

WHY SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISTS SHOULD EMBRACE MINIMALIST RACE

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ABSTRACT: My thesis is that social constructionists should embrace minimalist race. By this I mean they should accept the minimalist concept of race and the existence of minimalist races. They are likely to reject this suggestion because they are antirealists about biological race. But their antirealism about biological race is based on their identification of the biological concept of race with the racialist concept of race. The minimalist concept of race is free of the invidious features that make the racialist concept objectionable. It represents race as ancestry marked by patterns of visible physical differences. The reasons social constructionists have to reject the racialist concept of race do not extend to the minimalist concept of race. Social constructionists should accept that minimalist races exist, because it is overwhelmingly plausible that such races exist. Furthermore, they need minimalist races to account for the biological correlate of social race and to secure the biological materials the project of social construction requires.

My thesis is that social constructionists should embrace *minimalist race*. By this I mean they should accept *the minimalist concept of race* and the *existence of minimalist races*. In section 1, I explain why social constructionists are likely to resist this suggestion, why the reasons they have for rejecting the racialist concept of race do not extend to the minimalist concept, and why it is overwhelmingly plausible that minimalist races do, in fact, exist. In the second

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section, I consider the specific reasons that social constructionists in particular have for accepting minimalist race. I argue they need the existence of minimalist races to account for the biological correlate of social race and provide the biological materials their project of social construction requires. In section 3, I consider ways in which social constructionists might resist the existence of minimalist races and argue that these lines of resistance fail. Section 4 concludes by considering where this account leaves social constructionism.

I

The suggestion that social constructionists should embrace minimalist race may strike you as absurd. The concept of minimalist race, you will recall, holds that a race is a group of human beings:

- (M1) that, as a group is distinguished from other groups of human beings by patterns of visible physical features,
- (M2) whose members are linked by common ancestry peculiar to members of the group, and
- (M3) that originates from a distinctive geographic location.¹

It is not hard to see why social constructionists would be reluctant to accept a concept of this sort. Social constructionism itself can be understood as the conjoint view that

- (1) biological races do not exist
- and
- (2) socially constructed races do exist.

It is clear from (1) that social constructionism is not *just* a thesis about social race. It is *also* a thesis about biological race. Social constructionism, in its standard form, is a type of *antirealism* about biological race. It is inconsistent with a biological ontology of race.²

¹ Michael O. Hardimon, *Rethinking Race: The Case for Deflationary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 31.

² Adam Hochman's contention that social constructionism properly understood *is* compatible with a biological ontology of race presupposes that social constructionism is properly understood along the revisionary lines that I suggest it should be understood in this paper. Adam Hochman "Replacing Race: Interactive Constructionism about Racialized Groups," *Ergo* 4, no. 3 (2017): 63.

And there's the rub. Minimalist races are *biological* in a recognizable sense of the term. The elements that belong to their constitutive patterns of visible physical features, such as skin pigmentation, nose shape, and head form are biological. Minimalist races come into being through biological processes and without such processes could not continue to exist. Social constructionists' commitment to antirealism about biological race precludes them from accepting minimalist race.

But if we pause to look the *basis* of this commitment—namely, their understanding of the biological concept of race—something interesting comes to light. Social constructionists tacitly identify *the* biological race concept with the pernicious, empirically refuted, traditional, hierarchical, and essentialist concept of race—the race concept that conceives of races as groups of human beings who possess distinct biological essences that result in intellectual and characterological differences that make some races superior to others—the race concept that, as Tommie Shelby puts it, “attaches social meaning to visible inherited physical characteristics, continental origins, and biological ancestry.”³ It is the specific race concept I call the *racialist* concept of race. Now the crucial thing about this particular race concept is that it is *not* the only possible biological race concept. The minimalist concept is another.

The minimalist concept of race is free of the invidious features that makes the racialist concept objectionable. It does not posit the existence of a racial essence. Nor does it posit a correlation between visible physical features and normatively important features such as morality, intelligence, or sexuality. It does not rank races on a scale of inferiority to superiority or in any other way. It does not specify *any* ground on the basis of which races could be ranked. Nor does it specify a ground that could justify differential treatment of members of different races. It does not purport to explain human behavior. It does not attach social meaning to visible inherited physical characteristics, continental origins, or biological ancestry. It does not attach *any* meaning to these items. It is a nonracist, nonmalefic biological race concept.

Furthermore, the minimalist concept allows that skin pigmentation can vary as much within a race as between races. It requires no particular degree of genetic differentiation between minimalist races beyond the modicum of differentiation that accounts for the differences in visible physical features. It does not require that the portion of human genetic diversity that falls between races be larger than the portion of human genetic diversity that falls within them. It does not require that the portion of human genetic diversity that falls within races be smaller than the

³ Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 23.

portion of human genetic diversity that falls between them. It is compatible with the finding that there are few genetic differences between races and many genetic differences within them. The minimalist concept of race is a maximally thin biological concept.

The minimalist concept says that racehood—a group’s being a biological race—consists in its being an ancestry group that exhibits a distinctive pattern of visible physical characteristics, which is to say a distinctive pattern of phenotypes. What should be emphasized is that differences in geographical ancestry are no less essential to minimalist race than differences in patterns of visible physical features. Minimalist races belong to distinctive biological lines of descent initiated by geographically separated and reproductively isolated founding populations. Their distinctive patterns of visible physical differences reflect their distinctive geographical ancestries. These patterns are *marks* of these ancestries.

When we consider the reasons social constructionists have for rejecting the racialist concept, we find that they do not extend to minimalist race. Social constructionists could consistently affirm the existence of social races and the nonexistence of racialist races—and allow the existence of minimalist races. But it is one thing to say that social constructionists *can* consistently allow that minimalist races exist and another to say they *should*. The crucial question then becomes: Do social constructionists have a good reason to accept minimalist race?

It will come as no surprise that I think that they do. There are actually a number of them. The first is simply that it is overwhelmingly plausible that minimalist races exist. To see this, start with the evident fact that human beings exhibit patterns of visible physical features that correspond to differences in geographical ancestry. This is a point antirealists accept. As Joshua Glasgow (in his own antirealist period) reminds us “most antirealists [about race] are reasonable people. We acknowledge that people look different from one another and have ancestors who came from different places.”⁴ There are cases in which *this* configuration of *this* pigmentation together with *this* eye shape and *this* hair type corresponds to ancestry in *this* region. There are other cases in which this *other* configuration of this *other* pigmentation together with this *other* eye shape and this *other* hair type corresponds to ancestry in this *other* region. And so forth. Who doubts that?

In a similar vein, cultural constructionist Chike Jeffers notes, “it simply is the case that you can often look at a person and tell what part of the world

⁴ Joshua Glasgow, *A Theory of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 86.

the person's recent ancestors are from."⁵ This claim requires qualification. Some individuals are phenotypically anomalous. Some have ancestry tracing back to more than one subcontinental region. The pattern of visible physical features that correspond to a particular region may be unfamiliar. The geographical region associated with a familiar pattern of visible physical features may not be familiar. But none of these caveats undercuts the truth of Jeffers's point about the possibility of seeing where people come from. That is something we can do. And the reason is: human beings exhibit patterns of visible physical features that correspond to geographical ancestry.

We can get *from* the existence of these patterns *to* the existence of minimalist races by noting that the patterns are exhibited by *groups*. Recall that the minimalist concept of race is a group-level concept that specifies the conditions a group must satisfy to be counted as a minimalist race. *If* there are human groups that satisfy these conditions, minimalist races exist.

The antirealist Kwame Anthony Appiah allows there are such groups: groups "defined by skin color, hair, and gross morphology corresponding to the dominant patterns for these characteristics in the major subcontinental regions: Europe, Africa, East and South Asia, the Americas, and perhaps the Pacific Islands."⁶ Appiah, of course, denies that these groups are *races*, on the ground that they do not satisfy the conditions of the racist concept of race, which he identifies with *the* concept of race. But the relevant point for our purposes is that he accepts that there are groups satisfying the conditions of minimalist race. That is to say: he accepts the existence of the sort of groups I call "minimalist races."

My own preferred list of minimalist races consists of: Western Eurasians (the group formerly known as Caucasians), sub-Saharan Africans, East Asians, and Amerindians. Each has its own distinctive pattern of visible physical features that corresponds to its geographical origin. Each is what Quayshawn Spencer calls a "human continental populations."⁷ Aboriginal Australians very likely also constitute a minimalist race. I no longer think

⁵ Chike Jeffers, "Hardimon's Deflationary Realism: A Constructionist Critique," 1.

⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in *Color Consciousness: The Political Morality*, by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 73, 74.

⁷ Quayshawn Spencer, "How to be a Biological Racial Realist," in *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views*, eds. Joshua Glasgow, Sally Haslanger, Chike Jeffers, and Quayshawn Spencer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 99.

Pacific Islanders constitute a single minimalist race, since this group includes both Melanesians and Polynesians, who exhibit markedly different patterns of visible physical features.⁸

I do not claim—or think—that my list is complete. But the very idea of a “complete” taxonomy of minimalist races is problematic. Perhaps the biggest reason for this is that the minimalist concept is vague. Unlike the racialist concept of race, it does not require sharp boundaries between minimalist races. It allows that the lines separating the different patterns of visible physical features distinguishing minimalist races may be blurry and that the same is true of the lines separating the regions associated with different minimalist races. Minimalist races—the actual groups satisfying (M1)–(M3) have blurry boundaries. This is a basic fact about the biological kind *minimalist race*.

The conceit that races are, necessarily, sharply distinguished discrete groups is a throwback to the obsolete racialist concept of race. Rather than thinking that groups must have clearly defined boundaries to count as races, we should allow that the boundaries of races may be blurry. If minimalist race is a biological category and not a racist fiction, we should not expect to find the determinateness promised by the racialist concept of race. Nature is seldom tidy in that way.⁹

Because the minimalist concept is vague, there is no objectively fixed determinate number that is *the* number of minimalist races. How many minimalist races there are, will be a function of how finely one cares to individuate them.¹⁰ This, in turn, will depend on one’s practical and theoretical interests. Just as there are lumpers and splitters with respect to species, so there will be lumpers and splitters in connection with minimalist race. We do not regard the indeterminacy in the number of species to be grounds for rejecting the existence of species. We should not take the indeterminacy of the number of minimalist races to be grounds for rejecting the existence of minimalist races.

One striking feature of the minimalist concept is that it allows for the possibility of races within races. If G_1 and G_2 are subgroups of minimalist race MR that (a) exhibit slight variations in the patterns of visible physical characters of MR and (b) originate from different geographical regions within the aboriginal territory of MR, then G_1 and G_2 will, like MR, be minimalist races.

⁸ Cf. Hardimon *Rethinking Race*, 54, 121.

⁹ I owe this last suggestion to Aaron Chipp-Miller.

¹⁰ For an argument that the process of racial subdivision cannot be continued to a point at which race becomes the equivalent of a local population, see Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*, 53.

It is possible that Han and Japanese constitute smaller minimalist races within the larger minimalist race East Asian. If so, Han and Japanese constitute parts of a single minimalist race at a higher level of racial division and two separate minimalist races at a lower level of racial division.

Some philosophers find the idea of nested races counterintuitive. But it was not uncommon for traditional theorists of race to distinguish major and minor races, with the minor races contained within the major races, so the idea is not novel.¹¹ The idea *is* at odds with the metanotion (as we might call it) that races should be found at one fully determinate taxonomic level. But the idea of race as a single, tidy taxonomic level does not fit with the reality of minimalist race.

A further point. It is just not true that, if you started walking away from Norway in 1491, you would see a perfectly neat gradual continuum of change in the visible physical features that figure in the pattern of such features characteristic of races.¹² You would, on the contrary, see big jumps corresponding to the oceans, the Himalayas, and the Saharan Desert, which functioned as barriers to reproduction.¹³ But it is certainly true that most variation in the visible physical features that figure in minimalist race is gradual, the kind of variation biologists call “clinal.” But the minimalist concept, unlike the racialist concept, is fully compatible with the clinality of most racial variation. Rather than saying, with physical anthropologist Frank Livingstone, that “there are no races, only clines,” we can say racial variation is mostly clinal.¹⁴

Now if we combine: (i) the vagueness of the minimalist race concept, (ii) the blurriness of the boundaries of minimalist races, (iii) the clinality of racial variation, and (iv) the superficiality of the biological features in terms of which minimalist race is defined with (v) what we know about the genetic homogeneity of the human species, it becomes clear that minimalist race is a *relatively superficial biological phenomenon*. In contrast to the racialist concept, which is the concept of a Very Important Biological Phenomenon (that does not exist), the minimalist concept is the concept of

¹¹ Thus, for example, Hegel held that the racial group he called “Caucasians” could be subdivided into two smaller races, which he called Asiatics (Western Eurasians living to the east of Europe) and Europeans (Western Eurasians living in Europe). G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. v. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 43.

¹² Joshua Glasgow attributes this idea to Joseph Graves in “Is Race an Illusion or a (Very) Basic Reality” in *What is Race*, 118.

¹³ I owe this observation to Chike Jeffers, private correspondence.

¹⁴ Frank B. Livingstone, “On the Non-existence of Human Races,” *Current Anthropology* 3, no. 3 (June 1962): 280.

a biological phenomenon that exists but is not that biologically important. Minimalist race is not a fundamental division within the human species.

It is not, however, the case that minimalist race lacks biological significance altogether. Minimalist race plays a role in the explanation of how the human species came to occupy the range of climatically different regions of the globe in which it is found. Furthermore, some differences in susceptibility to disease and responsiveness to drugs may be associated with minimalist race.¹⁵ But the minimalist concept of race is not and does not pretend to be a central category of biology. Its job is to grasp a superficial biological division. *Minimalist race* is a relatively superficial biological kind.

When we look closely at minimalist race, we discover that the phenomenon of race is very different from what the racialist concept of race leads us to expect it to be. But rather than inferring that there are no races (since there are no racialist races) we should simply conclude that biological race is not what we expected it to be.

Observation. One well-known basic fact about empirical concepts is that their referents may turn out to be remarkably different from what they were initially taken to be. Take the empirical concept ATOM.¹⁶ Atoms were once thought of as indivisible entities, but empirical investigation revealed that the atom can be split. Just as the discovery that atoms are divisible represented a discursive advance in thinking about atoms, so the discovery that races have blurry boundaries and do not constitute a tidy, taxonomic level represents a discursive advance in thinking about race.

None of these caveats or complications should lead one to doubt that groups satisfying (M1)–(M3)—which to say the kind of groups I call “minimalist races”—actually exist. To deny that groups of this sort exist is to deny the obvious.

II

This obviousness—the obviousness of the existence of minimalist races—constitutes a reason for everyone—not just social constructionists—to accept that minimalist races exist. So, we can ask: Are there reasons for accepting their existence that are *specific to social constructionism*? Reasons that flow out of social constructionism itself?

¹⁵ I discuss this at greater length in chapter 8, “Health, Race, Medicine,” of *Rethinking Race*, 150–68.

¹⁶ I follow the convention of using SMALL CAPS to refer to concept.

Here again I think the answer is yes.

Social constructionists who are careful are at pains not to deny the existence of biological differences associated with social race. Adam Hochman correctly observes that, “social constructionism about race is the view that our racial categories are predominately determined by social factors, even though some of their inclusion criteria will be biological.”¹⁷ Likewise, Lisa Gannet is right to point out that, for the constructionist, “race is socially constructed by enlisting biological differences and investing these with socio-cultural meanings.”¹⁸ Social constructionism, properly understood, allows that there is a biological correlate to social race, grants that social races will include biological inclusion criteria, and recognizes that the social process of racialization enlists biological differences. Unfortunately, some social constructionists stop there: with the bare assertion that social races have a biological correlate. But such a stopping point is theoretically unsatisfying. If one aspires to philosophical comprehension of what race is, one will want to know *what* the biological correlate to social race is, *what* the biological inclusion criteria of social race are, and *what* biological differences social race enlists. This brings us to a reason why social constructionists *in particular* should accept the existence of minimalist races: it puts them in a position to provide a general answer to these questions—without falling back into racialist race. With the minimalist concept of race in hand, social constructionists can say that: the biological correlate to social race consists of patterns of minimalist race, the biological inclusion conditions of social race include features of minimalist race, and the biological differences that social race enlists and invests are differences of minimalist race.

Of course, some social constructionists do go beyond the bare assertion of the existence of a biological correlate to race. They try to account for this correlate within their conception of (social) race. Take Sally Haslanger. On her account, a race is a *racialized* group and

[a] group G is racialized relative to context C iff_{df} members of G are (all and only) those
 (i) who are observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed in C to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region (or regions)—call this “color”;

¹⁷ Adam Hochman, “Against the New Racial Naturalism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 110, no. 6 (June 2013): 334.

¹⁸ Hochman, “Against the New Racial Naturalism,” 334.

(ii) whose having (or being imagined to have) these features marks them within the context of the background ideology in C as appropriately occupying certain kinds of social positions that are in fact either subordinated or privileged (and so motivates and justifies their occupying such a position); and
 (iii) whose satisfying (i) and (ii) play (or would play) a role in their systematic subordination or privilege in C, that is, who are along some dimension systemically subordinated or privileged when in C, and satisfying (i) and (ii) plays (or would play) a role in that dimension of privilege or subordination.¹⁹

Haslanger thus has two distinct notions: RACE and COLOR. RACE is the concept of *social* race.

COLOR:

in the intended sense . . . includes not only skin color, but also those features in a particular context that *mark the body as having presumed ancestral origins in a particular region of the world*. So eye, nose, and lip shape, hair color, and texture, height and physique can all count as elements of “color” in the contemporary context. There are physical differences between members of different races (though these differences fall along a continuum); however, races are constituted not by these physical differences, but by the implication of these differences in context in which they are taken to be socially significant.²⁰

Haslanger’s concept COLOR is *not* the concept MINIMALIST RACE. The “physical differences” that figure in it need not be actual; their existence may be merely *imagined*. Similarly, the physical differences (real or imagined) that are constitutive of color are merely *presumed* to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region (or regions). The concept of minimalist race is the concept of actual physical differences that are actually correlated with differences of geographical ancestry.

Does the fact that COLOR and MINIMALIST RACE are different concepts mean that Haslanger can get by without adverting to minimalist race? I do not think so.

Notice that the sort of physical differences that are *merely imagined* and the sort of ancestral links that are *merely presumed* are precisely the kind of bodily features and geographical ancestry picked out by the minimalist concept of race. Furthermore, the components of color that are *actual*—the bodily features that do in fact “mark” the body as having ancestry in a certain geographical region and the ancestral associations that are in fact real—are themselves features *of* minimalist race. The theoretical construct “color”

¹⁹ Sally Haslanger, “Tracing the Sociopolitical Reality of Race,” in *What is Race?*, 25, 26.

²⁰ Sally Haslanger, “Social Construction: Myth and Reality,” in *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 185.

(the referent of the concept COLOR) is an amalgam of real and imagined features of minimalist race.

Now Haslanger has an excellent reason for building physical features that are merely imagined and ancestral links that are merely presumed into her concept COLOR. Doing so makes it possible to allow for the possibility that a group can be a race (in her social sense of the term) without being a minimalist race (in my sense of the term). Her account enables her to register the fact that the Irish were racialized as less than fully white in the United States and the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century without supposing that they are a distinct minimalist race. The idea that there may be a social race for which there is no corresponding minimalist race is well taken. It explains why we should not be surprised when there are social races for which there is no corresponding minimalist race.

But, if we reflect, a difficulty arises. Haslanger appears to be committed to the counterfactual claim that it would be possible for there to be the kind of groups she calls races, even if there were no groups satisfying the conditions of minimalist race concept.

The question we need to ask is: Is this a real possibility? Here is a reason for thinking the answer is no. Suppose there was a world in which everyone—each human being—looked like the Dali Lama with respect to skin color, nose shape, and head form, and, suppose, further, that in this world, the human species had ever been thus.²¹ Suppose, that is, that the human species was not divided into ancestry groups exhibiting distinctive patterns of visible physical features. Suppose that groups satisfying (M1)–(M3) simply did not exist. It is far from clear how, in such a world, the project of constructing social races could ever get off the ground. The inhabitants of such a world would, by hypothesis, lack the kind of physical differences that must obtain if they are to be “enlisted” by social processes of racialization. If this is correct, the existence of minimalist races is a material precondition of the possibility of the sort of races Haslanger thinks are socially constructed.

Chike Jeffers is another prominent social constructionist who does more than merely gesture at the existence of a biological correlate. As a social constructionist, he contends that “races as we know them . . . initially result from the history of Europe’s imperial encounters.”²² They “emerged

²¹ The idea that the human species might come to look like the Dali Lama is borrowed from Joshua Glasgow, *A Theory of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 34.

²² Chike Jeffers, “Cultural Constructionism,” in *What is Race?*, 65.

out of political conditions that divided people into groups unequal in power.”²³ “Differential power relations are what first brought racial differences into existence and are thus fundamental in being the origin of races.”²⁴ For Jeffers, there simply were no races before European imperialism. “The fundamental factors making it the case that races exist are sociohistorical in nature.”²⁵ Jeffers’s social constructionism is thus a form of *political* constructionism. It is at the same time a form of *cultural* constructionism. Race “can accurately be described as being from the start both politically and culturally constructed.”²⁶ So, social construction—political and social—is necessary for the genesis of the groups Jeffers calls “races.”

Although Jeffers’s credentials as a social constructionist are impeccable, he nonetheless urges us to note that racial difference “is not wholly unrelated to that which we may study by means of natural science because it is partly a matter of physical, biological, and geographic difference: it involves how *distinctive physical appearances indicate biological connections of descent that tie us to particular geographic regions of the world*” (emphasis added).²⁷ In saying this, he registers that the social construction he envisions requires biological materials.

Drawing on my 2003 *Journal of Philosophy* essay, Jeffers holds that for a group to be a race:

(LC1) its members must be distinguished from other human beings by visible physical features of the relevant kind,

(LC2) its members must be linked by a common ancestry, and

(LC3) it must originate from a distinctive geographic location.²⁸

In adopting these conditions, Jeffers goes well beyond the bare assertion that there is a biological correlate to social race. He additionally imposes a *structure* on what that correlate is. He holds, in effect, that (LC1)–(LC3) *fix* the biological correlate of (social) race.

A small point of scholarly clarification. Jeffers speaks of (LC1)–(LC3) (from the 2003 essay) rather than (M1)–(M3) (from the 2017 book). Conditions (M1)–(M3) are the philosophical successors of conditions

²³ Jeffers, “Cultural Constructionism,” 62.

²⁴ Jeffers, “Cultural Constructionism,” 56.

²⁵ Jeffers, “Cultural Constructionism,” 38.

²⁶ Jeffers, “Cultural Constructionism,” 63.

²⁷ Jeffers, “Cultural Constructionism,” 45 (emphasis added).

²⁸ Jeffers, “Cultural Constructionism,” 39–40. See Hardimon “The Ordinary Concept of Race,” *Journal of Philosophy* 100, no. 9 (September 2003): 442–47. I have taken the liberty of recasting the original (2003) specification of the concept of race as a specification of the conditions a group must meet to count as a race.

(LC1)–(LC3). Conditions (M1)–(M3) constitute a *refinement* of (LC1)–(LC3). The idea that races are distinguished from one another by *visible physical features* is replaced by the idea that they are distinguished by *patterns* of visible physical features. Talk of visible physical features of *the relevant kind* is replaced by the idea that the visible physical features that figure in the constitution of racehood are features that correspond to differences in geographic ancestry. Visible physical features of the relevant kind are visible features that are racial, and visible physical features are racial if they correspond to differences in geographic ancestry. The idea that members of a race share a common ancestry is precisified by the specification that the common ancestry that figures in race is a common ancestry peculiar to members of the group. All human beings share a common ancestry, but members of particular races share an ancestry that is peculiar to their group. I think these refinements are important. But the basic idea is the same. Since Jeffers tacitly accepts that (LC1)–(LC3) fix the necessary biological conditions of the genesis and existence of races, I do not think it would be amiss to assume that he would allow that (M1)–(M3) count as necessary biological conditions of the genesis and existence of races. If so, he needs (the existence of) groups satisfying (M1)–(M3), which is to say, the existence of minimalist races, to account for the kind of politically constructed groups *he* calls races.

If no groups satisfied these conditions, the biological materials required for the construction of (social) races would not be in place. For Jeffers's social races to exist, there must be groups exhibiting patterns of visible physical features corresponding to geographical ancestry to undergo the social process of racialization that transforms them into genuine, bona fide (social) races.

Note, further, that the groups that become races in Jeffers's sense must have satisfied (M1)–(M3) *before* they became races in his sense—*before* the fateful encounter between Europeans and non-Europeans. The relevant patterns of visible physical differences did not pop into existence when Europeans and non-Europeans first came together; they must have been there from the start. For Jeffers's account of the social origin of races to go through, there must have been the sort of biological group I call minimalist races *prior* to the formation of social races.

Social constructionists need the existence of minimalist races to account for the social construction of race because minimalist races provide the materials they require for the construction of social races.

III

Social constructionists could resist the preceding line of argument. They could concede the existence of groups satisfying (M1)–(M3) but refuse to embrace the minimalist concept of race. They could, for example, maintain that the minimalist concept of race is not a *genuine* race concept and argue that the fact that a group satisfies the conditions of this concept does not entail that it is a *race* in the proper sense of the term.

1. They could argue that the minimalist concept is not a genuine race concept because it is not the racist concept of race. But from the fact that the minimalist concept of race is not the racist concept of race, it does not follow that it is not a race concept. The minimalist concept of race and the racist concept of race represent two different *conceptions* of race—two possible articulations of the concept RACE.²⁹ The racist concept of race expresses an essentialist and hierarchical conception of race; the minimalist concept of race expresses a conception of race that is nonessentialist and nonhierarchical.
2. They could argue that the minimalist concept is not a genuine race concept because it does not posit the existence of a racial essence. But it is a mistake to think that the concept RACE is essentially essentialist. The minimalist concept of race is precisely a nonessentialist race concept. Just as population thinking shows the possibility of a nonessentialist species concept, so too its articulation shows the possibility of a nonessentialist race concept.³⁰
3. They could argue that the minimalist concept is not a genuine race concept because it is nonhierarchical. But the idea that a concept must posit a hierarchy of races to count as a biological race concept is obsolete. The falsity of racialism teaches us that we should not expect hierarchy from a biological concept of race.
4. In a similar vein, social constructionists could argue that the minimalist concept is not a genuine race concept because it does not register the positions of subordination or privilege that figure essentially in social race. But the minimalist concept of race is a biological concept of race. Registering social relations of subordination and privilege is not its job.

²⁹ Hardimon, “The Ordinary Concept of Race,” 439–40; Hardimon, “The Minimalist Concept of Race,” in *Rethinking Race*, 13.

³⁰ Ernst Mayr, *Evolution and the Diversity of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

5. They could argue that the minimalist concept is not a genuine race concept because it does not capture the “social meaning” of race, in other words, that it does not capture what being a member of social race SR means for the members of SR. But, again, the minimalist concept of race is a biological concept. It does not deny that race has a social meaning. But explaining that social meaning falls outside its conceptual job description.
6. They could argue that the minimalist concept is not a genuine race concept because it lacks the resources to account for who counts as “white” and who counts as “Black” in North America. This seems to me correct, but it does not constitute an objection. I agree wholeheartedly with Tommie Shelby that

what must be recognized here is that the concept “black” is an ideological construct; and, like many such constructs, it is extremely malleable and capacious. Consequently, “blackness” can be, and has been, given multiple and divergent interpretations, varying with who is interpreting it, their motives for using the notion, and the social circumstances under which they employ it. Thus, the most that can be truly said is that there are a number of loosely associated and variously interpreted black identities.³¹

I would simply add that what Shelby says about the concept BLACK goes equally for the concept WHITE. It too is an ideological construct. In North America, the Black and white races are social constructions. The minimalist concept of race does not fix or purport to fix what *social* races there are. Determining who counts as “white” and who counts as “Black” in North America does not fall within its assigned tasks. This is not to deny that there is some relation between being counted “Black” in North America and having “recent” ancestry in sub-Saharan Africa or being counted “white” in North America and having “recent” ancestry in Western Eurasia. How much Western Eurasian ancestry one must have to count as “white” and how much sub-Saharan ancestry one must have to count as “Black” are matters of dispute. We should not look to the minimalist concept—or any biological race concept—to determine who in North America counts as “white” and who counts as “Black.” That is a strictly social matter, not a biological one.

The failure of these arguments to show that the minimalist concept of race is not a genuine race concept leads me to doubt that the minimalist concept of race’s claim to be a genuine race concept *can* be successfully

³¹ Shelby, *Dark Ghettos*, 254.

rebutted. The concept provides a maximally thin, maximally deflationary, simple, and plausible conception of what it is to be a race. This modesty is in keeping with its claim to be the barest, most stripped-down possible characterization of what it is to be a (biological) race. The elements that constitute its intension—differences in patterns of visible physical features, differences in ancestry, and differences in geographical origin—have all traditionally been regarded as racial. The groups that that can plausibly be said to fall within its extension, such as Western Eurasians, sub-Saharan Africans, East Asians, and Amerindians, have also traditionally been thought of as races. The minimalist concept does everything that a *biological* race concept can be reasonably be expected to do. Groups that satisfy the minimalist concept count as “races” in a proper sense of the term.

Now there is a fallback position available to social constructionists who are not persuaded by these reflections. They could propose that groups satisfying (M1)–(M3) should be called “phenotypically marked ancestry groups” *rather than* “races.” A terminological move of this sort would enable them to allow the existence of “phenotypically marked ancestry groups” while retaining their commitment to antirealism about biological race. They could say that phenotypically marked ancestry groups *do* and that biological races *do not* exist. But such a position would come at great cost. Whether or not phenotypically marked ancestry groups properly count as “races,” they are biological groups—relatively unimportant biological groups—but biological groups all the same. And even if they should not be labelled “races,” they constitute a biological kind—a relatively unimportant biological kind—but all the same a biological kind. But this is precisely the substance of the concept of minimalist race. To acknowledge the existence of phenotypically marked ancestry groups is to acknowledge the existence of minimalist races in all but name.

Let us consider one final move that social constructionists could make. They could simply deny the existence of groups satisfying (M1)–(M3). But this would place them in an extremely awkward position; for it would mean embracing an extreme form of antirealism that goes well beyond the anti-realism that Glasgow and Appiah are prepared to endorse. It is hard to see how one can deny that groups satisfying (M1)–(M3) exist without denying that that people who come from different places (such as continents) look different—a move that is clearly unacceptable.

IV

So, where does this leave social constructionism? Social constructionists can, should, and will continue to deny that racialist races exist. Likewise, they can, should, and will continue to affirm the existence of social races. Nothing I have said in this paper argues against the existence of the latter. I have indicated that I think that both the Black and white race in North America are socially constructed. A comprehensive account of what race is must include an account of socially constructed races—an account of race as a social kind. But social constructionists need to abandon the idea that biological races do not exist. The fact that *minimalist* races exist means that *biological* races exist. And this precludes saying flat-out that *races* are socially constructed. Socially constructed races exist, yes, but the same is true of minimalist biological races. In this paper I have tried to explain why social constructionists should embrace minimalist race. I have said that they should do so because they need the minimalist concept of race and the existence of minimalist races to avoid denying the obvious, namely, that human beings exhibit patterns of visible physical features corresponding to geographical ancestry exist, to account for the biological correlate of social race, and to secure the biological materials the project of social construction requires.