAngelo 2018). When applied here, the worry would be that encouraging people not to think of themselves as white will only further exacerbate their tendency to overlook the privileges that accrue to whiteness.

While this outcome would be unquestionably bad, it is avoidable. First, it is possible to “take responsibility” for white privilege without thinking of oneself as white. Semantic awareness about whiteness requires a vivid appreciation of two important facts on the part of pale-skinned Americans: 1) that their ancestors gave up their ethnic identities to participate in an unjust project of social engineering, 2) that they have been socialized into a system of thought and practice that marginalizes people of color, and 3) they benefit from many privileges which accrue precisely because people believe them to be members of a white racial group. These are facts that the pale-skinned people of the United States (and elsewhere) must own up to, but they need not identify as white to do so properly. The obvious recommendation that follows from the arguments above is to encourage semantic awareness about the category of whiteness, and it is impossible to encourage pale-skinned people to be more semantically aware without emphasizing the benefits that accrue to whiteness. Moreover, it seems to

me unlikely that such a vivid awareness could lead to the kind of papering over of one's privilege that is at issue here.

A related worry is that by trying to eliminate the concept of whiteness, I may be advocating the idea of "colorblindness," which can also mask racial dis/advantage by glossing over or ignoring socially important differences and disparities between racial groups.¹⁰ However, there is nothing about eliminating whiteness that requires one to overlook important differences between pale-skinned people groups (emphasis on the plurality) on the one hand and people of African or indigenous American ancestry (etc.), on the other. It is not obvious to me why one would be more likely to fall prey to such a pattern of thought only because they refuse to think of themselves and others as white. Presumably, one can still come to appreciate any important difference between racial and ethnic groups. One merely refuses to refer to those differences by using a term that one deems to be pernicious and misleading (because its connotation of purity and connection with ongoing injustices, etc.). In sum, it is one thing to stop thinking of oneself as a member of a natural grouping with other pale-skinned people; it is quite another to *start* thinking of oneself as part of a natural grouping with darker-skinned people (in accordance with the "one human race" mantra of colorblindness). Semantic awareness about whiteness and eliminating whiteness aims at the former, not the latter.

By the same token, semantic awareness does not prevent one from falling into biased patterns of thought concerning other racial groups. For this reason, eliminating whiteness is no cure-all for racial injustices. To see this, consider a few of the documented effects in social psychology that specifically concern how participants think about or relate to minority groups (e.g., Greenwald and Krieger 2006; Payne 2006). Some of these biases appear to be rooted in a lack of empathy for outgroups

¹⁰ Cf. Alcoff (2015, 207, 211). This concern is distinct from the previous concern because it concerns ignoring racial difference rather than acting as if race has no bearing on one's life. One might act as if it has no bearing because they ignore racial difference, but one can also carefully attend to racial differences but continue to deny that they make a difference in one's life.

(Molenberghs 2013). Thus, eliminating whiteness seems unlikely to directly impact them. One cannot obviously increase one's empathy for racial minorities only by changing the way they think about their own racial identity. If I were to think of myself as a Scots-Irish-American instead of a white American, I would not thereby increase my empathy toward black people.

However, many of the biases against minorities or out-groups can be remedied by increased exposure to these groups (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008) and by developing a multicultural perspective, which values value diversity and difference (Richeson and Nussbaum 2004). If eliminating whiteness can break up white solidarity, then as a side effect, it would also increase exposure to diversity. Moreover, the elimination of whiteness could also contribute to the development of a multicultural perspective. As people learn to see and appreciate differences between pale-skinned people groups, they may also come to value diversity more generally. Finally, semantic awareness about whiteness involves a deeper understanding of the disadvantages faced by people of color. In some cases, one can imagine this leading to increased empathy toward people of color. Nevertheless, these are optimistic conjectures. In many cases, racial cognition has effects on social interactions and institutions, which has little to do with how pale-skinned people are categorized.

I conclude that the normative considerations that have vexed debates about race talk generally seem to have a clearer resolution where it comes to talk of the white race: such talk should be eliminated. Nevertheless, a more cautious way of articulating this conclusion in light of the objections above would be that we should encourage semantic awareness about the nature of whiteness. If the arguments above are correct, the elimination of whiteness will follow quickly on its heels. It seems difficult to sustain the illusion of white solidarity and hypodescent along with a full realization of their causes.

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