

Identity Complex

Making the Case for Multiplicity

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How Real Is Race?

The Abolition of Race

Few would deny that social identity has become a primary means for political action within liberal democracy. However, many bemoan this fact, and “identity politics” has become a pejorative, frequently denoting at best an unproductive approach to social change—as, for example, in Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s 2009 confirmation hearings in the U.S. Senate.¹ Within the academy, furthermore, a strong body of work has emerged over the past two decades in opposition to the concept of identity.² Some critics argue that the multiplicity of identity vitiates any stable notion of the category, while others charge that many identities—and racial identity in particular—have no real referent, and therefore amount to nothing more than useless fictions. Indeed, race probably ranks among the most controversial social identities in the contemporary United States insofar as people often question its very legitimacy as a justifiable social distinction. Many in the United States cling to their own racial identity as a central part of their existence, while others consistently deny that they (or anyone else) even has a race because they see race as illusory. A quick read of Ward Connolly’s so-called Racial Privacy Initiative (which would have eliminated California’s use of race as a means of classification) reveals much about the contradictions in public discussions about race. Two clauses from the text of the failed ballot measure are worth singling out:

- (a) The state shall not classify any individual by race, ethnicity, color or national origin. . . .
- (g) Nothing in this section shall prevent law enforcement officers . . . from describing particular persons in otherwise lawful ways. Neither . . . the legislature . . . the legislature nor any statewide agency shall require law enforcement officers to maintain records that track individuals on the basis of said classifications.³

Among other things, this initiative explicitly provides for the retention of racial profiling on the part of the police while freeing police departments from having to keep track of the race of the people they arrest or detain. The ballot measure, promoted using liberal, antiracist rhetoric, would thereby have frustrated all attempts to demonstrate discriminatory patterns of surveillance, arrest, or harassment by police. What ultimately swayed many white voters in California to oppose the measure, however, was not fear of police profiling, but fear of disease and a perceived need to use race to track harmful medical conditions popularly associated with biological conceptions of race.⁴ Race clearly matters, and yet throughout its history as a concept, it has presumed the truth of various biological fictions that have not held up to contemporary scientific scrutiny. In this chapter, I explore some of the contradictions between social and biological conceptions of the reality of race and suggest that what is needed now is creative experimentation with racial identities rather than their abandonment. Furthermore, in shaping that experimentation, people must thoroughly engage with the mutual constitution of race with gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity. In other words, we should measure the success of creative experiments with racial identities, at least in part, by their ability to evolve an understanding of the importance of race in relation to both the multiplicity of identity and the resistance to structural forms of discrimination, domination, exploitation, and oppression.

Despite notable challenges, a deep suspicion of identity in general and racial identity specifically has proven highly influential among many intellectuals in the humanities—and, as the Racial Privacy Initiative and Sotomayor hearings demonstrate, among many outside of the academy as well. (Within the field of philosophy, for example, a highly vigorous debate has taken place, primarily within African American philosophy, regarding the reality of race and its desirability as a concept. That debate, however, has not been broadly influential outside of its home discipline and has rarely considered race as a category mutually constitutive with gender and sexuality, preferring to analyze it in a state of presumed isolation.⁵) Against the current of intellectual suspicion of identity generally and racial identity specifically, I argue that racial and other identities can prove useful, productive, and transformative, and that their progressive political potential can benefit from a substantive account of their material reality in contexts of mutual constitution.

If social identities—understood as related to but distinct from the “self”—make a significant difference to how people live their lives, the kinds of experiences they have, and how others treat them, surely progressive politics would benefit from a substantive account of what makes identities matter and how people can elaborate them. Instead, however, some theorists have sought to make identities go away, although usually by arguing that they should rather than by addressing the material conditions giving rise to and resulting from them. I would like to begin this chapter, therefore, by considering two examples of antirealist views that see social identity generally and racial identity specifically as obstacles to progressive politics and as not referring to anything substantively “real.”

The first approach to rejecting identity sees any invocation of collective identity (other than social class) as a divisive impediment to progressive social struggle. The second singles out racial identity specifically as irretrievably founded on a biological fiction and therefore as an invalid category of social analysis. These two positions are not mutually exclusive, and critics often invoke them simultaneously. By way of illustration, I will try to emphasize each approach through the writings of two influential scholars, both of whom have risen to academic prominence in part on the basis of their rejection of social identities: political theorist Wendy Brown and literary critic Walter Benn Michaels.

Identity as Impediment

The first, more general, rejection of identity emerges in Wendy Brown's book *States of Injury*, which paints a pessimistic picture of identity politics. According to Brown, identity politics errs in one of two ways. Either it commits itself to the preservation of class inequality by distracting attention from economic issues, or it becomes caught up in an unproductive cycle of blame and resentment. Both outcomes circumvent radical, progressive transformation of society. Brown thus charges that either identity politics seeks inclusion into society without asking if the society is just or it remains incapable of getting over resentment at social exclusion.⁶ In other words, she does not believe that a political framework centrally concerned with identity can ever question the terms of social access, inequality, and scarcity that generate exclusions in the first place. She asks, “[T]o what extent do identity politics require a standard internal to existing society against which to pitch their claims, a standard that not only preserves

capitalism from critique, but sustains the invisibility and inarticulateness of class—*not accidentally, but endemically*? Could we have stumbled upon one reason why class is invariably named but rarely theorized or developed in the multiculturalist mantra, ‘race, class, gender, sexuality’?”⁷

In Brown’s account, identity politics remains “a protest against exclusion” that seeks inclusion into what turns out to be a fictional communal ideal. She believes that, rather than seeking transformation of society, identity politics ultimately reinforces that fictional ideal and its various exclusions.⁸ According to Brown’s account of identity as pathological, advocates of identity politics seek “revenge” for their social exclusion.⁹ They remain trapped, she believes, by their inability to get over the past (described variously as “a past injury” or a “history of suffering”), and they therefore locate a cause for past wrongs in the present. Basing their identity on a past injury or a history of suffering generates “an ethicizing politics . . . of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it” and that cannot offer a “future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain.”¹⁰

Conceding that one cannot simply do away with identity, however, Brown *does* offer a cure for what ails identity politics, in the form of two suggestions. First, she suggests something along the lines of a truth and reconciliation committee that would allow people to tell their pain, to be heard without seeking revenge, without asking for any remediation in the present to address past injuries (since to do so would inscribe the past in the present).¹¹ Second, she suggests that people should understand identity politics less in terms of “I am” and more in terms of “I want this for us,” thus shifting emphasis away from an affirmation of identity in the present toward a focus on wants, needs, desires, and the future.¹²

Brown’s account of identity politics, however, remains deliberately ahistorical and antimaterialist, and she casts her critique in the most abstract and general terms, implying that her account encompasses any kind of politics predicated on the affirmation of an identity. Absent from her account, however, is any specificity about *what* identity, *when*, and *in relation to* what other identities. Furthermore, she does not give an adequate account of either multiplicity or mutual constitution because she omits any specificity. Her critique could seem damning, except that she only offers a single example of identity politics in her discussion (an anti-discrimination ordinance in her local town), eschewing consideration of the *social movements* that have become the dominant expression of identity politics in the United States and elsewhere.

While her criticism of identity politics might hold validity for some examples of contemporary identity-based movements, it would require a significant amount of historical and ethnographic data to determine validity for all, or even most, of these movements. Such data are simply absent from her account. Ultimately, because Brown’s work remains unengaged with the history of identity politics, even in the United States, I think she misses many of the ways in which that history demonstrates complex relationships among the affirmation of identity, the histories of oppression, and the articulation of freer, more egalitarian futures. Furthermore, identity-based political movements have often pursued socially transformative futures in more complex ways than even Brown’s shift from “I am” to “I want this for us” can account for. This has been the case especially with regard to those movements that base themselves in a political recognition of the multiplicity of identity, such as women-of-color feminist movements.

Brown narrowly situates the origins of identity politics in a psychological need for recognition rather than in material, historical, and economic injustice, and understands identity politics as only seeking *recognition* within an unreconstructed social order. Consequently, her solution itself emerges as narrowly linguistic, rather than material, leaving unaddressed the material concerns that give identity its political salience to begin with. Rather than radical social transformation (something she criticizes identity politics for being unable to invoke), her solution amounts essentially to a change in political language.¹³

My objections to Brown’s work do not entail a complete rejection of her core political commitments. Rather, it seems to me that she too narrowly circumscribes her conception of identity politics. Furthermore, she does not sufficiently acknowledge the limits of that conception (giving her work the tone of a definitive take on all that identity politics is or can be). Finally, she does all of this without empirical support, without any substantive engagement with (or even reference to) the long history of identity-based political struggles. This lack, in turn, prevents her from even beginning to consider the implications of intersectionality, multiplicity, or mutual constitution in the shaping of social identities and identity-based political movements. An examination of the history of identity politics would reveal that a goal of inclusion has often proved compatible with a goal of radical social transformation. Furthermore, many kinds of identity politics (from many versions of nationalism to

lesbian separatism) quite simply do not seek social inclusion at all. While some identity-based movements might turn out to lack a future-oriented vision and might fail to move beyond an affirmation of identity, determining this to be the case would require careful, empirical consideration of each social movement. One cannot settle the issue in advance of the facts.

Racial Identity as Fiction

Another opponent of identity, Walter Benn Michaels, offers some objections similar to Brown's, but more specifically finds *race* an unjustifiable category of social classification. While many social constructionists claim that race is merely a social category with no basis in biology whatsoever, Michaels counters that this position makes little sense in light of how people actually act with regard to race. Every example of talk and action about race, he believes, relies consistently on reference to biology. Furthermore, race differs, Michaels claims, from other socially constructed identity categories, like class, primarily because of this reference to biology. However much social constructionists insist that they have rejected biological bases for race, Michaels argues that their arguments remain incoherent. If one rejects biological or other "essences" as the foundation for racial identity (as nearly all social constructionists believe one should), then Michaels claims that one must also absolutely reject race as a category. He puts his specific claim about race most sharply in a 1997 article:

We cannot think of race as a social fact, like slavery or . . . like class. . . . I will argue that race is not like class, that it neither happens nor can be made to unhappen. And despite those who wish to "respect and preserve" rather than abolish race, I will argue it makes no more sense to respect racial difference than it does to try to abolish it. . . . [O]ur actual racial practices . . . however "antiessentialist," can be understood only as the expression of our commitment to the idea that race is *not* a social construction, and I want to insist that if we give up that commitment, we must give up the idea of race altogether. Either race is an essence or there is no such thing as race.¹⁴

He notes that for critical race theorists, "the claim that there are no races in nature—that race is a social construction—is not meant to deny that

there is such a thing as race; it is meant to give us a better account of what race is."¹⁵ That is, social constructionists about race, rather than arguing that race is merely a fiction, argue that it exists, only not as a natural or biological given outside of or before cultural meanings. For Michaels, however, race constitutes either a biological fact or a biological fiction; it forms neither a structural location within an economic system like class nor a mesh of cultural practices like ethnicity. (Of course, in his account these things—class, ethnicity, race—all appear separable rather than mutually constitutive.)

Indeed, one must concede that the central fact of biology has typically played the defining role in modern distinctions between race and ethnicity—a fact that would seem to support Michaels's claim that social constructionists' rejection of biological or natural facts results in some incoherence on their part. For example, while common ancestral lineage often figures centrally in defining both *race* and *ethnicity*, *race*, at least in the United States, typically carries with it more of an exclusive association with biologically inherited traits (for example, skin color, hair color and texture, nose and eye shape, height, or—most disturbingly—intellectual and moral capacity). This has remained true more or less since the nineteenth century. By contrast, *ethnicity* always includes—and has increasingly come to be limited to—cultural inheritance (for example, cuisine, customs, music, and folklore). Thus, Irish Americans, Russian Jews, Inuit, and Navajos might all constitute distinct ethnic groups, but in the contemporary United States, most would consider the first two racially white and the last two racially Native American. Furthermore, a Romanian infant adoptee in the United States would probably grow up both ethnically American and racially white, while Korean adoptees to white parents in the United States regularly grow up to think of themselves and to be perceived by others as ethnically American and racially Asian.¹⁶

For reasons I will discuss later in this chapter, many progressive social thinkers prefer to think of race as a social, rather than biological, phenomenon—or at the very least they consider it irreducible to simple, physical criteria (for example, skin color, descent, or genetic distance). Michaels holds that they must therefore believe that race comes about as a consequence of what one does, as an expression of actions and behaviors. He thus finds his (dis)analogy to class very important. While he agrees that social classes exist even though classes are not "natural," he denies that the same reasoning could apply to race (that it could be real without also

being a fact about the natural world). For Michaels, class arises as a function of what someone does (for example, working or owning), not who a person is according to social categories or that person's self-conception. He understands class as a purely structural social location, in other words; either a person owns the means of production or one works for the person who does. (Of course, Michaels leaves unaddressed the difference that gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity might make in *how* a person works for the person owning the means of production or their likelihood of occupying one class position rather than another.) In contrast to class, Michaels believes that race is "irreducible to action" because people can act in a way incompatible with their race. If a black person can "act white" without thereby becoming white, or a white person can "act black" without becoming black, in other words, then people must believe that race arises as a part of one's being rather than as a consequence of one's actions.¹⁷

If social constructionists do indeed argue that race comes about through one's actions, then Michaels has caught them in a contradiction—simultaneously upholding race as merely performance while believing in race as a part of one's being. Michaels thus levies his attack most successfully against those who appear to define race as strictly cultural rather than biological, since an account of race that refuses biological criteria cannot adequately explain the persistence of physical features, among other things, for determining racial identity. He goes further, however, and denies the possibility of a gray, "blurry" definition of race as something complexly arising out of the interactions of biology and culture—or, for that matter, out of the interactions of social class with biology and culture. Michaels insists that the "identity that is irreducible to action is essential, not socially constructed, and the identity that is identical to action is not really an identity—it's just the name of the action: worker, capitalist." This reasoning then leads him to conclude that if "we do not believe in racial identity as an essence, we cannot believe in racial identity as a social construction and we ought to give up the idea of racial identity altogether—we should . . . deny that there are such things as Jews, or blacks, or whites."¹⁸

Michaels's position ultimately proves too reductive, however. He bases his argument on the conviction that race must have only one meaning and only one determinate factor. Race, like most social concepts, however, means many different things and is not reducible to neat, orderly categories. As I argue in chapter 1, social identities, including race, have blurry boundaries, change over time and from place to place, and produce

ambiguities and indeterminacies. Like Michaels, I would agree that one cannot reduce race to behavior, genes, or physiognomy alone. Race is not the same thing, furthermore, as class, color, culture, ethnicity, or nationality. This need not mean, however, that race has no relation to these things. Indeed, if, as some scholars suggest, racial categories originated as a way to assign places within a gendered labor market based on a calculus of physical appearance, genealogical descent, and geographical place of origin, then one need not deny the reality of those categories simply because the calculus usually proved vague and inconsistent or because one cannot easily separate race from class and gender. As I argued in chapter 1, the fact that one cannot easily define something—that it contains exceptions, ambiguities, and indeterminate boundaries—does not mean that it does not exist or that it makes no sense to speak of it.

The Stakes in Defining Race

Any adequate account of race must first entail a more subtle understanding of identity and experience. In making his general case against identity, Michaels seeks to replace political discussions of *being* with debates over *beliefs*. He elsewhere characterizes proponents of identity politics as claiming that "the things you do and the beliefs you hold can be *justified* by a description of who you are."¹⁹ Like Brown, however, he assumes, rather than demonstrates, that this claim provides the basis of identity-based political movements. If, however, Michaels's statement were to read that the things one does and the beliefs one holds can be *explained*, in part, through a description of who one is and what one has experienced, then it would be a more accurate sense of the thinking behind much identity politics. Of course, in this formulation I do not see that Michaels's arguments provide a basis for opposition. After all, what *else* might lead people to hold particular beliefs *other than their experiences*?²⁰ This claim need not reduce all that a person is to ability, class, gender, race, sexuality, and so on. Furthermore, the claim that identity contributes to a person's beliefs need not imply that all people with similar identities will hold the same beliefs. Consider famed communist Angela Davis, who grew up as middle class, black, female, and intellectually gifted in Birmingham, Alabama, and famed anticommunist Condoleezza Rice, who grew up as middle class, black, female, and intellectually gifted in Birmingham, Alabama, a mere ten years later. The fact that they hold diametrically opposed political

beliefs does not mean that their identities as black women had nothing to do with how they came to hold those beliefs. To argue otherwise would seem to border on obstinacy, or else to suggest that social identities cannot hold any significance unless they are absolutely bounded, uniform, deterministic, and foundational. Explaining either woman's political beliefs without reference *at least* to her gender, nationality, and race would be as absurd as arguing that the process by which Karl Marx came to his political beliefs had no relation to his being German or male or living in the nineteenth century.

What interests are served by polemics against race and other marginalized political identities? Studies of race demonstrate its power as a concept that has transformed repeatedly over the past five centuries. Race thus appears unlikely to go away any time soon. Rather than dismissing it, I believe that critical theorists should ask what possibilities exist for its further reinvention and how those possibilities might promote progressive social change. In a similar vein, Nobel laureate Toni Morrison writes,

For three hundred years black Americans insisted that "race" was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline . . . insisted "race" was the determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as "race," biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. . . . It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of "race" when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist.²¹

Morrison's words might cause one to ask what critics have to gain by discounting identity and race. Cultural critic Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, for example, has noted commonalities between Michaels's rejection of collective identity and a larger "angry White male" cultural backlash in the United States in the 1990s.²²

Of course, scholars of race can glean important insights from critics like Brown and Michaels. One might see Brown's work as an important caution against versions of identity politics that fall too easily into a

liberal democratic framework without questioning the reproduction of economic inequality, as well as against those versions that fall into divisiveness and navel-gazing. Similarly, one might generously read Michaels's work as a caution against an overinvestment in racial language. Theorists and activists should not retain the language of race simply because we are attached to it, trying to make it do the work of culture, ethnicity, and class. Indeed, the mutual constitution of identities makes it even more important to consider the specific kinds of interactions among them. Thus, for example, defensiveness against attacks on affirmative action should not lead us to overlook the need for expanded access to higher education for lower socioeconomic status people of all races, as well as those from rural communities.²³ One should also guard against the lingering elements of nineteenth-century scientific racism in contemporary racial rhetoric, as well as against the collective tendency of the U.S. Left to conflate race with class and culture. I think that Michaels is wrong, however, in thinking that because people often conflate race with these other concepts, it does not describe any social reality at all. To be real, race needs neither to designate absolute, naturally given biological difference nor to conflate social categories with ways of acting. Rather than seriously asking what race means—whether or not it is useful, whether or not it actually obfuscates economic exploitation, and whether or not it refers to material contexts—Michaels, like Brown, opts for abstract, theoretical answers intended to transcend time and space. The empirical question remains of what race means and describes (or attempts to describe) in different times, places, and contexts and in relation to class, gender, nationality, religion, or sexuality. I will consider the consequences of this question in the remainder of this chapter.

The Power of Race and the Coloniality of Power

Social identity movements take many varied forms in contemporary society, and one must understand those forms in order to understand race. Sociologist Manuel Castells has emerged as one of the most influential empirical thinkers about identity in recent years. He offers a wide-ranging account of the new form of global social organization that he believes has quickly replaced both the industrial capitalist and state socialist forms of society at the end of the twentieth century: "the network society."²⁴ According to Castells, within the network society, collective identity movements

have gained significance as the most powerful counterpoint to globalization. In other words, the contemporary destabilization of work and the increasing homogenization of ways of life and thinking have led political actors to embrace identity as the best way to organize themselves, both in resistance to and in support of a wide variety of political ends.

For Castells, identity-based political movements include what he calls “proactive movements” that seek to radically transform society and human relationships—movements such as feminism and environmentalism. They also include “reactive movements” that attempt to fight against the radical transformations of traditional ways of life being brought about by global capitalism as well as by other identity movements.²⁵ Castells does not use this dichotomy between proactive and reactive, however, as his primary way of categorizing identity movements. Instead, drawing from a broad array of examples from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe, he argues for a three-part typology of social identities: legitimizing identities, resistance identities, and project identities.²⁶ *Legitimizing identities* arise through formal and informal, but “official,” institutions, such as religious bodies, elections, schools, corporate and state media, and so on. Whether U.S. middle-class identity or citizen identities, they ultimately serve to reinforce and legitimate existing social structures and the often unequal relationships among people that these structures entail. *Resistance identities* come into existence through actions by people who believe they are dominated, excluded, exploited, or oppressed by existing social structures; they reject the institutions and norms of society, championing alternatives. *Project identities* attempt to redefine a group’s position and role in society, but unlike resistance identities, they expand outward in the pursuit of radical transformation of society as a whole. In other words, their aim is not simply to redress the situation of one group, although they remain organized around identity. His typology, finally, is overlapping: some movements begin as resistance identities and later become project or legitimizing identities, or a mixture of some or all of the above.

Castells’s account of project identities, specifically, makes accessible a whole range of possibilities that other accounts of identity foreclose, and raises serious challenges to the nostalgia of some on the Left for (allegedly) belief-based, as opposed to identity-based, political movements. According to Castells, project identities become part of a larger process of reinventing and reordering society. While the process of creating a project identity might begin through the affirmation of a denigrated identity, it

has the potential to expand “toward the transformation of society as the prolongation of this project of identity, as in the . . . example of a post-patriarchal society, liberating women, men, and children, through the realization of women’s identity.”²⁷ While project identities need not necessarily prove politically progressive, Castells believes that they are, in the contemporary era, *necessary* for social change.²⁸ Castells does acknowledge that most contemporary identities do not become project identities, remaining caught in a reactive posture; however, despite the bad odds, he holds that identity remains the best hope for transforming the current global network society into a better and more humane world.²⁹

Before turning to Castells’s consideration of racial identity in the contemporary period, I want briefly to retrace some of the long history of race as a social category. I do so because I believe that social theorists discuss race without a full account of its history at their peril. In particular, I would like to turn to historical sociologist and world-systems theorist Anibal Quijano’s account of the origin and significance of race. I do so both because I find world-systems theory among the most powerful models for analyzing historical change on a global scale and because Quijano has been at the forefront of using that model to understand race. His use of world-systems theory, starting his analysis with the discovery of the Americas, offers a much longer and wider sense of the origins of race than do accounts that take the relatively recent scientific racism of the nineteenth century and legal classifications of the twentieth as the definitive examples of racial thinking. For Quijano, race emerges early in the sixteenth century, alongside a complex and global (re)organization of power around three interrelated and inseparable factors: “coloniality,” capitalism, and Eurocentrism. The development of the concept of race occupied a central role in the shaping of a world system:

What is termed globalization is the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America [the “discovery of the Americas”] and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism as a new global power. One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character,

but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of *coloniality*.³⁰

Race has two crucial characteristics for Quijano. First, its origin presupposed the existence of biological differences from which followed a natural hierarchy among superior and inferior groups. Second, race enabled (and was enabled by) new social and economic relations; racial identities thus became “constitutive” of *unequal* roles, locations, beliefs, and practices.³¹

Thus, according to Quijano, race, in its origin, entailed a web of beliefs that served to legitimate domination and to naturalize inequality so that people understood them as inevitable and eternal rather than as contingent and produced. In the process, ideas about race “encroached on” already existing practices of gender domination, mutating and transforming them.³² The encroachment of race on gender involved the mutual constitution of gender, race, and sexuality over the course of several centuries. (I consider this process of encroachment and mutual constitution at length in chapter 3.³³) In short, emerging conceptions of gender, sexuality, sin, and perversion intermeshed thoroughly with the development of the colonial/modern racial regime outlined by Quijano, giving rise to what philosopher María Lugones calls the “colonial/modern gender system.”³⁴ This process brought about a Eurocentric conception of gender and sexuality that eventually evolved into understandings of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and gender hierarchy that remain inseparable from the colonial encounter and that continue to influence modern practices of gender and sexuality today.

According to Quijano, race came into existence (separately from ethnicity or nation) as a marker of inherited, “natural,” and hierarchically ranked differences in temperament, morality, intellectual ability, and aptitude for cultural and scientific achievement among geographically distinct populations. These supposed differences justified social relations of domination and made them seem “natural” to European colonizers. Race emerged both as a justification for social domination and as a basic way of assigning places within a labor market also segregated by gender.³⁵ In other words, it divided the world into inferior and superior populations, which then legitimated a racial and sexual division of labor. Wage labor became restricted to white males, while the racial-gender order assigned

white females to paid and unpaid domestic labor and nonwhites (primarily Africans, Amerindians, and Asians) of all genders to various forms of hereditary serfdom and slavery. Quijano writes, “In this way, both race and the division of labor remained structurally linked and mutually reinforcing, in spite of the fact that neither of them were necessarily dependent on the other in order to exist or change.”³⁶ His view of the relationship between race and labor marks a decisive departure from other social theorists, like Eric Wolf, who see race as essentially subordinate to the division of labor, and as not having structural independence.³⁷ The independence of race from the division of labor has significance for its continuing effects, what Quijano calls the “coloniality of power.” Quijano, however, like Wolf, does not go far enough in considering the centrality of gender as a force shaping race and labor. He thus gives insufficient attention to, for example, how the complex relations among genteel, working-class white, peasant, and enslaved women differed from those among their male counterparts.

In addition to the material reorganization of the world, the classification of the world’s population according to race also came to have intense effects on the ways in which people thought about how one can arrive at knowledge, what it means for something to be true, and what it means for cultural practices or objects to have value or significance:

In the first place, they [Europeans] expropriated the cultural discoveries of the colonized peoples most apt for the development of capitalism to the profit of the European center. Second, they repressed as much as possible the colonized forms of knowledge production, the models of the production of meaning, their symbolic universe, the model of expression and of objectification and subjectivity. . . . Third, in different ways in each case, they forced the colonized to learn the dominant culture in any way that would be useful to the reproduction of domination. . . . All of those turbulent processes involved a long period of the colonization of cognitive perspectives, modes of producing and giving meaning, the results of material existence, the imaginary, the universe of intersubjective relations with the world: in short, the culture.³⁸

Numerous scholars have studied this process at great length, especially over the past three decades.³⁹ *Eurocentrism*, for Quijano, names the cognitive and cultural dimension of the new model of global power dominant

since the sixteenth century. It entails the imposition of a “racial, colonial, and negative” identity on non-Europeans, as well as the classification of their culture as “naturally” inferior and as historically antecedent to Europe (as premodern or primitive).⁴⁰ The well-discussed dichotomies of modern Western thought make up but one enduring legacy of the coloniality of power: civilized–primitive, culture–nature, male–female, mind–body, normal–abnormal, north–south, reason–passion, superior–inferior, white–black. The seventeenth-century separation of the body from the mind, and the identification of the body with nature (and femaleness, Indianness, and blackness), made possible, according to Quijano, the scientific racism of the nineteenth century.⁴¹

Based on the history of Eurocentric values that sedimented onto racial difference, one should not find it surprising that both Castells and Quijano cast race in almost exclusively negative terms. Quijano only discusses race as a means to facilitate oppression. For his part, Castells attempts to distinguish *race*, understood as a source of oppression and discrimination and as an externally imposed biological categorization, from *ethnicity*, understood as “a source of meaning and identity” that comes closer to *nationality*, although without the key features of language and territory.⁴² After a lengthy consideration of the importance of race (in terms of oppression and discrimination) for African Americans, Castells finally holds that the concept of race (which he here conflates with ethnicity, despite his earlier distinction) can only take on significant communal meaning as it combines with broader categories (gender, nation, religion, class, and so on):⁴³ “[E]thnicity does not provide the basis for communal heavens in the network society, because it is based on primary bonds that lose significance, when cut from their historical context, as a basis for reconstruction of meaning in a world of flows and networks. . . . Ethnic materials are integrated into cultural communes that are more powerful, and more broadly defined than ethnicity, such as religion or nationalism, as statements of cultural autonomy in a world of symbols. . . . Race matters, but it hardly constructs meaning any longer.”⁴⁴ The primary basis for this striking claim (striking because Castells does not make the same claim about nationality or religion) lies in the growing class polarization of blacks in the United States. In the case of race, Castells concludes that the fracturing of identity in one example prevents it from being a source of meaning in all cases (while the fracturing of some national identities does not preclude the cohesion of some other national identities for Castells). It seems ironic

that Castells would argue that race in the contemporary era only provides meaning in combination with other categories of identity, since he introduces an artificial separation of race from gender, nation, sexuality, and so on in his analysis. Throughout his study, he conducts analyses on different religious, national, ethnic, linguistic, and gender identities, treating each in isolation from the others. Thus, he takes little notice of the extent to which Catalan nationalist movements might be shaped by gender and religion, or of how Islamic and Christian fundamentalist movements might emerge from core commitments to specific gender identities or to national, racial, linguistic, or tribal ones.

Is It Real? Is It Really Real?

If one understands race as different from culture, ethnicity, class, or nation, then I suggest that the claim that race is *real* could mean at least three different things: (1) race has a material-economic reality in the immediate effects and legacies of racism; (2) race has a social and psychological reality as an existing system of beliefs and attitudes with material effects (this would include certain effects on the production and acquisition of knowledge); or (3) race exists in a physical or biological form, as bodily matter. (In each case, of course, the reality and significance of race will be further shaped by gender and socioeconomic status, among other things.) Given Quijano’s account of the origins of race as a concept tied to domination and exploitation, one can easily understand why people might want to argue against its biological reality—perhaps even more so in the wake of nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions of scientific racism.⁴⁵ Yet, as Castells notes, with a nod to Cornel West, “race matters a lot.”⁴⁶ Determining what that mattering consists of, then, becomes an important task.

If one thinks of *race* as merely shorthand to reference the effects of racial classification and racism in contemporary society, then it is hard to deny its reality (although some might). Castells cites a host of studies on the impoverishment and imprisonment of blacks in the United States, for example.⁴⁷ As criminologist Coramae Richey Mann notes, “Racial minority suspects disproportionately become defendants [in court] and as defendants are disproportionately sent to prison or disproportionately executed.”⁴⁸ A massive study of the death penalty in Georgia in the 1970s found that defendants were four times more likely to receive a death sentence for killing white victims than for killing black victims. Moreover,

blacks convicted of killing whites were twenty-two times more likely to receive a death sentence than blacks convicted of killing blacks. The study found race to have more influence than over two hundred other possible factors that affect sentencing (including various kinds and degrees of aggravation and motivation, whether victims were police officers or very young or female, and whether the defendant had a prior record).⁴⁹ Disparities in criminal justice have not diminished in the thirty years since. It is difficult to understand the unequal treatment of racial minorities in the United States as anything other than an effect and legacy of racism. At the very least, then, race remains important for understanding, explaining, and addressing the effects of contemporary and historical racism, a point that even most critics of racial identity concede in some form or another.⁵⁰

Race might also matter as a set of beliefs with material effects. Put another way, ideas about race can have consequences for how people think and act. In 1995, for example, social psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson conducted a study in which researchers gave black and white college students difficult exams measuring advanced English language skills. When researchers told test-takers that the exam was diagnostic of verbal ability, blacks performed about half as well as whites. When the same exam was given and test-takers were told that it was not diagnostic of ability, but merely a way to study how people solve problems, blacks and whites performed roughly equivalently.⁵¹

Another group of researchers was able to produce similar results in the domain of physical performance, having black and white college athletes play ten holes of golf in a laboratory course. When athletes were told that the goal was to measure "natural athletic ability," the blacks outperformed the whites significantly; when they were told that the test measured "sport strategic intelligence," the outcome was the opposite.⁵² Thus, setting aside the question of whether racism (intentional or structural) currently exists, race as a set of ideas exists and has significant material effects not only on people's thinking but also on their performance in a wide variety of mental and physical tasks. Furthermore, these effects are not arbitrary, but rather have clear connections to the long history of Eurocentrism and its attendant evaluative hierarchies (white-black, mind-body, and so on). Similar studies have explored the effects of gender, although it has proven difficult for such scientific studies to move beyond consideration of identity categories as separable units, combinable only on an additive model.

Perhaps the most controversial meaning of the claim that race matters (or that race is real) would be the suggestion that race has a basis in biological or physical causal structures that, in turn, result in the social differences one finds between contemporary, socially defined racial groups. As I have just laid it out, this claim assumes an easy separability between biology and culture. Furthermore, it can easily play into historical and commonsense racist thinking. The belief in a biological basis for race lies at the core of what scholars call scientific racism, arguably the dominant form of racial thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Paleontologist and historian of science Stephen Jay Gould, among others, has meticulously documented the abuses of nineteenth-century scientific racism as an attempt to legitimate socially defined racial classifications and their attendant social inequality in terms of biological differences (for example, the idea that brain size or intellectual capacity has a direct connection to skin color).⁵³ More recently, evolutionary biologist Joseph L. Graves Jr. has compiled a range of scientific and social data to argue that contemporary categories of socially defined races in the United States usually prove unhelpful—and often harmful—for attempting to understand sexual behavior, health and medicine, athletics, and intelligence. While he also looks at considerations such as bone density and muscle mass, Graves mainly targets genetic explanations for social differences. He observes that humanity as a species has come into existence very recently, in evolutionary terms. The even more recent dispersal of human populations geographically and the relatively short time that populations have spent in geographical isolation have not sufficed for the development of different geographical races as scientists apply the term to other species. In other words, by contrast to many other mammals, humans seem remarkably alike when it comes to our genes. As he observes, "The genetic distances in humans are statistically about ten times lower (2 percent) than the 20 percent average in other organisms, even when comparing the most geographically separated populations within modern humans. There is greater genetic variability found within one tribe of western African chimpanzees than exists in the entire human species!"⁵⁴

Furthermore, with regard to supposed racial genetic predispositions for disease, Graves shows that our current, socially defined races obscure the actual genetic commonalities and differences of various populations. Genes for sickle cells, for example, while prevalent in people from western Africa, the Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula, and India, are

uncommon among people from eastern Africa. Similarly, while much has been made of a supposedly genetic predisposition among African Americans for high blood pressure, Nigerians have far lower rates of high blood pressure than do U.S. whites (the difference between Nigerians and U.S. whites being more than double the difference between U.S. whites and U.S. blacks).⁵⁵ As Graves observes, “Geographical distance does not necessarily equal genetic distance. In fact, assuming that two people are genetically different because they look like they came from different parts of the world can be really dangerous for their health . . . [b]ecause things like people’s blood type or their ability to accept transplanted organs are dictated by how genetically close they are, not necessarily by where their ancestors came from geographically.”⁵⁶

Good reasons therefore exist for skepticism about attempts to link biology and race—especially given such familiar examples of racial biological determinism as Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s resoundingly refuted book, *The Bell Curve*.⁵⁷ However, I think there are important reasons not to eliminate all consideration of biology and the body from our discussions of race, provided we understand biology as mutually constituted with culture and as significantly less determinate than people often take it to be. In particular, an important dimension of what race is and how it functions results from the interaction of social practices and beliefs about race with visible human difference. To understand this dimension of racial experience, scholars must consider the physical matter of race. While such outward differences as skin color, hair texture, or eye shape may hold little or no meaning for our biological functioning as organisms or for our innate capacities, they can prove crucial, in Western societies at least, for our social functioning.

Racial Identity as “Intra-action”

It helps to understand physical or natural materiality as something that does not simply exist inertly and passively, waiting for culture to give it meaning and to act upon it. Theoretical physicist Karen Barad suggests that an adequate social theory of bodies needs to account for “*how the body’s materiality—for example, its anatomy and physiology—and other material forces actively matter to the processes of materialization.*”⁵⁸ Drawing from the quantum theory of Niels Bohr, her view of bodies rejects the separation between observer and object, and therefore, also that between

social and cultural forces and matter. If one understands the world as fundamentally a big soup of inseparable processes, with indeterminate boundaries and constantly in flux (which is easiest to do at the quantum level of atoms, particles, and waves), then one can begin to see the degree of mutual constitution at stake among observers and objects. Both the “observer” (which would include theoretical assumptions as well as instruments used to observe and measure) and the “observed matter” interact (or, as Barad insists, “intra-act”) in order to produce an event or phenomenon. Both observer and matter are “agential,” actively influencing one another. Barad’s account does not understand the observer as neutral, nor matter as passive: “The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity in the ongoing reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies.”⁵⁹ *Agency*, for Barad, describes a process through which the causal intra-actions of different parts of the world produce intelligible phenomena. As Bohr notes, indeterminacy becomes particularly salient in the study of quantum phenomena, so that accounting for a quantum event requires a thorough description “of all relevant features of the experimental arrangement.”⁶⁰

Extrapolating from Barad’s and Bohr’s ideas to the realm of social theory, I would argue that indeterminacy and mutual constitution play equally important roles in social, political, and historical phenomena as they do in quantum phenomena. In considering race, most biological reductionists tend to eschew histories of racism as irrelevant, while most attempts to debunk scientific racism tend to discount the importance of biologically superficial physical differences for understanding the reality of race. As Barad cautions, however, “explanations of various phenomena and events that do not take account of material, as well as discursive, constraints will fail to provide empirically adequate accounts (not any story will do).”⁶¹ The temptation to eliminate race as a category of analysis in favor of culture, ethnicity, or class, furthermore, while well intentioned, can fail precisely by not accounting for the active role of otherwise superficial physical differences—as well as customs of assigning meaning to family descent—in shaping “racial formations,” the broad processes that shape and reshape the cultural and structural meanings of race across history and geography.⁶²

Unless we accept the causal role of matter in the formation of racial meanings and phenomena, our theories of society will prove incapable

of explaining how and why people experience race as they do. To put it bluntly, how can I understand my ease at hailing a taxicab in New York City or Washington, D.C., in the face of countless stories from black friends about having to walk forty blocks without having one stop for them? Along similar lines, a 1991 study found that while African Americans identified as “very light” earned 80 percent of the average income for U.S. whites in 1980, “very black” African Americans earned 53 percent—with the incomes of “light brown,” “medium brown,” and “dark brown” African Americans forming a downward-sloping curve between the two extremes.⁶³ Other scholars have identified similar correlations to skin color in Brazil and among Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans.⁶⁴ Another study among African Americans found slightly different data suggesting that while lighter-skinned blacks faced significantly less wage discrimination in relation to darker-skinned blacks, those identified as “medium-skinned” did not receive a significant preference from potential employers.⁶⁵

In both studies, interviewers recorded skin tone shades of African American survey participants. The authors of the first study suggest that because of racism, darker-skinned blacks face (and have historically faced) greater discrimination than their lighter-skinned peers, resulting in both inherited and acquired income differences. Their explanation suggests the continuing effects at the end of the twentieth century in the United States of a racial division of labor that first emerged in the sixteenth century. In the more recent study, moreover, the authors suggest that the effects of skin color manifest in the decisions of employers, whose behavior reveals marked preferences in favor of lighter-skinned employees.

A theory of race that does not account for the intra-action of culture and body will prove inadequate to explain the data from these studies. Some of the social psychology studies discussed earlier also suggest the importance of considering the active participation of bodies in racial meanings. For example, when researchers administered a verbal ability test to black and white college students and described the test as culturally fair, whites did not outperform blacks. When they presented it as a normal diagnostic test, however, whites outperformed blacks—and blacks had dramatically higher blood pressure levels.⁶⁶ The biological body, it would seem, is not inert matter in the face of ideas and beliefs about race. Bodies respond to ideas as ideas respond in turn to physical bodies.

Race thus emerges as a phenomenon through the intra-action of a number of things, including human phenotypic differences such as eye

and nose shape, skin tone, hair texture, height, and so on. These differences become salient in the ongoing process of racial formation. They become meaningful as components in the intra-active phenomenon of race, which in turn varies across time and space. While the significance of those bodily differences changes and is not always even present when the concept of race emerges, one cannot fully explain certain racial phenomena without reference to human bodies. For example, attempts to reconfigure race solely as culture or as legal fiction fall into absurdity if they cannot consider the significant role of bodily difference in the “whitening” of European immigrants in the United States (or the uneven ability of different Mexican Americans and Latinas and Latinos to “become” white).⁶⁷ Whiteness may not only result simply from a lack of melanin (there are many light-skinned people of color), but it certainly helps to be light skinned in order to qualify as white. Studies on the ambiguity of the category of whiteness in fact support the link between skin tone and social whiteness. After all, uncertainty about who qualified as white in U.S. history did not affect immigrants from Nigeria or Sweden. The very fact that U.S. case law determining the boundaries of racial identity focuses overwhelmingly on Arabs, Armenians, Asians, Latinas and Latinos, and people of mixed-race descent shows the extent to which physical appearance emerged as a causal, albeit not always determinate, factor in the materialization of race in the United States.⁶⁸

Bodies do not have inherent meanings. Yet given the physical properties of bodies and the historical sediment of their intra-actions with cultural ideas and political-economic practices, one cannot attach just any meaning to any body. In other words, the body comprises something more than an inert, passive object on which people inscribe meaning. Bodies are agents with their own causal role in making meaning. Dark-skinned black people in the United States, for example, cannot become white simply through linguistic feats, because their body’s production of melanin plays an indispensable role in racial production. Of course, race is not just color, but in some periods and places color becomes not merely an indispensable but a determinate component of race.

Race is a produced, intra-active phenomenon involving the colonial/modern gender system (itself a phenomenon with many intra-acting components) and individual bodily differences and histories of family descent, as well as social beliefs and practices (including those of courts, legislatures, police, and prisons). It consequently varies and changes

across time and space, intra-acting significantly with practices related to gender and sexuality. That in the contemporary United States two people with very light pigmentation and known sub-Saharan African ancestry can be considered black, while in contemporary Brazil a brother and sister with different complexions but the same ancestry might be considered of different races, does not mean that race does not exist. Rather, such differences indicate that the social phenomenon of race emerges differently because of the different intra-actions among history, economics, law, sexuality, and human bodies in U.S. and Brazilian societies. Race, on this account, amounts to a social construction, but one in the emergence of which biology sometimes plays an important part.

Is Race All Bad? Racial Identity Projects

In the remainder of this chapter, I argue for considering the creative elaboration of racial standpoints as not just compatible with, but necessary for, radical social transformation. My position assumes the malleability of racial categories beyond what one might most often associate with *race*. It also assumes that racial meanings can transcend histories of racism. Given the more than three centuries of racial thinking that preceded the rise of scientific racism in the nineteenth century, it might seem odd to reduce race to the biological classifications of that period—even if the word *race* took on its sharpest definition at that time. It would seem considerably less odd, however, to view race as an inherently oppressive construction that legitimizes social inequality, domination, and exploitation. Such a view amounts to the assertion that *race* equals *racism*.

One can somewhat easily argue for the reality of race as a *social location* that one finds oneself placed in by racial classifications given the substantial empirical data on the effects of social ideas of race. It proves far more controversial, however, to defend race as a self-consciously chosen *standpoint* necessary to antiracist struggle—particularly given the persistent characterization of race as a negative construction, one that has had polarizing and destructive effects on human knowledge, morality, and aesthetics. In writing about standpoint and social location, I draw on a distinction developed within feminist philosophy. *Social location* names the part of one's identity defined by laws, customs, and practices quite apart from one's individual sense of self. Racial social location generally results in a person's experiencing or not experiencing the direct effects

of racism, for example. *Standpoint* refers to the mediation, or interpretation, of social location. It generally reflects someone's decision to make a public and political issue of one's identity. In becoming a standpoint, an identity becomes rearticulated in the pursuit of social transformation, while remaining thoroughly bound up with one's individual and collective sense of self.⁶⁹

Increasingly, a number of scholars have argued for identity's indispensability as a theoretical construct shaping one's cognitive access to the world. The clarity of this access remains an empirical issue, but that issue's resolution does not make socially constructed identities any more or less real. Even identities that obscure knowledge about the world can have substance to them. Furthermore, through active social struggle (or the elaboration of standpoints and project identities), one can both transform the world and generate new knowledge about what the world is and what it might become. In turn, social struggle can enable new social identities, and new social identities can give rise to social struggle. One might, therefore, understand some resistant and project identities as the elaboration of a standpoint from a social location in order to act in the world in such a way that forever alters that social location. However, people can have difficulty imagining imposed, negative identities as resources for hope and transformation.⁷⁰

I offer two examples of racial project identities by way of concluding this chapter in order to suggest the possibilities for reimagining race and other stigmatized identities. Performance scholar Carrie Sandahl recounts one example of the potential for progressive project identities in her analysis of black and blind performance artist Lynn Manning's *Weights*. In her analysis of Manning's performance piece, she focuses centrally on his departure from the traditional "overcoming" narrative of disability, in which "disability experience becomes a generalized metaphor for psychological adjustment."⁷¹ According to this traditional narrative (a narrative with no shortage of similarities to Brown's prescription for identity politics), newly disabled people first feel devastated by their disability and eventually learn to transcend it and to achieve a wiser, happier state because of the effort of overcoming.⁷² The pivotal point at which *Weights* departs from the overcoming narrative occurs when Manning regains consciousness after being shot and learns that he has lost his sight. At this moment, he recalls, "Something akin to joy surges through me."⁷³ While his doctors see his response as "abnormal," Manning reveals that he feels

not so much happy to be blind as happy to be blind and still alive. Later, however, he does begin to revel in his blindness and the vistas of opportunity and experience that it opens to him. As Sandahl notes, “[W]hat Manning learns could only be known through the biological configuration of his new body, or . . . the ‘causal constraints’ of the natural world. He discovers new dimensions, or new truths, about what he thought he had known.”⁷⁴ These discoveries only become possible because of his experience of blindness.

Sandahl finds Manning’s response to becoming blind significant because it reveals that his blindness, in conjunction with his blackness and maleness, provides him with an “interpretive framework” for understanding the world around him. Drawing from realist theories of identity, Sandahl argues that Manning’s interpretive framework, rather than impeding objective knowledge about the world, makes it possible.⁷⁵ In order to obtain knowledge about the world from a blind person’s standpoint, Manning must embrace his blindness and revel in his disability rather than seek to eliminate or overcome it. Manning’s understanding of his gendered and racial identity as a black man, in turn, shapes this process. He must take the knowledge he has about what it means to be a black man and what it means to be blind and integrate the two standpoints. His integration of disability and black male identities calls forth a further reimagining of social struggles and categories, transforming the very elaboration of project identities.

The materiality of Manning’s dark-skinned and blind body (his social location) occupies a causal, but not determinate, role in the process. His body comprises one of the agential factors in the emergent phenomenon of his blind man–black man standpoint. As Sandahl notes in conclusion, “Manning’s performance makes clear that we need to spend more time exploring what disability *is* and *can be*, along with what blackness *is* and *can be*, in as many variations as possible.”⁷⁶ (One might add, what manhood *is* and *can be*.) Not coincidentally, Sandahl’s analysis addresses both race and disability. Disability activists and disability studies have occupied a position at the forefront of developing recent proactive identity projects. While emphasizing the constructed nature of reality, some leading scholars in disability studies have also pointed to the persistence of concrete physical bodies that remain irreducible to “culture” (understood as separate from rather than mutually constitutive with nature). For me personally, conversations with disability scholars and activists

have greatly informed my thinking about creative racial identity projects. The connections between the two identities also enable one to recognize the historical inseparability of race and notions of ability and disability in the elaboration of modern conceptions of different and hierarchically ranked bodies.⁷⁷

The project of reveling in minority identity remains necessary, not simply for the well-being of minorities, and not simply for its own sake, as if all identity projects will lead naturally to progressive social change.⁷⁸ Rather, by exploring identities and fostering communal resistance, one can reveal the social conflicts produced by modernity, coloniality, and patriarchy and begin to recognize possibilities that might lead to better ethical knowledge and progressive social change. Of course, people can often more easily grant the importance of embracing gender or cultural identity—which appear to have ready referents beyond domination, exploitation, and oppression—than disability or racial identity, which can appear exclusively negative. I believe this dwells at the heart of Castells’s and Quijano’s reservations about racial identity. One should note, however, Castells’s account of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatistas comprise an indigenous resistance movement in Southern Mexico that for nearly two decades has existed in various levels of open conflict with the Mexican state. Castells finds the Zapatistas’ identity formation remarkable and historically unprecedented, insofar as the indigenous communities of Chiapas have lived separated by ethnic and linguistic differences for centuries. Thus, “it does not seem that the defense of ethnic identity was a dominant element in the movement” because a “new Indian identity was constructed through their struggle and came to include various ethnic groups.”⁷⁹

Although Castells claims earlier to discount racial identity, one wonders what the Zapatistas’ “new Indian identity” can be if not a racial identity. It seems based on neither ethnicity, nor culture, nor nation, nor language. Their “new” racial identity, in turn, does not make sense apart from the five hundred years of struggle against the coloniality of power, as described by Quijano. Yet Quijano, too, describes race in purely negative terms, as a “mental construction” that becomes mapped onto (passive) bodies and populations in order to naturalize social difference and a hierarchy of labor, knowledge, and value.⁸⁰ The Zapatistas’ racial identity seems “new,” however, precisely because it does not completely depend for its meaning on how race has taken shape within the colonial/modern

gender system. While Eurocentrism as a standpoint for understanding meaning emerged from the birth of the colonial/modern gender system, Zapatismo emerged in the late twentieth century as a self-conscious indigenous standpoint seeking to criticize and transform that system.⁸¹ As a critical standpoint, it does not advocate for the retention of racial categories and hierarchies as they currently exist (or, according to many of the Zapatistas' communiqués, gender and sexual hierarchies), but its birth in an analysis of a racially specific social location remains undeniable in the "First Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle": "We are the product of five hundred years of struggle."⁸² Their radical, unprecedented, and transformational racial identity project aims to creatively reimagine the possibilities of existence not only for indigenous peoples in Southern Mexico but for all people.

The world needs identities more than it needs arguments against them—and I believe that it needs creative racial identity projects more than it needs philosophical arguments against race. Race is no more or less a fiction than nationality or ethnicity, and it is just as unlikely to go away. One cannot easily dismiss it as "only cultural" or "just ideological." It emerges from the intra-action of history, culture, economics, and human bodies. It has played a constitutive role in shaping the modern world, and it continues to shape people's most intimate and unconscious actions, behaviors, and beliefs. Race remains, moreover, an inseparable part of how most people experience gender, sexuality, and citizenship, among other things. Racial hierarchies and biological determinist assumptions about racial difference will not evaporate without a significant reorganization of cultural, economic, and political relations at the personal and societal levels, as well as an accounting for how different bodies intra-act with racial categories and ideas. That reorganization, in turn, must come in part from racial identity projects that do not simply reaffirm what race is and has been, but rather seek a transformation of race into something new.

There have been, and continue to be, many attempts at transforming racial identities, including that of the Zapatistas. Other creative and transformational racial identity projects include the Harlem Renaissance, the Negritude movement, Pan-Africanism, Pan-Indigenism, and the contemporary formations of Asian American and Chicana and Chicano identities. Writing in different contexts, both Linda Martín Alcoff and Walter Dignolo, for example, have noted the potential for some recent formations of U.S. Latino identity to challenge radically the meanings of

race in both the United States and Latin America, perhaps pointing to less Eurocentric possibilities for racial formations in the Americas.⁸³ While internally heterogeneous and by no means perfect, these projects have begun *recently* (recently, that is, given that the present racial order took over five hundred years to occur) to imagine what race can mean beyond the facilitation of domination, exploitation, and oppression. To the extent that they have failed, it has often been due to their inability adequately to address race as one of many mutually constitutive aspects of identity formation. Still, I believe that only by encouraging racial project identities to flourish can we find possibilities for a more egalitarian future. Success, however, will require better theories about the interrelation of capitalism, class, coloniality, gender, race, and sexuality. The next chapter takes a step toward this goal.