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Social Identity and Group Solidarity

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We are one with you under the ban of prejudice and proscription—one with you under the slander of inferiority—one with you in social and political disfranchisement. What you suffer, we suffer; what you endure, we endure. We are indissolubly united, and must fall or flourish together.

—Frederick Douglass, “To Our Oppressed Countrymen” (1847)

In an effort to liberate blacks from the burdens of racial injustice, blacks frequently call upon, even pressure, one another to become a more unified collective agent for social change. There are, of course, critics who think such solidarity irrational, impractical, and even morally objectionable.¹ Yet many people, both black and nonblack, continue to believe that black solidarity is essential to achieve the full freedom and social equality that American ideals promise. As we have seen, though, even among those who agree that black solidarity is important for bringing about racial justice, there is substantial disagreement over the precise meaning of this group commitment. Such disagreement can be quite fundamental, as can be seen by comparing classical and pragmatic nationalism.

Recall that, according to classical nationalism, black solidarity and voluntary separation under conditions of equality and self-

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determination is a worthwhile end in itself. On this account, blacks should unite and work together because they are a people with their own distinctive ethnoracial identity; and as a cohesive national group, blacks have interests that are best pursued by their seeking group autonomy within some relatively independent institutional framework. However, according to pragmatic nationalism, blacks should unite and work together because they suffer a common oppression; and given the current political climate they can make progress in overcoming or ameliorating their shared condition only if they embrace black solidarity. Here, black unity is merely a contingent strategy for creating greater freedom and equality for blacks.

Though similar in underlying motivation, the two strains within the nationalist tradition are importantly different. The pragmatic account, the least radical of the two, simply acknowledges the negative historical impact and current existence of antiblack racism in America and calls on those who suffer because of these injustices to act collectively to end them or at least to reduce their impact on their lives. The goal of this political program, then, is to free blacks from racism and its burdensome legacy, and it regards black solidarity as a necessary means to that end. The classical nationalist, on the other hand, maintains that blacks are a people whose members need to work together to bring about their collective self-realization as a people. Generally more pessimistic about the prospects for ending, or even sharply reducing, antiblack racism, this program seeks relief for black people through collective autonomy and self-organization and it calls for black solidarity to bring this about.

In previous chapters, I have highlighted the weaknesses in the classical program, problems that I believe are insurmountable. I have also tried to show that interpretations of pragmatic nationalism as community nationalism, political corporatism, or cultural nationalism are also untenable. My concern in this chapter will be to further clarify the practical implications of a viable pragmatic

nationalism and to more sharply distinguish it from its classical rival. I shall do so by scrutinizing a doctrine that is often thought to be a component of any conception of black solidarity.

Collective Identity Theory

Collective identity theory holds that a shared black identity is essential for an effective black solidarity whose aim is liberation from racial oppression, and thus blacks who are committed to emancipatory group solidarity must steadfastly embrace their distinctive black identity. It is clear why the advocate of classical nationalism would accept this view, since it is the distinctive social identity of blacks that, on this account, constitutes them as a “people,” which in turn grounds the claim of group self-determination. Without such an identity, the goal of black collective self-realization loses its rationale and much of its appeal. For the pragmatic nationalist, too, collective identity theory seems to have much going for it. In particular, it would appear to help with overcoming two serious obstacles to black collective action against racial injustice.

First, there is the familiar free-rider problem. Although many blacks, even some who are well off, are willing to make the relevant sacrifices to bring about racial justice, many are also complacent, narrowly self-interested, or simply weary of carrying on the struggle. Their inaction weakens the collective effort. It also breeds resentment and mistrust, as some are seen as benefiting from the sacrifices of others without contributing to what should be a group endeavor. Collective identity theory suggests a (perhaps only partial) solution: namely, by cultivating a common conception of who they are as a people, blacks can strengthen the bonds of identification, loyalty, special concern, and trust that would enable them to overcome these barriers to collective action. Such an identity could also give blacks a foundation for mutual identification across class lines, something that is sorely needed in this time of increasing intraracial economic stratification.

Second, there is the general problem that the mere acceptance of abstract principles of justice is often insufficient to motivate people to contribute the time and resources necessary for effecting meaningful social change. This difficulty affects the collective will of blacks as well, despite the fact that they, perhaps more than any other racialized group in America, desperately want to see an end to unfair racial disadvantage. We have noted several broad principles—antiracism, racial equality, equal educational opportunity, and antipoverty—that all blacks can be expected to support. But getting blacks (or any other group) to act upon these principles is another matter. Again, a collective identity would seem to help: viewing one another as black brothers and sisters with a shared social identity in blackness may, like the familiar motivating force of kinship relations, make blacks more inclined to help each other in a movement to eradicate racial injustice and its negative consequences.

Many influential theorists in the history of black political thought have defended or implicitly relied upon collective identity theory. The tendency to link the demand for collective self-definition with emancipatory black solidarity can be found in the writings and speeches of quite diverse black thinkers.² For purposes of illustrating this tendency, I will, once again, focus on Du Bois and his well-known essay “The Conservation of Races” (1897). In that early essay, Du Bois explicitly advocates a particularly strong form of emancipatory black solidarity: “It is our [American Negroes’] *duty* to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity *to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development.*”³ As was discussed in Chapter 2, Du Bois believed that black solidarity is necessary for overcoming racial oppression and insuring that blacks make their unique cultural contribution to humanity. He also in-

sisted that blacks should “conserve” their racial identity rather than allow themselves to be absorbed completely into Anglo-American culture, for the goals of emancipatory black solidarity cannot be achieved without the preservation of a distinctive black identity: “We believe it the *duty* of the Americans of Negro descent, *as a body*, to maintain their race identity *until* this mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility.”⁴ Although Du Bois often suggested that he would like to see black identity, in particular its cultural dimensions, preserved even beyond that time when social equality becomes a reality, here he emphasizes the “duty” of blacks to maintain their identity “until” such equality is realized.

Even in his early reconstruction of the concept of “race,” Du Bois emphasized the link between racial identity and race solidarity: “[A race] is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, *who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.*”⁵

There has recently been a lively philosophical debate over the exact meaning of Du Bois’s conception of race as defined in his “Conservation” essay.⁶ Much of this debate has focused on the metaphysics of race—on what would make a group of people a “race,” what it would mean for races to be “real,” and, given what we now know about human variety, whether any races actually exist. In light of his avowed philosophical proclivities, it is safe to assume that Du Bois was concerned with such abstract ontological questions. Yet his interest in the reality of races was also based on his desire to lay a firm foundation for black solidarity, to forge or construct a collective black identity that would enable “the Negro” to become a more unified force for social change. Du Bois was convinced that a collective black identity—based primarily on a shared history and culture, and only secondarily, if at all, on a common biological in-

heritance—is a necessary component of an emancipatory black solidarity. Much of black political thought has followed him in this. Indeed, among advocates of black solidarity, collective identity theory is often regarded as a truism.

I will argue, however, that blacks should reject this conception of pragmatic nationalism, because cultivating a collective black identity is unnecessary for forging effective bonds among blacks, would create (or exacerbate an already) undue constraint on individual freedom, and is likely, in any case, to be self-defeating. I will urge the disentanglement of the call for an emancipatory black political solidarity from the call for a collective black identity. A black solidarity based on the common experience of antiblack racism and the joint commitment to bringing it to an end can and should play an important role in the fight against racial injustice. But a form of black unity that emphasizes the need to positively affirm a “racial,” ethnic, cultural, or national identity is a legacy of black political thought that must now be abandoned for the sake of the struggle against racial domination and black disadvantage.

Before proceeding further, two caveats are in order. First, my concern in this chapter, as throughout the book, is with that form of group solidarity that has as its primary goal the liberation of black people from the burdens of injustice. Thus, when I speak of black solidarity I refer to this type of political or emancipatory solidarity. But of course not everything that could rightly be called a form of black solidarity is, strictly speaking, directly bound up with politics. There are other collective goals or values that might be thought to serve as a basis for building black unity. For instance, there is a form of black solidarity that has as its end the nurturing of communal relations among blacks, a solidarity that is not treated as a means to some other external objective but as valuable in itself. Some may seek solidarity with other blacks simply because they see intrinsic value in the social interaction and the feelings of community that it brings. Nothing I say here should be taken to preclude or

disparage this type of *social* solidarity. The form of emancipatory political solidarity that I would defend is perfectly compatible with it. Indeed, sometimes black social solidarity can foster black political solidarity and vice versa. Second, like the cultural nationalists considered in Chapter 5, some blacks might want to work together to cultivate and preserve black culture. They may also see this collective project as important quite apart from its relationship to the struggle against injustice. Provided such a project is not treated as a necessary component of black political solidarity, it is not threatened by the rejection of the collective identity theory. It may, however, suffer from other conceptual and normative difficulties, as we have seen.

Modes of Blackness

Before submitting it to critical scrutiny, it will be useful to specify the collective identity theory in a bit more detail. This will require discussing a long-standing philosophical conundrum—the meaning of “blackness.” According to collective identity theory, black people must embrace and preserve their distinctive black identity if a politically progressive solidarity is to flourish among them. Thus it is necessary to know what group of people the label *black* is supposed to be picking out here and what the nature of this “black identity” is that they must embrace and preserve. I want to approach these two questions by building upon the distinction introduced in Chapter 1 between “thin” and “thick” conceptions of black identity. Relying on this distinction, we will see, among other things, that the collective identity theorist urges the cultivation of thick blackness.

Recall that on a thin conception of black identity, blackness is a vague and socially imposed category of “racial” difference that serves to distinguish groups on the basis of their members having certain visible, inherited physical characteristics and a particular biological ancestry. There are widely shared, nationally variable,

intersubjective criteria for the classification of individuals into racial groupings. The prevailing (though not uncontested) thin conception of black identity in the United States, a conception that has its social heritage in chattel slavery and Jim Crow domination, holds that *blacks* include both (1) those persons who have certain easily identifiable, inherited physical traits (such as dark skin, tightly curled or “kinky” hair, a broad flat nose, and thick lips) and who are descendants of peoples from sub-Saharan Africa; and (2) those persons who, while not meeting or only ambiguously satisfying the somatic criteria, are descendants of Africans who are widely presumed to have had these physical characteristics. Thus, on a thin view, blacks are persons who (more or less) fit a particular phenotypic profile and certain genealogical criteria and/or who are generally believed to have biological ancestors who fit the relevant profile.

For those who meet these criteria, there is little room for choice about one’s “racial” identity. One cannot simply refuse to be thinly black—as the African American folk saying goes, “the only thing I *have* to do is stay black and die.” If, say, one were to assimilate completely to so-called white culture, one’s thin blackness would nevertheless remain intact, for cultural conversion provides no escape. No amount of wealth, income, social status, or education can erase one’s thin blackness, which of course is not to deny that these advantages might mitigate some of its negative consequences. One might alter her physical appearance so as not to “look black,” or if she doesn’t look black, she might then conceal her genealogy—as those who “pass” do—but in either case, she would still *be* black, in the thin sense, even if never found out.⁷ It is an individual’s thin blackness that makes her vulnerable to antiblack racism despite her law-abiding conduct and good character, her commitment to civic and personal responsibility, the extent of her assimilation to mainstream bourgeois or mass culture, her middle-class income and professional status, her educational success and intellectual

achievement, or her nonblack physical appearance.⁸ Thus the category of thin blackness, as an official “racial” classification, is all that would be needed for the administration of civil rights laws and the enforcement of antidiscrimination statutes.

A *thick* conception of black identity, which usually includes a thin component, always requires something more, or something other, than a common physical appearance and African ancestry.⁹ Here the social category “black” has a narrower social meaning, with specific and sometimes quite austere criteria for who qualifies as black. Unlike thin blackness, thick blackness can be adopted, altered, or lost through individual action. Drawing on the history of black social thought, five familiar modes of thick blackness can be distinguished.

First, there is the *racialist* mode.¹⁰ On this conception, black identity is based on the supposed presence of a special genotype in the biological makeup of all (fully) black people that does not exist among nonblacks. On this view, an underlying cluster of genes, transmitted through biological reproduction, accounts not only for the relatively superficial phenotypic traits that satisfy the criteria for thin blackness but also explains more socially significant traits, such as temperament, aesthetic sensibility, and certain innate talents. It is the possession of this genotype that defines membership in the black race. There is of course a racist conception that holds that the black essence significantly determines the native intelligence, reproductive traits and tendencies, and moral character of those who possess it. However, blacks generally regard this strong form of biological determinism as false and insulting, and so I shall proceed on the assumption that the collective identity theorist, as an advocate for black freedom and equality, does not endorse it either.

Second, there is the *ethnic* conception of blackness, which treats black identity as a matter of shared ancestry and common cultural heritage. On such an account, there is no assumption that two peo-

ple of the same ethnicity must necessarily share the same racial genotype. To be sure, as a result of their shared biological ancestry the members of an ethnic group may share certain physical traits—for instance, dark skin or the capacity to grow an Afro—and they may even value their possession of these traits as part of their ethnic identity. But these ethnic traits need not be viewed as indicating an underlying biological essence that explains black behavioral or psychological dispositions. Indeed, the ethnic conception of blackness is consistent with the complete rejection of racialism.

There are two dominant conceptions of black ethnicity among black Americans. One emphasizes the fact that black Americans are descendants of certain sub-Saharan African peoples, and it maintains that they share a culture that is traceable to the culture of those ancestors. The other stresses both the experiences of blacks with oppression in the New World and the rich culture they have created in the context of that oppression since being forcibly removed from Africa. On either version, though, one does not have a black ethnic identity, in the thick sense, unless one has the relevant lineage and embraces, to some significant degree, the corresponding cultural traits.

Third, there is blackness as *nationality*. “Nationality” has at least two meanings. It is often used to mean citizenship in a territorially sovereign state. A person would therefore have a black national identity if he or she were a citizen of a (predominantly) black nation-state (such as Ghana, Haiti, or Nigeria). But “nationality” also has a meaning that is quite similar to that of ethnicity. An ethnic identity can be considered a national one when the people in question think of themselves and their culture as derived from a particular geographical location, where the relevant territory is considered an ancestral “homeland” and a source of group pride. In the case of black Americans, this geographical region is, again, typically (some part of) sub-Saharan Africa. However, I will treat black nationality, in both its senses, as a variant of the ethnic conception, for

the differences between ethnicity and nationality, as here defined, will not affect the argument to follow.

Fourth, there is the *cultural* conception of blackness. It rests on the claim that there is an identifiable ensemble of beliefs, values, conventions, traditions, and practices (that is, a culture or subculture) that is distinctively black (see Chapter 5). Though this culture is thought to be the creative product of those who satisfy the criteria for thin blackness, the continued reproduction of the culture does not depend solely on the activities of these blacks, because nonblacks may participate in sustaining and developing it as well. On this model, thick black identity is tied neither to race nor to biological descent. Anyone could, in principle, embrace and cultivate a black cultural identity, in much the same way that anyone could, again in principle, become a practicing Christian.

Finally, there is the historically influential *kinship* mode of blackness. This view conceptualizes black identity on the model of the family—recall Du Bois's conception of race as a "vast family" or consider the common use of "brother" and "sister" to affectionately refer to fellow blacks.¹¹ Of course blacks are not a family, not even an extended one, in any ordinary sense. And earlier I criticized the invocation of this idiom insofar as it is meant to underwrite contemporary black political solidarity (see Chapters 3 and 4). So what is it about familial relations that could plausibly constitute a basis or suggest an analogous foundation for a thick black identity? There seem to be three possibilities. First, one could understand blackness in terms of biological relatedness or genealogy—"blood ties." But then the kinship conception can be adequately expressed in terms of the racist view, the ethnic view without the cultural requirement, or the thin conception of black identity.¹² Second, one could treat black identity as a matter not merely of biology but of the reproduction of a common way of life. But here the idea could be fully captured by the ethnic conception of blackness (perhaps with some additional racist assumptions). Or third, like familial

relations formed through marriage or adoption (whether formal or informal), blackness could be thought to rest on voluntary affiliation, custom, or (legal) convention. This form of blackness, however, would be simply a version of the cultural conception, a matter of *joining* the relevant group. The familiar kinship view is not, therefore, a conception of blackness distinct from the ones already considered, just a convenient (though often misleading) trope used to signify one or more of them. Now of course members of a family often share important experiences that contribute to their feelings of connectedness, trust, and loyalty. And in a similar way, black people have a common history of racial oppression and share a common vulnerability to racial discrimination. However, as I will argue below, these commonalities can form the basis for group solidarity without relying at all on a thick collective black identity.

There are several things to notice about thin and thick black identities and their interrelations. First, a person who satisfies the thin social criteria for being classified as black may nevertheless choose, with varying degrees of psychological difficulty and against various forms of social pressure, not to define his or her self-conception in terms of “blackness” at all. That is, such a person may choose not to subjectively identify with the label *black* or to conform to its associated behavioral norms.¹³ Some nationalists contend that those so-called blacks who refuse to self-identify as black are denying something important about themselves, usually out of racially motivated self-hate. But a different, more respectable, reason for rejecting a black identity, one that does not necessarily involve self-deception or bad faith, is that one may believe that the designation *black*, with its typical connotations, is not an apt characterization of either who one is or who one would like to be. Or one might think that a black identity, while perhaps perfectly appropriate for some, is too limiting in one’s own case. Yet another reason might be that one believes it to be an inherently invidious and repressive social distinction that should thus be repudiated on

moral or political grounds. It should be clear, however, that the choice not to self-identify as black, whatever its rationale, does *not* dissolve the often constraining social realities that are created by the fact that *others* may insist on ascribing such an identity to one and consequently may treat one accordingly, whether for good or ill.

Second, black identity is not only multidimensional—involving the thin/thick distinction and often including various types of thickness—but the content of each mode is intensely contested. This circumstance makes possible the familiar but controversial discourse of black authenticity. It sometimes happens, for example, that an individual who satisfies the thin criteria for blackness possesses only a subset of the three modes of thick blackness under consideration—for instance, the thinly black person may (seem to) embody the racist dimension without exemplifying the cultural dimension. There is intense disagreement among African Americans about whether anyone who identifies as black along one dimension should also, perhaps as a test of group loyalty or trustworthiness, identify as black along all the others—to be, in a sense, “fully” black. It is also possible for an individual to exemplify each of these modes but to different extents; for example, a person might have dark skin and love hip hop but have little fondness for or knowledge of African cultures and no interest at all in the blues. Recognition of this fact has also sometimes given rise to talk of “degrees” of blackness. Moreover, because the boundaries of each mode are both vague and fiercely disputed, there is often deep disagreement among African Americans about exactly when the label *black* applies in a given case, a circumstance that sometimes produces seemingly irresolvable questions about whether certain persons are “really” black.

Now given the thin/thick distinction, we can understand what it would mean to say of someone who is clearly black according to the thin criteria but who fails to satisfy the relevant criteria for thick blackness (whatever they turn out to be) that he or she isn’t “really”

black—a claim that is sometimes thought to be essentialist and paradoxical, if not completely incoherent.¹⁴ Here is how we might make sense of that familiar charge without relying on racialism and within the context of thinking about the relevance of a collective identity for black solidarity. Though a person cannot choose whether to be black in the thin sense, she can, as we've said, decide what significance she will attach to her thin blackness. This includes deciding whether to commit herself to pragmatic black nationalism. But if she does so commit, either explicitly or implicitly, then she could rightly be criticized for failing to live up to obligations she has voluntarily accepted as a member of that solidarity group. For instance, she might be criticized for not being sufficiently faithful to the goal of racial equality.

Of course we all, whether black or not, have an obligation to resist racial injustice. The obligations of blacks in this regard are certainly no greater than those of nonblacks.¹⁵ But blacks would arguably have an obligation to pursue their antiracism *through* black solidarity if in its absence racial justice could not be achieved. Such an obligation would follow from the principle that if one wills the end, one also wills the necessary means, provided of course these means are morally permissible. If such a position is sound, then blacks who fail to commit to black solidarity are open to criticism. And thus if collective identity theory is correct, any thinly black person who does not affirm thick blackness as part of his identity, whether he has made a commitment to black solidarity or not, would be vulnerable to criticism. In this book, I leave open the question of whether a commitment to black political solidarity is strictly obligatory, for answering it would require resolving the difficult empirical question of whether such solidarity is absolutely necessary to achieve racial justice. Instead I focus on what should and should not be required of those who *choose* to fight antiblack racism through black political solidarity, noting, as I have emphasized throughout, that such group efforts are a legitimate and con-

structive means to effect social change. This leaves open the possibility that it is permissible for blacks to work for racial justice through some other means, whether group-based or not.

Thus, if we think of authenticity, not as a matter of acting in conformity to or fully realizing one's inherent essence, but as being faithful to the practical principles that one has freely adopted, then black "inauthenticity" could be understood as not living up to one's solidaristic commitments (whatever these turn out to entail). If the goals of black solidarity cannot be achieved without a thick shared identity, as collective identity theory maintains, then a person who has signed on to this emancipatory project, but fails to identify as thickly black, may rightly be criticized for being "inauthentic"—fraudulent or fake. By using the thin/thick distinction, then, we can more clearly discuss the discourse of black authenticity and what role, if any, it has to play in black solidarity.

Finally, it is clear that among those who satisfy the criteria for thin blackness, many spontaneously embrace a thick black identity without treating this as a conscious strategy and without being concerned for how this would impact black politics. Even for those who do deliberately choose to cultivate a thick black identity, they do so for the most varied reasons, many doubtless having to do with resisting racial injustice but some having more to do with cultivating self-esteem, wanting a rich and relatively stable conception of who they are, or desiring a strong sense of community. It is moreover probably rare that blacks consciously embrace a thick black identity solely for political purposes. In fact, in order for such an identity to have a positive effect on black solidarity, it may be necessary for some to embrace it for reasons apart from its political value. The collective identity theorist could concede all this but nevertheless insist that were a sufficient number of blacks, for whatever reason, to reject or distance themselves from thick blackness, this would seriously hamper, if not undermine, emancipatory black solidarity, especially given the collective action problems that blacks

currently face. Indeed, the familiar policing of social identities that takes place among black Americans—which often frustrates those who seek greater freedom in the construction of their social identities—arguably functions to strengthen the bonds of solidarity necessary for effective resistance against racial oppression. It is for this reason that the advocate of collective identity theory urges blacks to accept a thick black identity, even if some will do so for reasons having little to do with antiracist politics.

Given the above distinctions and caveats, the collective identity theory can now be given a more precise formulation: There are persons who meet the criteria for thin blackness who also have available to them a black identity that is “deeper,” that is, *thicker*, than their thin blackness, and these persons must positively affirm and preserve their thick blackness if collectively they are to overcome their racial oppression through group solidarity. Thus, for the remainder of this chapter, when I speak of the alleged need for a common black identity, I will be using the term *black* in the thick sense, and when I speak of “black people” or simply “blacks,” I will mean “black” in the thin sense, unless otherwise indicated.

Is a Collective Identity Necessary?

On a racist conception of blackness, with its commitment to a more-than-skin-deep racial essence, embracing and preserving black identity would entail, at a minimum, fostering intraracial reproduction between blacks and, perhaps more importantly, discouraging interracial reproduction between blacks and nonblacks. This practice of racial endogamy is supposed to help keep the black essence intact and protect blacks from the dangers of racial hybridity. However, this view has a number of well-known problems. For one thing, it is now generally acknowledged that no “pure” biological races exist. Indeed, many biologists and anthropologists question the very idea of “racial” difference.¹⁶ But even if there are (or once were) pure racial groups, those Americans who are black by

the prevailing thin criteria certainly would not qualify as such a group (or even a proper subset thereof), because most (by some estimates as many as 80 percent) have some European or Native American ancestry.¹⁷ Limiting black solidarity to only “pure(er)” blacks would exclude many victims of antiblack racism, contrary to the point of the enterprise. It would also run the risk of creating a “reverse” color prejudice—a preference for darker skin rather than the more familiar but no less problematic preference for lighter skin—among those who identify or are identified as black. Harold Cruse has rightly emphasized this danger: “In the United States, the American Negro group is too large and mixed with too many racial strains for the ideology of black-skin supremacy to function within the group. It can lead to the reasoning that ‘I’m blacker than you, and so is my mama, so I’m purer than you and your mama. Therefore, I am also more nationalistic than you, and more politically trustworthy than you and your mama, in the interests of Black Power.’ But inside America this is a pure fiction.”¹⁸

A racist justification for the principle of black endogamy would be no more plausible if the more inclusive “one-drop rule” were adopted.¹⁹ Such a conception of black identity would hardly justify prohibiting “race mixing” in the name of black solidarity. If anything, it suggests that blacks should make it their policy to produce “mixed” progeny, because this would only increase their numbers and thereby perhaps their collective strength.²⁰

Given the obvious problems with its racist version, most advocates of the collective identity theory have adopted the more plausible position that blacks should embrace and preserve their distinctive *ethnic* or *cultural* identity. Recall that the main difference between these two conceptions of blackness is that the ethnic version requires black ancestry while the cultural version does not. But because collective identity theory calls on blacks alone to embrace thick blackness, those who do so will have the appropriate ancestry by default; that is, the thinly black who have a black cultural iden-

tity will thereby be ethnically black. Thus for present purposes, the ethnic and cultural versions of collective identity theory come to the same thing, and I will therefore treat them as one “ethno-cultural” conception of blackness.

Yet perhaps this is too quick. The ethnic version of collective identity theory may urge blacks to *affirm* their black ancestry in some special way. Provided it is devoid of any racist assumptions, there seem to be three important ways this affirmation could be carried out. First, one could honor the memory of one’s black ancestors by embracing and passing on their cultural legacy. This view, however, is just a variant of the cultural version of collective identity theory. Second, it might be thought that because one’s black bodily appearance is the result of one’s black racial pedigree, one should honor one’s black ancestors by being proud of that appearance and perhaps accentuating it. This might seem all the more important once one considers the fact that racists have often maintained that blacks are physically unattractive, even repulsive. Being proud of “looking black” can be expressed by, for example, wearing one’s hair “natural” and prominently featuring one’s other prototypical “black features”—big lips, noses, and hips. Yet doing so would be a matter of observing certain norms of conduct or fashion imperatives, and thus this account of the alleged independent significance of black ancestry is also a variant of the cultural version of collective identity theory, one that attaches positive meaning to outward bodily appearance. Third, one might affirm one’s black ancestry by honoring the sacrifices that previous generations of blacks have made for the benefit of future generations. Setting aside the option of paying such homage through cultural identification and preservation (see Chapter 5), I would argue that the best way to honor the heroic efforts of previous generations of blacks is to continue their struggle for racial justice and black liberation. This view, however, is consistent with a pragmatic nationalist conception of solidarity whether or not a thick identity is thought to be a neces-

sary component, as either the thin or thick variant would urge blacks to work for racial equality and black freedom.

Now the ethnocultural version of collective identity theory requires blacks to identify with black culture, insisting that blacks view it as (at least partly) constitutive of who they are. Note, though, that if this ethnocultural identity is to have a positive impact on black solidarity—providing a basis for mutual identification, engendering a sense of special concern, reinforcing their commitment to common values or goals, and creating stronger bonds of loyalty and trust—then it cannot be a passive or merely internal acknowledgement of the value of black culture. Rather, blacks must actively perform or display their cultural identity for other blacks (and perhaps nonblacks) to see. They must demonstrate their knowledge and appreciation of black culture by, for example, participating in it, preserving or developing it, and exposing others to it, especially their children. However this is accomplished, there must be some means by which blacks publicly signify their allegiance to ethnocultural blackness.

There is a strong and weak version of the ethnocultural view. On the strong version, a collective black ethnocultural identity is a *necessary* component of black solidarity; that is, failing to cultivate such a collective identity would undermine the effort to build black unity. On the weak version, a collective identity is not claimed to be necessary for black solidarity, since blacks might get by without one, but it is thought that such an identity would strengthen the bonds of unity by giving blacks more in common than just their history of oppression and vulnerability to racism. However, I maintain that neither version is sound. Focusing on the strong version first, I will argue that there is little reason to suppose that blacks must share a collective identity in order for them to exhibit, as a group, each of the five characteristics of robust solidarity outlined in Chapter 2.

At the outset, it might be thought that if blacks are to *identify*

with each other, they must share an ethnocultural identity (or at least they must *believe* themselves to share such an identity). Yet there are clearly other, and more politically reliable, bases for identification. Blacks could, for example, identify with each other because they believe themselves to suffer the same form of racial subordination, to have experienced the degradation and insult of antiblack racism, or to share a common interest in ending racial inequality and racialized poverty. The mutual recognition of such commonality could produce, and arguably already has produced, empathetic understanding of a deeply felt kind between blacks. Thus, quite apart from their supposed common “racial” characteristics, ethnicity, or culture, each could come to see and feel that a significant part of himself or herself is to be found in the others, so that it becomes meaningful to speak about and act on the basis of what “we” experience, “we” believe, and “we” desire.

In fact, members of oppressed groups often experience a common fate because of a social identity that they only *appear* to share, as it is not unusual for the dominant group to construct an identity for those it oppresses (and for itself) in order to justify the ill treatment and deplorable condition of the subordinate group.²¹ Such imputed or ascribed social identities are sometimes entirely fictional, maliciously fabricated by oppressor groups. Consider, for example, the old myth that blacks are the descendants of Ham and thus are forever cursed to toil for the benefit of whites. But even when the ascribed identity is based in something real, members of the subordinate group may still find it more pragmatic to build solidarity on the basis of their common oppression and their desire to overcome it, for some of them might not value or identify with the ascription.

The special concern that is typical of solidarity groups often has little to do with a shared culture. Sometimes this concern is rooted in mutual identification itself, which, as I have said, does not require a common ethnoracial identity and often extends across lines

of cultural difference. Consider the mutual concern that binds together some women in their fight to end patriarchy and gender discrimination. Such women come from a variety of ethnocultural backgrounds and yet are able, imperfectly to be sure, to identify with one another's burdens, fears, and pain.²² But special concern does not even require such identification—that sense of “we-ness.” Mere empathy is often sufficient. Such empathy is rooted in the feeling that “had things gone a little differently, I could be in your unfortunate position” or perhaps “I have been in your position, and thus I can understand what you are going through and may be well situated to lead you out of it.” This kind of imaginative self-projection into the shoes of another can move individuals to the kind of special concern that is characteristic of solidarity, a form of caring that is not limited to those with whom one shares an ethnocultural identity.

Black solidarity does require a shared set of values or goals. But this normative commitment need not involve embracing black culture as the basis of a collective identity. One does not have to possess a black cultural identity—indeed one does not have to be black at all—to appreciate the value of racial equality, to condemn racism, or to abhor poverty. Of course, values are components of culture, and black cultural forms are among those that sometimes express or embody principles of social equality, which can be a legitimate source of black pride. Nevertheless, the basis of blacks' commitment to equality should be that this is what justice demands, not simply that such values are embedded in black cultural traditions. Now, to the extent that black culture expresses or embodies principles of justice, this might provide those who embrace a black ethnocultural identity with a *further* reason to cling to these principles. But if, as is not unreasonable to suppose, there were components of black culture that did not extol the virtues of racial justice but instead emphasized black supremacy or, worse, black inferiority, then blacks would of course need to reject these compo-

nents of their culture and embrace social equality instead, whatever its ethnocultural roots.

Loyalty, too, can exist between blacks with a wide range of ethnocultural identities. Consider, for example, the loyalty that sometimes exists between the diverse members of labor organizations. Despite differences in age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, region, ethnicity, occupation, and many other things, some workers have been intensely loyal to one another, especially when confronted with threatening or dire circumstances. Moreover, they often maintain this loyalty with little more in common than their shared vulnerability as workers and their will to improve their lot. There is no reason why blacks cannot do the same, for they, too, are vulnerable to a threatening social force—antiblack racism. And just as workers can unite in the name of economic justice without sharing a conception of the value of labor or a desire to preserve their “identity” as workers, blacks can unite in the name of racial justice without sharing a conception of the value of black culture or a desire to conserve ethnocultural blackness.

It is also clear that blacks can foster mutual trust among themselves without sharing a common ethnocultural identity. A common culture would undoubtedly create a type of familiarity and ease of intercourse that could contribute to the building of mutual trust. And, in general, it is easier to trust those with whom one shares a social identity. However, trust can be facilitated in other ways as well. One can, for instance, demonstrate one’s trustworthiness by openly making efforts to advance the cause of black liberation. Working together with other blacks to accomplish limited, short-term goals—for example, collectively boycotting a known racist establishment or putting concerted pressure on political leaders to heed black concerns—can also foster trust. This makes the participants only minimally vulnerable to one another, while at the same time creating seeds of trust that can grow through future collective efforts. In any case, as I argued in Chapter 2, using one’s tal-

ents and resources to promote an antiracist agenda is surely a better sign of one's trustworthiness in the struggle against racial oppression than expressing one's solidarity with other blacks through exhibiting pride in one's black ethnocultural identity.

Against this view, Laurence Thomas has argued that there can be no "genuine cooperation" among blacks until they develop what he calls a "group narrative"—defined as "a set of stories which defines values and entirely positive goals, which specifies a set of fixed points of historical significance, and which defines a set of ennobling rituals to be regularly performed"—for, according to him, such a narrative provides the basis for mutual trust.²³ Moreover, Thomas claims that a people cannot genuinely cooperate with each other simply on account of their desire to defeat a common enemy, because the existence of such an enemy cannot form the basis of mutual trust.

I disagree. First, if the civil rights movement did not constitute genuine cooperation among blacks, then I'm not sure what would. Thomas may not count the movement as genuine cooperation, because it did not operate on the basis of what he regards as "group autonomy"; that is, blacks were not generally regarded as the foremost interpreters of their history and cultural traditions. But unless the goal is black collective self-realization *as a people* or *cultural self-determination*, then the narrative-free black solidarity that held together the civil rights movement should be sufficient for the post-civil rights era as well. Second, Thomas's account of group narrative would seem to suggest that blacks need something comparable to an ethnic religion if they are to form bonds of mutual trust. But I see no reason to believe that, because, as I argued above, there are less restrictive and more reliable routes to that end.

Would a Shared Identity Help?

So far I have argued that a collective ethnocultural identity is not a necessary condition for the creation and maintenance of robust

black solidarity. But, as I mentioned earlier, some collective identity theorists endorse a slightly weaker position. Instead of claiming that a collective black identity is necessary, they claim that, while perhaps not necessary for black solidarity, such an identity would create stronger bonds of unity. *Prima facie*, this seems quite plausible. Yet this weaker version is also unsound, as it is much more likely, at least presently, that the requirement of a common identity would weaken, if not undermine, black solidarity. There are a number of reasons for thinking this to be the case, some of which have already been reviewed.

For one thing, the push for a collective black identity would probably worsen existing intragroup antagonisms (recall the discussion from Chapter 3) and might even produce new ones. The types of internal conflict and competition among blacks that I have in mind would be likely to show up in several domains; here I mention four salient ones.

First, the imperative to conform to black culture would require individual blacks to possess the capacity to identify, if only implicitly and roughly, which elements are components of their culture and which are not. The problem is that there is no consensus on just what characteristics these are or on how they are to be distinguished from elements of white culture. In fact, what is culturally black is one of the most contested issues within the greater black population. Thus the question inevitably arises: Who has the authority and expertise to specify the content and define the parameters of black culture?

There is no black plural subject that can define itself culturally, only individual blacks who, perhaps working together or, more likely, struggling against one another, choose to cultivate this or that cultural identity—to take up various beliefs, values, practices, and modes of expression that they regard as “black.” Even among those who most earnestly seek to maintain black cultural integrity (perhaps especially among them), there is often intense disagree-

ment on just what elements constitute authentic black culture and which elements represent a bastardization or abandonment of the truly black. In light of this inevitable cultural friction, it is hard to imagine how an inclusive and democratic form of cultural autonomy could emerge. Should black Americans see themselves as essentially tied to Africa, and if so, what African culture(s) should be given privileged status? Can this shared identity include elements from European, Anglo-American, or Western culture and still be authentically black, or must it remain, in some sense, “pure”? How much, if any, of the cultural legacy of slavery—for example, southern Negro folk culture—should blacks embrace? Given historical migration patterns, should blacks from northeastern, West Coast, or midwestern urban centers or those with a southern sensibility be seen as more paradigmatically black? Should black identity be tied to a particular religious tradition, and if so, should this be Christianity, Islam, or some indigenous traditional African religion? Are there distinctively black norms of etiquette or black social values? Is there a black ethics, epistemology, or aesthetic? Are there uniquely black styles of dress, hairstyles, or modes of speech? While some of these are no doubt interesting questions, there is no reason to believe, and in fact every reason to doubt, that blacks can achieve anything like consensus on such matters. And the endless and often acrimonious disagreements over what constitutes the real meaning of blackness can easily become so all-consuming that blacks lose sight of the *sources* of their anxiety about who they are—such as anti-black racism, social exclusion, persistent racial inequality, and severe urban poverty—which should be the primary focus of their collective political energies.

Second, class differences among blacks will complicate any attempt to sustain a common black ethnocultural identity.²⁴ First of all, it is not clear that the black professional elite, the black middle class, the black working class, and the black urban poor share more cultural traits with each other as a group than they do with non-

blacks of their respective economic station and educational level. Moreover, for decades now there has been an ongoing contest between blacks of different socioeconomic status over who has the standing to define black identity; that is, over who is best positioned to have the authentic black experience and to represent “the race” in the public eye. It is also clear that the growing physical separation of the black middle class from the black urban poor—the former sometimes living in the suburbs and the latter mainly in central cities—is likely to exacerbate this conflict. Given the increasing intragroup stratification of blacks and the well-known correlation between class position and cultural identification, we can expect this internal struggle over the meaning of blackness to continue and perhaps intensify. Yet if blacks were to drop the requirement of a common ethnocultural identity, which as I have argued is not necessary for the success of pragmatic nationalism anyway, this might reduce the negative effects that class differences have on black solidarity. I say *reduce*, not eliminate, for class differences among blacks pose a real and serious threat to pragmatic nationalism. My main point here, though, is that insisting on a common black ethnocultural identity can only worsen this already challenging problem.

Third, the requirement of a common black identity would surely aggravate the antagonism between black men and black women over the meaning of blackness as it relates to gender and the family. Historically, the content of black identity, including gender roles and norms governing family structure, has largely been prescribed by black men—that is, when it wasn’t being defined by other ideological and structural forces within the larger society—most often leading to greater sacrifice and less freedom for black women. Moreover, the attempt to maintain a “positive” and cohesive group identity will likely have the effect, as it often has, of subordinating or ignoring the legitimate concerns of black women. Because black women are situated at the intersection of racial and sexist oppres-

sion, they have experiences and interests that are peculiar to their complex social condition.

But many black men fail to see, acknowledge, or take seriously these gendered experiences and interests. When black women voice, let alone attempt to aggressively deal with, their political concerns—such as sexual assault, domestic violence, inequality within the domestic sphere, degrading representations of women in the media, sexual and reproductive freedom, gender discrimination and harassment on the job, access to positions of leadership and authority—this is often wrongly seen as a divisive attempt to embarrass black men or as an imprudent move that threatens to worsen the public image of blacks. Rather than listening to black women and thinking of their concerns as integral to the freedom struggle, many black men have tried to silence them and have remained complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchy, often in the name of “unity.” Given the prevalence of sexist attitudes and behavior among black men (and even some women), and the continuing unequal power relations between the sexes, male-centered conceptions of blackness are likely to predominate, though not, of course, without resistance. Witness, for example, the mixed reaction among black Americans, and especially black women, to the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court or to the call for a Million Man March on Washington. Though black feminist perspectives are growing in influence, even among some black men, until greater strides are made against (black) male hegemony, a shared and progressive view of what it means to be black is unlikely to develop.²⁵

And fourth, there is a generational divide that can only be made worse by insisting that all blacks share an ethnocultural identity. Many of those who came of age during the civil rights era have a different understanding of what it means to be culturally black than those who grew up after Jim Crow was abolished. This is most evident in the intense intergenerational disagreement over the value and positive or negative influence of hip-hop culture.²⁶ Some of

this disagreement is political. Some blacks contest the political content of rap lyrics and the images seen in music videos and hip-hop-inspired advertisements. Many feel that hip-hop representations degrade women, glorify violence, belittle the value of education, make light of drug abuse, reproduce pathological behavior, and reinforce negative stereotypes about blacks. Those who identify with the culture believe that it affirms women's sexual freedom, accurately depicts the grim realities of ghetto life, critiques a failing school system, highlights the hypocrisy of the war on drugs, provides a soul-preserving source of comfort in impoverished conditions, and furnishes black youth with an identity that is not beholden to the politics of respectability. Such debate is healthy and, in any case, unavoidable if black political solidarity is to be sustained in the post-civil rights era. Some of the generational conflict surrounding hip-hop culture is simply aesthetic: blacks have sharply divergent views about whether the culture contains beauty and genuine artistry. Debate over such questions can also be healthy—and fun. Yet consensus on the aesthetic worth of hip hop is not on the horizon.

However, all blacks have a vested interest in racial equality, regardless of their cultural identification, class position, gender, or age (though the urgency with which one pursues racial justice will likely depend on, among other things, whether one also suffers under class subordination, male domination, both, or neither). And given their common classification as thinly black, blacks can identify with each other across these differences, for they share the susceptibility to antiblack racism that this classification makes possible. As Du Bois often emphasized, recognition of this common interest and mutual identification can lend much-needed motivational strength to a morally based, joint commitment to ending racism, especially when it is accompanied by the special concern, loyalty, and trust that are characteristic of solidarity. Moreover, as Orlando Patterson has argued, though both blacks and whites have

an interest in overcoming racism and racial antagonism, blacks must play a larger part in bringing this about, not only because they stand to gain more from it, but because whites have much less to lose from the status quo.²⁷

It is doubtful that blacks will ever come to consensus on the meaning of "blackness." Though the quest for collective self-definition may not be an entirely futile one, blacks cannot afford to rest their hopes for racial justice on its success. And they certainly should not postpone the collective effort to bring about such justice until they secure this elusive common identity. Blacks can and should agree, in the present, to collectively resist racial injustice, not only because it is the morally responsible thing to do but also because it negatively affects them all, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways. Mobilizing and coordinating this effort will be difficult enough without adding the unnecessary and divisive requirement that blacks embrace and preserve a distinctive ethnocultural identity.

One final reason to doubt that a common identity would contribute to black solidarity and thus to the elimination of racial injustice is that if blacks were to push for a thicker collective identity, this would strain their already delicate bonds of unity. For although most blacks believe in the struggle for racial equality and the value of black communal relations, they also value the freedom to choose their cultural affiliations and to decide on their own conception of human flourishing.²⁸ If there is group pressure to conform to some prototype of blackness, which collective identity theory would seem to require, this would likely create "core" and "fringe" subgroups, thus alienating those on the fringe and providing them with an incentive to defect from the collective effort. Those who only marginally fit the black prototype may feel that accepting a conventional black identity is unduly burdensome and consequently may only halfheartedly participate, if at all, in the black fight against racism, especially if by acting alone they can manage, perhaps through their

superior class position, to escape some of the more severe forms of racial injustice. Thus, a prescribed black identity could have the unintended consequence of inviting blacks who do not identify with the prevailing conception of blackness to protest against black intolerance, to form alternative alliances, to become egoistic, or to be simply complacent.

At this point, a critic might ask: But what about the assimilated black who has rejected his black identity in favor of a white persona and cultural lifestyle; can other blacks in the collective struggle really trust him when he shows no loyalty to black culture? The answer depends on how he conducts himself in other contexts, especially those that bear directly on the struggle for racial justice. Granted, sometimes when a black person chooses not to identify with black culture, this is accompanied by a lack of identification with the struggle against racial injustice. And cultural identification has long been a test of group loyalty and critical consciousness among blacks, as many realize that some among them will inevitably attempt to escape the stigma of blackness by taking on cultural attributes associated with “respectable” whites. Though this sometimes happens, especially among elites, it would be unjustified to presume that every time a black person adopts a “white” cultural identity, he or she is effectively lost to the struggle.

Sometimes nonblack modes of self-presentation are taken up so that the person can gain entry into institutions and social environments dominated by whites. Sometimes such a person was not socialized into black culture to begin with, and so is not presenting a persona at all. Sometimes she may simply find an alternative cultural identity more intrinsically appealing. And sometimes she may be operating with an unconventional though no less valid interpretation of blackness. As I argued earlier, we cannot simply infer a lack of loyalty and trustworthiness from the fact that a person does not define herself in terms of black culture. Many so-called assimilated blacks have played important roles in the struggle against rac-

ism, and it would be unreasonable and insulting to doubt their commitment to black solidarity simply because they did not embrace what some define as an appropriate black ethnocultural identity. As Bernard Boxill wisely reminds us (though his black trope is now somewhat dated), “it is false and vicious to infer that every assimilated black, or every black-skinned writer or poet who does not display ‘soul,’ is imitative and servile.”²⁹ In short, the cultural test of group loyalty often produces false negatives.

The fact is, a person can show loyalty to the cause of black liberation and thus her trustworthiness as an ally in black resistance to racism through ways other than cultural identification. She can, for example, work to help ensure that the next generation of blacks has a lighter burden of racial oppression than the present one. Such work and protest against racism and its legacy should be sufficient to eliminate any suspicion that might arise due to the person’s lack of black cultural identification. If the person were truly self-hating and servile, then she would be unlikely to openly struggle and sacrifice to advance the interests of the very group whose abject status is the source of her self-contempt. Blacks should be careful not to reject potential allies on the ground that these persons do not share their ethnocultural identity. It is much more important, indeed critical, that race-conscious blacks seek solidarity with others who share their antiracist values, along with their commitment to eliminating racial oppression and the social problems it causes.

Virtues of Pluralism and Inclusiveness

One response to these considerations is to insist that there already exists an inclusive and widely shared black identity and thus that blacks need only preserve it. Yet this claim is simply implausible. Blacks, taken in the thin sense, are an ethnically and culturally diverse group. This diversity includes differences in physical appearance, language, customs, religion, political outlook, moral values, aesthetic tastes, cuisine, fashion, traditions, national origin, and

more.³⁰ The cultural and ethnic diversity of blacks should be especially obvious once we consider the various cultural traits embraced by recent black immigrants from Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Caribbean. These other communities of African descent are themselves subject to antiblack prejudice in the United States and beyond. One could of course mean to include under “black identity” *all* of the cultural traits that are embraced and reproduced by blacks. This, however, would have the effect of rendering collective identity theory vacuous, because blacks cannot help taking on cultural traits of one sort or another, and therefore the imperative to “conserve blackness” would have no prescriptive force—it would not require blacks to do anything but literally “be themselves.” If we view everything that black people do as “black,” then blackness becomes a matter of ontology, sinking us right back into the quicksand of essentialism from which we should be actively trying to escape.

Alternatively, one might argue that it is possible to construct a pluralistic and nuanced conception of black identity, rather than a monolithic and unduly restrictive one. Again, this may be true. Yet no matter where one sets the boundaries of thick blackness, if it is meaningful enough to have normative, and not merely descriptive, force, some blacks will be left out or forced into submission. The collective identity theorist might not be troubled by this result, because he may insist that not all blacks are needed in the struggle against antiblack racism and some, if not most, will be indifferent to the fight for racial justice anyway. However, as was discussed in Chapter 2, we cannot determine on the basis of cultural identification alone who will or won’t be willing to make such a solidaristic commitment. Thus it is more reasonable to be as inclusive as is consistent with the basic goals of such unity, as there is power in numbers. Indeed, it may turn out that the least “black” among us are among those most dedicated to the cause of racial justice, despite the widespread assumption to the contrary.³¹ In any case, in-

sisting on a specific conception of black identity, regardless of how pluralistic it is taken to be, is still vulnerable to the criticisms raised earlier against an essentialist discourse of black authenticity: blacks will find themselves in an unnecessary, contentious, distracting, and interminable debate over what counts as “black” and who will decide.

But let us suppose that cultivating a collective black identity were a realistic possibility for the near future. It might nevertheless be too dangerous to try to bring this about, for it is possible to go too far in creating group cohesiveness. The attempt to forge a collective black identity could unwittingly produce a groupthink mentality. The symptoms of groupthink include such things as collective efforts to rationalize the group’s subordinate condition; social pressure on fellow members who reject in-group or out-group stereotypes; self-censorship of deviations from some presumed group consensus; and allegiance to ideologues who screen the group from information that might threaten its self-image. Striving to create a shared black identity could lead to this uncritical and often unconscious drive for unanimity and positive self-conception. This would have disastrous consequences for the cause of black liberation, by engendering defective collective decision-making, such as assuming that traditional solutions to black oppression must be correct; failing to reconsider initially discarded strategies or programs of action; dismissing criticisms of conventional narratives and goals; and ignoring social-scientific analyses that diverge from black common sense. Blacks must avoid these pitfalls, but unfortunately they have not always done so.³²

One such pitfall deserves further comment. Many conceptions of black identity include, if only implicitly, an account of the nature of black oppression. In the black nationalist tradition, these narratives generally emphasize the pervasiveness of white supremacy. The legacy of slavery and current racism are treated as the primary obstacles to black flourishing, and shared narratives about racial

oppression are reproduced as a part of black cultural heritage. To the extent that this cultural inheritance is embraced as an essential core of black identity itself, it could prove to be a self-imposed obstacle to black emancipation. Thus, for example, when a person accepts a particular analysis of the black condition *as a black person*—as a feature of who he *is* and not just what he believes—this can lead him to be stubbornly resistant to changing his view of the nature and causes of the black condition in the face of overwhelming evidence. To change his mind about such fundamental social matters would be to him (though he may not consciously recognize it as such) not just a shift in opinion based on evidence but a tragic loss of self-identity, which few are willing to consider, let alone seriously countenance. Now when a whole community accepts a particular analysis of their collective condition as a necessary component of who they are *as a people*, this can make it extremely difficult for them to reevaluate their shared standing or to recognize differences in standing between the various subgroups within the community. The point here is that an uncritical attachment to a particular conception of blackness where this includes a common narrative about the social status and material conditions of the group can undermine the group's ability to arrive at an objective assessment of their shared problems and possible solutions. Given the need to distinguish between the impact on blacks' life prospects of current racism, historical racism, and nonracial social dynamics, it is essential that blacks not embrace a collective ethnocultural identity that collapses these distinctions or misconstrues their current significance.

What must be recognized here is that “blackness,” as a modality or child of “race,” is an ideological construct that African-descended peoples have inherited as a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Like many such constructs, including “nation” and “ethnicity,” it is extremely malleable and capacious, and so blacks have naturally fought—sometimes with their oppressors, some-

times with each other—to remold it to suit their own purposes. Consequently, blackness can be, and has been, given multiple meanings, which vary with the interpreters, their motives for using the notion, and the social circumstances. Thus, despite the obvious practical significance of the label *black*, agreement on its positive meaning must be limited to the claim that there are a number of loosely associated and variously interpreted *black identities*. The one link that often does exist between these multiple identities, however, is that many of them have been formed in an antiblack social environment, and each, in its own way, will likely bear the marks of race-based ill treatment. Yet the aim of black political solidarity should not be to discover the essential group-affirming core of all modalities of blackness, but to release all of these identities from racial stigma.

Paul Gilroy has advocated a conception of black identity based on a set of loosely related narratives that, according to him, have been produced in response to the experience of transatlantic black oppression. The multiple and globally dispersed practices that reproduce these stories can be viewed as constituting a sort of “tradition,” which all blacks may identify with and participate in. Such an account, if adequate, could allow us to speak intelligibly and somewhat concretely of “black identities.” However, such a conception of black identity would be of little help to the collective identity theorist, for at least two reasons. First, as Gilroy emphasizes, the Black Atlantic tradition is not rooted in a particular culture or ethnic heritage but is transnational, syncretic, unstable, and always mutating. Part of this lack of “purity” has to do with the inclusion of many European, Anglo-American, and Latin American cultural forms and modes of expression. Thus, although blacks can identify with and lay claim to the Black Atlantic tradition, so can many whites. Second, the Black Atlantic tradition, as Gilroy conceives of it, is nonessentialist. Therefore, there is nothing built into the content or structure of the tradition that determines who can or should

identify with it or how any individual should relate to it. A black person who does not identify with it is not thereby inauthentic, and one may appreciate its depth, value, and beauty without necessarily defining one's identity in terms of it. Given the abstract and inclusive nature of the Black Atlantic tradition, there is room for many black identities and no basis for insisting on any one of them as the "real" social identity of blacks.

Although I find the idea of a Black Atlantic cultural tradition appealing, for the reasons given above I would stop short of including it as a necessary component of contemporary black American political engagement. I would urge blacks living in the United States, and by extension those in other parts of the world, to identify with each other on the basis of their experience of racial oppression and commitment to collectively resist it. From the standpoint of black political solidarity, each should be allowed to interpret "blackness" however he or she sees fit, provided the interpretation does not advocate anything immoral and is consistent with the collective struggle for racial justice.³³ In saying this, I am not suggesting, as some have, that individual blacks should give up their various black identities in favor of an American, a cosmopolitan, or simply a "human" identity. Though there should be more mindfulness of the dangers and limitations of "blackness," I see no reason to object to blacks identifying with what they regard as their ethnocultural heritage. What I resist is the tendency to think that blacks must *share* a distinctive black identity if they are to be a unified force against racial injustice.

Is Thin Blackness Too Thin?

The advocate of collective identity theory might object as follows: Surely a black solidarity that focuses on resisting racial oppression must at least require that blacks identify with their *thin* blackness, for without such a common identity they will lack a stable foundation for mutual identification. Yet this objection fails. Consider the

following variant of the well-worn but still instructive witch analogy.³⁴ Historically, for example, in medieval Europe and in Salem, Massachusetts, in the late seventeenth century, the trial and subsequent punishment of “witches” was ostensibly based on the claim that the accused had communed with the forces of the underworld. Though this accusation was certainly unfounded, these so-called witches nevertheless suffered a common fate. Now let us suppose for a moment that some of the accused really did practice witchcraft—that they engaged in sorcery, sought to conspire with the Devil, surreptitiously corrupted good Christians, and so on. Suppose further that, at various points, some of their number, for whatever reason, ceased practicing witchcraft and no longer self-identified as “witches.” And finally, suppose that at least some of these practitioners of witchcraft believed that there were some among them who were *frauds*, not “real” witches, according to some commonly accepted criteria for being a witch or according to some more controversial and strict criteria. Despite all this, it seems clear that all of these erstwhile, quasi, pseudo-, and would-be witches could have shared bonds of solidarity with each other, not based on their common affirmation of a “witch identity” (for *ex hypothesi* the existence of a *shared* identity was in doubt), but based on their common persecution. For purposes of collective resistance to unjust persecution, they simply could have put aside the question of who was and who was not an authentic witch and focused their attention and energy on overcoming their common plight.

Black solidarity could have, and should have, an analogous foundation. Just as a common belief in the value of “black magic” is not a necessary foundation for “witch” resistance to their unjust persecution, a shared belief in the value of a common “black identity” is not needed to ground “black” solidarity against racial domination. The basis of blacks’ group identification is not their attachment to their thin black identity but rather their shared experience with antiblack racism and their mutual commitment to ending it.

Blacks need only recognize that part of the reason they often suffer mistreatment is that others see them as thickly black (their thin blackness being merely a “sign” of a deeper difference), and this racialized perception leads their oppressors to devalue them.³⁵ Identification between members of the racially oppressed group can therefore be based on their common recognition of this sad and disturbing fact. It would not undermine black solidarity if the physical and genealogical characteristics that constitute their thin blackness, apart from the unjust treatment that they engender, were to have no intrinsic significance for the members of the united oppressed group. Once a racially just social order is achieved, thin blackness may in fact lose all social and political significance.

Some might suggest that even this stripped-down common-oppression theory commits itself to a version of the collective identity view, for despite its pretensions to have transcended identity politics, it nevertheless endorses the cultivation of a thick collective black identity: it urges blacks to see themselves as racially oppressed. This shared identity is based not on race, ethnicity, nationality, or culture, but on the common experience of antiblack racism. Thus, those blacks who are united by ties of solidarity will still have a collective identity, and one that is not reducible to their political principles. This identity might aptly be described as “victims of antiblack racial oppression.”

One response to this objection is to simply concede it; that is, we could accept that the one “thick” collective black identity that continues to be a realistic possibility is constituted by victim status in an antiblack social world. This approach to the meaning of blackness is not self-defeating or divisive like the other conceptions considered, because the vast majority of blacks rightly accept that antiblack racism continues to exist (though of course they have no wish to preserve the conditions under which an oppression-based identity would be advantageous or desirable).³⁶ Such an identity would

not gratuitously add to individual unfreedom, for it is nonracialist and perfectly consistent with tolerance for ethnocultural diversity. Moreover, blacks should not have to go to great lengths to cultivate this identity, for regrettably there is more than enough antiblack sentiment and discrimination still around to sustain it—though, admittedly, it may be necessary to convince some people of the depth of the problem.³⁷ But this view of “blackness” would not give the collective identity theorist all that he or she wants, for the search for a collective black identity has generally been a struggle to discover or construct a *positive* social identity, one that could be a basis for pride, dignity, and collective self-affirmation. A common identity based on nothing more than the shared experience of racism cannot provide such an identity, for this would, perversely, treat victimhood as something to be proud of—which is not, of course, to say that it is something blacks ought to be ashamed of (see Chapter 2).

Some might argue that a collective identity constituted by a shared oppressed condition can be seen to be positive and group-affirming if viewed from a black theological perspective, say, Christian or Muslim.³⁸ On this view, God embraces blacks *because* they are oppressed; and he is concerned to help them liberate themselves from their evil oppressors. However, the positive dimension of this kind of blackness is surely derived, not from the oppression itself, but from the virtue associated with the steadfast pursuit of truth and justice *despite* being oppressed and/or from the promise that, through faith and collective struggle, blacks will ultimately be delivered from that oppression. If God did not love what is good and hate what is evil, or if he could help liberate blacks from undeserved domination but did not, then they could hardly take just pride in being “chosen” by him. Yet even if black theology could find in black oppression something to be proud of, a theological account of this sort will not resonate with all blacks, because not all

are religious. At best, then, “victims of antiblack racial oppression” could be a positive identity for some. Thus, blacks clearly need a nonsectarian basis for their political solidarity.

Is Pragmatic Black Solidarity (Still) Too Black?

Some will surely wonder why *black* solidarity is needed at all, especially because racism is not unique to the experience of blacks and, as has been emphasized throughout this book, solidarity between antiracist blacks and nonblacks is both possible and necessary. Should we not just reject black solidarity and embrace interracial, antiracist solidarity instead? Anthony Appiah, for example, raises this kind of objection against Du Bois’s conception of racial solidarity.³⁹

Although blacks should surely work with antiracist nonblacks against racism and other forms of social injustice, there is no principled reason why blacks must give up their solidaristic commitment to each other to do so. The two forms of solidarity are not mutually exclusive. There is room for nested and overlapping forms of antiracist solidarity, just as there is space for more or less exclusive and inclusive collective struggles at other sites of oppression, such as class, gender, culture, and sexuality. Broader forms of antiracist solidarity and coalition building should be cultivated, but there are several reasons why it is prudent for blacks to hold on to their narrower commitment to each other as well, at least for the time being.

First, antiblack racial injustice—like anti-Semitism, anti-Asian racism, the oppression of American Indians, the denial of equal citizenship to Latino groups, and the more recent profiling and harassment of Arab Americans—has features that make it unique as a form of racial subjection in the United States. The enslavement and brutalization of Africans in the New World, the subsequent exclusion of blacks from the mainstream of American civic, economic,

and social life, and the peculiar content of antiblack racist ideology, with its images of blacks as lazy, stupid, incompetent, hypersexual, and disposed to gratuitous acts of violence, have combined to give antiblack race prejudice a distinctive character among American forms of racism. There are also severe social problems—joblessness, alarmingly high rates of incarceration, concentrated poverty, failing schools, a violent drug trade—that plague some black communities and that are partly the result of past and present racial discrimination against black people in particular. Although a joint commitment to fighting racial injustice in all its forms can help create interracial solidarity, it is often the shared experience of *specific* forms of racial injustice that creates the strongest motivation to act and the most enduring bonds among victims of racism.⁴⁰ This additional motivational impetus is needed to overcome the moral complacency and conservative resistance that inhibit political reform in the racial arena, a political momentum that cannot be achieved by mere abstract calls for greater social justice.⁴¹

Second, the black experience with racism in America makes it difficult for many blacks to fully trust nonblacks when it comes to fighting against racism, for they have too often been victimized by the racism of nonblacks, even by some who are racially oppressed themselves. What is more, other ethnoracial minority groups have solidaristic commitments of their own, which have sometimes been used to exploit the economic and political disadvantages of African Americans as a group. And whites in power sometimes favor these other groups over blacks, creating resentment and competition between minority groups. In light of this, it should be clear that many black Americans justifiably feel the need to protect themselves against the dangers that may result from competing group loyalties and group interests. A unilateral laying down of solidaristic arms, as it were, would needlessly increase black vulnerability to marginalization. Thus, on pragmatic grounds, blacks should maintain

their political solidarity with each other while simultaneously cultivating greater bonds of unity with progressive members of other racial groups.

Finally, the common experience of antiblack racism has for centuries provided a firm and well-recognized basis for mutual identification and special concern among blacks. This shared experience partially accounts for the bonds that exist today, for blacks understand one another's burdens and empathize with each other on this basis. In light of this common understanding and identification, the legacy of collective struggle to remove this burden is a cherished inheritance for many black Americans. As we seek to establish stronger interracial forms of solidarity in our fight against social injustice, we should not underestimate or devalue the social bond among blacks. Historically, it has been a great source of strength and hope, and a highly effective means for mobilizing the population to work for social justice. I believe that it can, and should, continue to do so. In holding out this hope, however, I am not suggesting that black collective action, founded on pragmatic black solidarity, would be sufficient to eliminate racism. Indeed, it might be that nothing blacks do, even with the help of members from other ethnoracial groups, will end antiblack racism.⁴² Perhaps the most that can be realistically hoped for, at least in the foreseeable future, is that black solidarity affords blacks a limited form of collective self-defense against some of the more burdensome kinds of racial injustice. But this, I should think, would be sufficient to make the effort worthwhile.