

# STUDYING WHILE BLACK

## *Trust, Opportunity, and Disrespect*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

How should we explore the relationship between race and educational opportunity? One approach to the Black-White achievement gap explores how race and class cause disparities in access and opportunity. In this paper, I consider how education contributes to the *creation* of race. Considering examples of classroom micropolitics, I argue that breakdowns of trust and trustworthiness between teachers and students can cause substantial disadvantages and, in the contemporary United States, this happens along racial lines. Some of the disadvantages are academic: high achievement is more difficult when one faces mistrust, ego depletion, effort pessimism, and insult. And within a knowledge economy, exclusion from knowledge work makes one vulnerable to injustice. But the problem goes deeper than achievement, for schools are contexts in which we develop self-understandings and identities that situate us as members of society. If students of color are systematically denied full participation in trusting conversations that create shared knowledge—especially, knowledge that holds power within the dominant culture—they are unjustly deprived resources to form flourishing selves that are suited to the positions of power and authority. The argument suggests that knowledge is not best understood simply as a commodity to be distributed, and opportunity is not just a matter of access. Moreover, even if access is granted, those who are motivated and talented can fail: they drain their willpower by coping with insults, or reasonably lose optimism about their efficacy. Over time, motivation may shift away from achievement, and under the circumstances this can be a rational response. The barriers to achievement are many, but true opportunity is impossible without trust and trustworthiness.

**Keywords:** Achievement Gap, Educational Opportunity, Trust, Social Epistemology, Critical Race Theory, Race, High School, Bias

*The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals.*

—Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (1980, p. 98)

*...class divisions and other fundamental lines of inequality, such as those connected with gender or ethnicity, can be partly defined in terms of differential access to forms of self-actualization and empowerment.*

—Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991, p. 6)

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## INTRODUCTION

It is well documented that being non-White continues to be a source of substantial disadvantage in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Blacks and Hispanics, especially, experience disadvantages in education, health care, housing, employment, and criminal justice. There is no doubt that these disadvantages interact and accumulate. Those who grow up in poverty, in dangerous neighborhoods, and in poor health will not be in a position to take advantage of educational opportunities to the same degree as those who do not face these challenges. And, in turn, those who lack education will be disadvantaged in employment, thus making them more vulnerable to poverty and crime. The interdependence of these disadvantages occurs regardless of race; but race exacerbates the problems by contributing to the degree and depth of disadvantage, the lack of mitigating factors, and the visibility and indelibility of race marking.

How should we explore the relationship between race and educational opportunity? One relevant set of questions concerns the causes of the Black-White achievement gap. What explains the discrepancy between the performance of Blacks and the performance of Whites on various standard educational measures? Another set of questions concerns how to define justice in education: In our efforts to remedy the current educational inequities, what, morally speaking, ought to be our goal? Both sets of questions are tremendously important and many philosophers and other scholars have made important contributions to answering them. Both sets of questions mainly consider how we (should) *respond* to racial differences. In this paper, I would like to shift the discussion somewhat to consider how education *creates* race, or at least functions as part of broader structures that do so.<sup>3</sup>

To have a race, as I understand it, is to stand in a complex and hierarchical set of social relations, relations that are both imposed and enacted (Haslanger 2000). Race, in this view, is not a matter of how you identify or who your ancestors are; to be raced is to be positioned in a hierarchical social structure due to certain interpretations of your appearance. School, clearly, is a site of intense socialization. It creates kinds of individuals through a process of discipline, in particular, individuals who fit the available structures. It does not do this in a deterministic or mechanical way, of course, for part of the goal of discipline is to form individuals who voluntarily enact the social structures that are to be perpetuated. And because we are individuals with genuine agency, our voluntary action always has the potential to be oppositional, resistant, and subversive. However, in the current educational context, it is African American success that is oppositional and subversive, not African American failure. That is to say, the process of racialization that occurs in schools prepares African Americans for the subordinate status they can expect to occupy, and it does this very effectively. The “success” of racialization is at odds with the explicit egalitarian ideology that many Americans hold dear, but this ideology does not hold the political, cultural, or economic reins; and structures have pernicious effects without anyone intending or designing them. Our system of education has been and is currently highly effective in perpetuating the existing structure of American society, in spite of the idea that it should be otherwise and the substantial efforts to change it.

Following Theresa Perry’s “Up from the Parched Earth” (2003), in this paper I will explore some aspects of “African-American school achievement, from the inside out, from the perspective of African-American youth as thinking, feeling, and social and intentional beings” (p. 3). Broad surveys that isolate variables that correlate with achievement are extremely valuable; however, additional insight can be gained by considering the racial micropolitics in classroom settings. My focus will be on African American high school students, and I will draw on anecdotes reported to me by students

concerning relatively affluent Black students attending a well-funded, diverse urban public high school. Although the most urgent problems of justice lie elsewhere—the most disadvantaged in education are surely those who suffer race injustice along with injustices such as those attaching to class, immigration status, and disability—there is something to be learned, I think, about how race poses serious problems even if separated from some of the confounding effects of other social disadvantages (e.g., in diverse schools that celebrate their diversity and provide significant resources and opportunities to all who attend).<sup>4</sup> I hope to show that from this perspective, “from the inside out,” questions concerning educational opportunity and achievement look somewhat different. As will become clear, this paper does not offer solutions. It is an exploration of some problems that should be considered.

In the sections that follow, I begin each by providing an example involving African American males in high school classrooms with White teachers in order to illustrate the points I want to discuss. I have changed the names of the individuals involved. There are parts of these stories missing; they are, after all, reports describing the situation *from the student's point of view* and I have not spoken with any of the teachers or parents involved. But the examples don't have to be fully objective or neutral reports in order to learn something from them, for they represent the experiences and responses of students who have the ability to achieve at a high level, but back away from opportunities to do so. The aim is to capture how some students experience the learning environment at school, whether their interpretations are correct or not. These are not isolated incidents. However, whether they also reflect the experience of African American females, how the intersection of gender and race might play out for young women, and even how gender is a factor in the dynamic between Black male students and White female teachers, are not subjects I take up in this essay.

I suggest we consider the examples in light of recent work on credibility, testimony, epistemic trust, and epistemic injustice. A common theme in this work is that implicit and explicit prejudice can have the result that a speaker is granted less credibility than he or she deserves. This not only distorts our efforts to understand the world, but also harms the interlocutor who is not included as an equal in the epistemic community. Given the importance of epistemic norms in an educational setting, it is worth considering in some detail the kinds of harm that may occur. I will argue that even though individual (implicit or explicit) bias is a serious problem, trust can break down even if teachers are unbiased, given a social context in which race is highly salient. The social meaning of racially marked bodies is not just a problem of individual psychology, but a social problem for which we are collectively responsible.

After exploring the examples in some detail, I consider how and why it is useful to see race, not as a prior “given” in the analysis, but as something being created through the socialization that happens in school. It is well documented that the racial categories we use in the United States do not correspond to meaningful biological categories.<sup>5</sup> Some conclude from this that there is no such thing as race (Blum 2002; Glasgow 2008). My response, instead, is to theorize race as a social category. To be a member of a race is to be viewed and treated as such and to stand in contextually defined relations to others that constitute race in that milieu (Haslanger 2000).<sup>6</sup> The cultural marking of racial difference is in terms of “color,” where “color” consists of features assumed, within the context in question, to be indicative of ancestral links to a certain geographical region. Racial frameworks situate groups delimited by “color” in a social hierarchy that carries presumptions concerning both moral and epistemic authority and a range of associated entitlements. These presumptions are enforced and enacted everyday between the races. Race is imposed upon students in school settings, even when the teachers are well meaning and conscientious. This has powerful implications

for the challenges Blacks face as epistemic agents in school and elsewhere, and an understanding of how race is created can help those of us who seek racial justice.

## EPISTEMIC MISTRUST

[*Spanish Class*, Ms. S.] In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Jonathan took honors Spanish. Fairly often he would complain about how the teacher picked on this or that student. He suspected that race and ethnicity were factors determining her targets. Over time, he came to believe that there was a clear pattern of Ms. S. picking on his Egyptian friend, Mustafa. By Jonathan's report, one day Ms. S. was talking about life in Chile and Mustafa asked if the women in the community she was describing could go about freely or whether they were limited mainly to the home. Ms. S. replied, "It isn't like *your* culture, Mustafa. You should be aware that in most parts of the world women can go about freely, and it is your culture that is the exception." Mustafa objected that in Egypt women *do* go about freely, and Ms. S. disagreed with him. When Mustafa expressed disbelief that she would disagree with him about this, he was sent to the Dean's office. Jonathan's reaction was that the teacher is "an idiot." Jonathan withdrew, emotionally, from the class, both in a gesture of support for Mustafa, and as a protective measure.

In her essay, "Epistemic Trust and Social Location," Nancy Daukas (2006) sets the background for a discussion of epistemic trust:<sup>7</sup>

In all aspects of our lives, we function, in part, as epistemic agents. Epistemic functioning often, and perhaps always, involves the exchange of epistemic goods, and a shared acceptance of the epistemic norms that guide the practices that yield those goods. Social functioning, then, requires epistemic cooperation; and epistemic cooperation requires trust (p. 109).

Daukas is interested, especially, in epistemic trustworthiness: what is it for an agent to be *worthy* of epistemic trust. Let's consider first what trustworthiness requires; we can then consider whether there are systematic ways in which some who are trustworthy are denied trust, and some who are not trustworthy claim it.

The relationship between teacher and student is not one of epistemic equality. At least in most cases, it is an important feature of the relationship that the teacher has some kind of knowledge that the student lacks. It is compatible with this, however, that there are epistemic conditions for each party that must be satisfied in order to participate cooperatively in teaching and learning. The first, most basic, principle is that each should extend to the other a threshold degree of first-order epistemic credibility. As Davidson (1984) and others have argued, we cannot even begin to communicate with someone unless we presume that the other is in command of a substantial number of truths and undertake to abide by the simple rules of conversation dictating that one should aim to, e.g., be relevant, be informative (but not too informative), be perspicuous, and speak the truth (Grice 1975).

Daukas argues, however, that there are further requirements placed on productive epistemic cooperation. Because fruitful epistemic exchange requires that we take each other seriously, we depend not only on the credibility of our partners, but also on their ability to accurately gauge their own reliability. Epistemic cooperation with someone who consistently misjudges her own epistemic capacities is of little value, for she will contribute to the exchange without indicating to those who trust her the proper

degree of confidence they should have in her contributions. “If someone frequently and sincerely claims epistemic authority that she does not possess, she is not worthy of trust, in an epistemic sense; and we should not believe P, or even consider the possibility that P, on the strength of her testimony alone” (Daukas 2006, pp. 110–111). So, Daukas suggests, successful epistemic exchanges are those in which we rightly extend to our partners, and they to us, a principle of second-order epistemic credibility. In effect, in order to be epistemically trustworthy, and so a meaningful partner in exchange, one must be a good judge of both his or her own cognitive capacities and the cognitive capacities of others. Failures of such self-assessment involve being overly confident in one’s own epistemic capacities (closed-minded, dogmatic, or impatient), or overly diffident (deferential or gullible). Failures in judging our interlocutor include being ungenerous (suspicious or skeptical) or excessively generous (uncritical).

We develop our second-order epistemic competencies—our ability to rightly judge and be judged trustworthy—in social interaction. As Daukas says:

One develops one’s epistemic character through practice and habituation, by internalizing norms that determine what degree of confidence is appropriate when, and what degree of epistemic deference or skepticism should be extended toward which others under what circumstances, regarding what kinds of subject matter. This process depends, in part, on learning to ‘read’ and respond to the evaluative responses one received from those others to whom one has come, through the same complex process, to extend the principle of epistemic charity (p. 114).

School is a crucial site for internalizing epistemic norms and learning to “read” others. Students learn how to judge their own competencies and the competencies of others based on the responses they receive, and they see others receive, to contributions in the classroom. As Daukas points out, under conditions of race and gender hierarchy, it is not surprising that attributions of trustworthiness will go awry, and racially dominant groups will become over-confident of their trustworthiness, and subordinate groups will become less confident than they should be. Because those who are less confident in a domain are less likely to be successful and highly visible as authorities in that domain, “unjust epistemic exclusion on the basis of social location is therefore self-perpetuating: its consequences perpetuate the inequalities that fulfill, and therefore seem to justify, the discriminatory expectations that, in turn, perpetuate unjust epistemic exclusion” (p. 116). Let’s call this the “untrustworthiness feedback loop.”

This sort of looping effect is familiar and comes in different forms. For example, Abigail Stewart (2007) describes an “evaluation bias feedback loop.” If, due to social bias, my contributions are wrongly judged less worthy than others’, I will be less successful by ordinary measures; and the lack of success of members of my group will have the result that we are less visible in authoritative positions. The lack of a critical mass of members of my group in high-ranking positions will not only lead others to doubt my credibility, but will reinforce attitudes towards the group that are responsible for biased evaluations. In short, bias against a group G leads Gs to be less successful, which reinforces bias against Gs.

Although Daukas emphasizes the effects of trust violations on confidence (in her view, lack of confidence explains lack of success), it is important to note that those students who are confident and trustworthy in their self-evaluation also suffer harm when teachers are untrustworthy, or even just perceived as untrustworthy. Consider again the example of Jonathan and Mustafa in Spanish class. According to Jonathan’s report, Mustafa asks a reasonable question and yet the teacher’s reply evinces not only rudeness, but also first-order ignorance of Egypt and second-order epistemic

untrustworthiness: she is unable or unwilling to acknowledge her own epistemic incompetence. In this context, Mustafa and Jonathan do not come to doubt their own knowledge; rather, they rightly lose epistemic trust in the teacher. They conclude that she is not a trustworthy judge of her own epistemic abilities. However, a breakdown of epistemic trust results in a breakdown of epistemic cooperation in the classroom. As the teacher's authority is challenged, she removes Mustafa from the class. The students take this to be an enactment of racial privilege: from their perspective, she demonstrates both epistemic and moral arrogance (and ignorance) in response to ethnic (at least somewhat racialized) difference. Moreover, Mustafa's refusal to grant her authority on the matter, no matter how justified he is, results in expulsion from "her" space.<sup>8</sup> The students perceive this not just as unfair, but racially significant.

It would seem that a careful evaluation of the teacher's actions would warrant an epistemic reengagement with her as a teacher of the Spanish language (she does not, after all, display epistemic untrustworthiness in her command of Spanish, even according to the student's report). However, as Daukas points out, fruitful epistemic exchange relies both on epistemic and moral trust: we each must be able to trust that the other will be, to some threshold degree, sincere, honest, and open. This is especially true when power relations in the exchange are unequal, for the powerful who are dishonest and insincere can do serious damage when they are trusted by the less powerful. In the case of *Spanish Class*, doubt has been raised about Ms. S.'s moral trustworthiness in her treatment of Mustafa (and others). So it is not surprising that, without an effort to repair the epistemic and moral damage, the classroom has ceased to be a learning environment for students of color.

It is crucial to note that the students who disengage in *Spanish Class* (and, I would argue, in *History Class* (see below)), are not ignorant, unmotivated, or self-doubting; rather, they are knowledgeable and have epistemic self-respect. Moreover, their withdrawal of epistemic trust is warranted (even if not practically wise). However, an unwillingness to cooperate in the epistemic exchange is harmful to them: they are less successful in mastering the material; their distrust is interpreted as disrespect or stupidity; and, if they try to raise the issue or complain, they are branded as trouble-makers, as resistant to authority, etc. I think what emerges is an "epistemic distrust feedback loop": if, due to my race, teachers act towards me in a way that either signals that they are not granting me epistemic credibility, or that shows them to be epistemically untrustworthy, I will, reasonably, withhold epistemic trust; but if I withhold epistemic trust, I will show signs of distrust, will do less well on my work, and will appear to be stupid and unmotivated. When I appear to be stupid and unmotivated, teachers act towards me in epistemically distrusting and untrustworthy ways. And the cycle begins again.<sup>9</sup>

## EGO DEPLETION

It is easy to imagine that, if a student is regularly in classroom situations in which trust has broken down over the course of their high school years (perhaps even as witness to the travails of others), their disposition to extend epistemic trust to any teacher is diminished. If we add this on top of all the other disadvantages, no wonder students of color are having trouble in school. Research in social psychology allows us to explore some of the broader effects of epistemic distrust and hierarchical race relations with more than just imagination. Two key concepts are ego depletion (Baumeister et al., 1998) and effort optimism (Perry 2003). I will consider ego depletion in this section and effort optimism in the next.



[*History class*, Ms. H.] Eli took an honors history class in the spring of 11<sup>th</sup> grade. During class he regularly sat next to his Israeli friend Maya. He liked the (White) teacher and thought she was “smart” but found her hard to relate to. One day after school he was very angry. When asked why, he explained: “In history class today, Ms. H. spent about five minutes talking to Maya about xxx. I was listening because I was sitting next to Maya, as usual. Their discussion was *so* interesting; you could see them both just popping with ideas. I wanted to join in, but didn’t want to interrupt their conversation. Then Ms. H. turned to me and said really slowly: ‘Eli...did...you...do...your...homework?’ I just wanted to say, ‘F–k you, Ms. H.’ But instead I just said ‘Yes,’ and she moved down the row.”

Richard Holton (2009) has recently argued, drawing on work in social psychology, that “there is a faculty of willpower—something like a muscle. When desires and resolutions clash, we can succeed in sticking to our resolutions by employing this faculty. Moreover, employing the faculty is hard work: it requires effort on the part of the agent” (p. 130). In his view,

Action is not determined just by the agent’s beliefs, desires, and intentions. In addition willpower plays an independent contributory role. Agents whose willpower is strong can stick by their resolutions even in the face of strong contrary desires; agents whose willpower is weak readily abandon their resolutions even when the contrary desires are relatively weak (p. 113).

It is not part of my goal here to defend Holton. However, it is clear that something like willpower is important in education: we don’t always want to attend class, do homework, read boring material for a test, and yet those who have the willpower to forego immediate desire satisfaction to “do what has to be done” are more successful. Willpower is a central aspect of executive function more generally.

A notable feature of willpower in this model is that “willpower comes in limited amounts that can be used up” (Holton 2009, p. 128). This phenomenon is called “ego depletion.” According to Baumeister et al. (1998), *ego depletion* is “...a temporary reduction in the self’s capacity or willingness to engage in volitional action (including controlling the environment, controlling the self, making choices, and initiating action) caused by prior exercise of volition” (p. 1253). Baumeister et al. have conducted a series of experiments of the following sort: hungry subjects were presented with chocolates and radishes. Some were told they could only eat the chocolates, others that they could only eat the radishes. Some time afterwards, subjects were asked to solve (impossible) puzzles, taking as many tries and as much time as they would like. Those who exerted self-control to *not* eat the chocolates and *only* eat the radishes (many later admitted it was difficult to do so) quit sooner on the puzzle task than those in both the chocolates group and the control group. Baumeister et al. concluded that:

Resisting temptation seems to have produced a psychic cost, in the sense that afterward participants were more inclined to give up easily in the face of frustration. It was not that eating chocolate improved performance. Rather, wanting chocolate but eating radishes instead, especially under circumstances in which it would seemingly be easy and safe to snatch some chocolates, seems to have consumed some resource and therefore left people less able to persist at the puzzles (1998, pp. 1255–1256).

Moreover, ego depletion seems to have quite broad effects on executive function, e.g., it lowers one's ability to stick to resolutions, lowers IQ, and makes one susceptible to bad arguments.<sup>10</sup> Although there are different accounts of how ego depletion works, and how it affects cognition, it is clear that under ordinary circumstances, managing anger and other strong emotions is a cognitive drain (Muraven et al., 1998; Stucke et al., 2006).<sup>11</sup>

Suppose, then, that efforts to exert self-control do diminish one's willpower and executive function more generally. Let's return to the examples and the phenomenon of trustworthiness in classroom settings. Recall that according to Eli's report of *History class*, Ms. H. talks eagerly with Maya without including Eli in the conversation, and when she turns to Eli, speaks to him in a way that conveys a lack of confidence in his abilities. Eli wants to say, "F-k you, Ms. H." Instead he is polite, but not forthcoming about the subject matter of the assignment. Eli is angry, perhaps reasonably so, but exhibits good self-control. However, as a result of his anger, not only did he find himself unable to take advantage of the teacher's attention, he was no doubt also distracted from the lesson. Moreover, he carried his anger all day and was still angry after school. Given that he behaved well all day, he must have used self-control all day. This would have taken a huge toll on his willpower, leaving him with less energy and attention for his remaining classes and homework. On the Baumeister et al. model, coping with what he experiences as insult fatigues his willpower muscle. Given the relationship between motivation and willpower, these effects occur even if he is motivated to do the work.

No doubt all students suffer frustrations during the course of a day and have to exercise self-control; some students, regardless of race or ethnicity, will have substantial challenges that require more effortful self-control. Everyone is vulnerable to ego depletion. The point, however, is that if students of color are being treated in ways that they regularly experience as denying them credibility, respect, and trust in comparison with White students, then they will face greater challenges of self-control than Whites. And, interestingly, those who are committed to doing well and participating in the community will be the ones to exert the *greater* self-control, and so suffer the *more* substantial ego depletion.

So the options look worrisome. Teachers are sometimes untrustworthy. I believe that the students reporting the incidents in question offer reasonable interpretations. There is bias against Black students. But even in cases in which teachers are trustworthy, they can plausibly be *perceived as* untrustworthy. In either case, based on their experience, students of color find themselves faced with only bad options:

1. Accept the teacher's mistaken judgment of their credibility and lose confidence;
2. Challenge the teacher and face the stigma of being disruptive and the punishment for it;
3. Withdraw from the epistemic exchange and lose valuable learning opportunities;
4. Exert self-control over their emotional responses of insult and (temporarily) deplete their capacities for cognitive work and epistemic agency; or
5. Develop a Teflon skin that renders one insensitive to (at least certain kinds of) input from teachers (and others).

None of these are ideal strategies for academic success and, depending on the temperament of the student, some may not be available (though in some circumstances, something as simple as ingesting glucose can strengthen willpower so that one is less vulnerable to ego depletion!). These are not the only options, of course. Individuals



who have developed a variety of epistemic strengths and hold some power in the conversational context may respond in more productive and self-affirming ways. But remember, we are talking about adolescent students in a public high school, where they are just learning how to be epistemic agents, and where social divisions are highly salient.

## EFFORT OPTIMISM

[*Math class, Ms. M.*] Jerome has always been good at math, and in the spring of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, he enrolled in an honors math class. He was one of two Black students in the class. The teacher's policy was that students would not get credit for their homework unless the problems were written in a particular format on the page and a box was drawn around the answer. Jerome found it difficult to remember to use the right format and for several days he received no credit, even though he had done the problems correctly. Jerome felt that because of the "no credit" homeworks, Ms. M. began to treat him as a failing student and got in touch with his guidance counselor to set up a meeting with his parents. The parents agreed to help out with homework. According to Jerome, one weekend Jerome's Dad worked with Jerome on the homework. Later that week the teacher emailed the parents again to say that Jerome was continuing to do poorly on his homework and in the time since the previous meeting, many assignments had not been turned in. When questioned, Jerome denied this and showed his parents the homework he'd turned in with Ms. M.'s check marks. Jerome described another meeting with the parents and teacher in which she accused Jerome of lying and claimed that he continued to produce sloppy work. Jerome's parents respectfully challenged her and explained that Jerome's father—who is fully capable of doing the math she is teaching—had helped him, so they knew he had done it correctly; the teacher then walked out of the meeting, suggesting that the parents were disrespecting her. Jerome got through the class, but swore that he would never take an honors math class again. When Jerome took a non-honors math class in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the teacher urged him to switch into an honors class, given his abilities, but Jerome refused, saying, "There's no point."

Faced with the breakdown of epistemic cooperation in classrooms (and with students' families), African American students lose "effort optimism" (Perry 2003, p. 61). Intuitively, effort optimism captures the general attitude that one's efforts towards a goal will have a positive effect on achieving that goal. Even if one faces setbacks, the effort is worth it and will lead, if not to success, then at least further down the path towards the goal. Effort optimism provides resilience when dealing with life's challenges.

In the context of education studies, John Ogbu (1983) and others have argued that the persistent job ceiling for Blacks has prevented "effort optimism" from being "culturally sanctioned." Developing William Shack's (1970–1971) idea, he says:

Lack of academic effort and optimism may have developed as a result of the contrasting experiences of blacks and whites in the status-mobility system. [Shack] suggests that the absence of a job ceiling against whites allowed them to develop "effort optimism," summed up by the white maxim, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." But black encounters with the job ceiling have taught them that jobs, wages, and promotions are not based on educational credentials and

individual ability and efforts; consequently, they have developed a different maxim: “What's the use of trying?” (p. 180).

Ogbu makes two claims. One claim is that Black students are disadvantaged academically because they lack effort optimism. The other claim is that Black students lack effort optimism because it is not a value in the Black community due to persistent encounters with racism. One might accept the first claim without accepting the second.

Theresa Perry (2003) welcomes Ogbu's attention to the sociopolitical background of school achievement and his emphasis on power and status-mobility, not just “culture” (p. 64). And she draws an important connection between effort optimism and the contemporary educational climate that views education as job training: “For members of a castelike racial minority, the lack of a predictable and comparable relationship between the education and rewards in the marketplace over generations does influence effort optimism, particularly if one's view of schooling and education is primarily instrumental” (p. 105). However, she rejects Ogbu's claim that the African American community does not support effort optimism. In her view, African Americans have developed a distinctive approach to education, namely, “education for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship, and leadership” (p. 63) that has developed and sustained effort optimism over time.

Let's bracket Perry's debate with Ogbu over whether the Black community fosters effort optimism, or not. A hypothesis remains that effort optimism is relevant to Black achievement in school and is undermined by persistent encounters with racism. In the context of this paper, the question, then, is whether the violations of trust and trustworthiness that students of color encounter undermine epistemic agency so that effort pessimism is a predictable and damaging result.

Martin Seligman (1990) has argued that:

The traditional view of achievement...needs overhauling. Our workplaces and our schools operate on the conventional assumption that success results from a combination of talent and desire. When failure occurs it is because either talent or desire is missing. But failure also can occur when talent and desire are present in abundance, but optimism is missing (p. 13).

Optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy are major themes in social and cognitive psychology, and I cannot do justice to them here. However, there is substantial evidence that optimism is a major factor in predicting success. The classic formulation of the issue is Seligman's idea of “*learned helplessness*”:

*Learned helplessness* is the giving-up reaction, the quitting response that follows from the belief that whatever you do doesn't matter. *Explanatory style* is the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen. It is the great modulator of learned helplessness. An optimistic explanatory style stops helplessness, whereas a pessimistic explanatory style spreads helplessness (pp. 15–16).

We all suffer misfortune. But there are different ways of explaining misfortune.<sup>12</sup> Suppose you fail a math test. It might be seen as permanent or momentary (I always do badly in math vs. I didn't study hard enough for this exam); pervasive/universal or specific (Teachers are unfair vs. Mr. B. is unfair); and personal (about me) or not (I'm stupid vs. We didn't cover all the material in class). Those who tend to explain misfortunes in a particular domain as *permanent*, *pervasive/universal*, and *personal*, lack

optimism. They will be more likely to give up after a failure rather than try harder, and will doubt that effort will make a difference.

Consider the example of *Math class*. According to Jerome, he does his math homework and gets the answers right. But his effort does not pay off because his work counts as failing simply because he doesn't draw a box around the answers. He gets help from his father and turns in his work, but the teacher doesn't record it (even though it was graded). He is told he is lying when he objects. And when this comes to a head, he is witness to the teacher rejecting his father's word (and his legitimate authority). The story represents the teacher as deeply untrustworthy: she does not grant Jerome or his father threshold credibility, and she is a poor judge of her own epistemic capacities and those of her interlocutors. Jerome might plausibly ask the questions: Why me? Why is she treating me so disrespectfully? There will surely be a temptation to pessimistic answers: racism (permanent and pervasive), and I'm Black (personal). One might even argue that this explanation is reasonable and supported by induction given life as an African American in the United States.

There are, of course, other options. One might explain the incident a bit more optimistically: Ms. M. is prejudiced (but not every White person is); Ms. M. is trying to hold me to high standards so I will do better (she isn't really prejudiced); and Ms. M. is threatened by my father's intelligence (it's not me or my Dad, she's just insecure). But these can be a bit of a stretch, depending on the circumstances. Much of the literature on learned helplessness and effort optimism suggests that the cure for pessimism is changing one's "mindset" (Dweck 1978, p. 2006). But the problem is that this strategy seems to favor those who are either very sophisticated in their understanding of social dynamics and can gain a distance from the pain caused by the events in order to apply this understanding, or those who are willing to make up explanations to suit their needs rather than carefully consider the evidence and the circumstances. Neither option is very promising, in part because the damage has been done. (And remember, we are talking about adolescents who may be developmentally somewhat self-absorbed!) As Miranda Fricker (2007) puts it, "[w]hen one is wrongfully mistrusted, regardless of whether it is one's competence or one's sincerity that is being impugned, one is *dishonored*" (p. 46). The experience of dishonor, I believe, is common in racially charged settings.

## EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

[*Biology class*, Ms. Sub. (the substitute)] Kevin is a student with a solid B average in mostly honors classes. He was doing well in Biology until his teacher went on temporary leave and was replaced by a substitute teacher. According to Kevin, the substitute, Ms. Sub., seemed to target him for negative attention. He was ridiculed for his mistakes. He was accused of stealing a piece of computer equipment (that later was found had just been misplaced). He got to the point where he would come into class and wait with his head on his desk until class began. On his account, even with his head on his desk, the teacher would accuse him of "being disruptive." He repeatedly denied the accusations, but was anxious that any attempt to complain would result in retaliation. However, the accusation of theft brought the situation to the attention of the Dean, a Latina. The Dean knew Kevin and trusted him, so she intervened on his behalf. When Ms. B. (the regular teacher) returned to the class, things returned to normal.

In the previous two sections, I have argued that in classroom contexts there are race-related forms of epistemic distrust and apparent failures of trustworthiness that can

have substantial implications for student motivation and achievement. Daukas represents the problem of epistemic mistrust as primarily a question of virtue: individuals who are epistemically untrustworthy—individuals who are poor judges of their own epistemic authority and/or wrongly judge the epistemic authority of others—lack *epistemic* virtue. If these epistemic failings are linked to moral failings, e.g., racism, and sexism, etc., then the individual also lacks *moral* virtue.

In these circumstances, however, justice is also an issue because under conditions of social injustice there is a pattern of epistemic exclusion that systematically disadvantages certain groups in reinforcing loops:

Where unjust power relations are in play, the link between individual epistemic agency and social epistemic practices forged by attitudes about the epistemic capacities of self and diverse others, creates a mutually supporting ‘feedback loop’ between a widespread, socially inculcated habitual failure of epistemic trustworthiness, on the one hand, and patterns of epistemic interaction on the other, which perpetuate those power relations (Daukas 2006, p. 116).

Given the economic and social significance of knowledge (many suggest we now live in a “knowledge economy” (Mason 2013)), unjust epistemic exclusion results in widespread disadvantage for members of racially subordinate groups.

In addition to issues of virtue and disadvantage, however, it is worth considering the idea that a failure to grant others epistemic credibility due to their race is a moral wrong in itself. Miranda Fricker considers this in her book *Epistemic Injustice* (2007). Her central concept is *testimonial injustice*. In her view, in the central cases of testimonial injustice, an individual speaker suffers a credibility deficit based on systematic identity prejudice. Fricker (2007) says,

Systematic testimonial injustices, then, are produced not by prejudice *simpliciter*, but specifically by those prejudices that ‘track’ the subject through different dimensions of social activity—economic, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political, religious, and so on. Being subject to a tracker prejudice renders one susceptible not only to testimonial injustice but to a gamut of different injustices, and so when such a prejudice generates a testimonial injustice, that injustice is systematically connected with other kinds of actual or potential injustice (p. 27).

In Kevin’s description of *Biology class*, systematic identity prejudice is a plausible explanation of the substitute teacher’s claim that Kevin stole the computer equipment (and plausibly also the accusation of being disruptive). Kevin, being Black, is assumed to be prone to criminal behavior. His denial is not considered credible until the Dean intervenes.

Being falsely accused of wrongdoing has bad consequences for the individual accused, sometimes very bad consequences, particularly when the error is not uncovered. In Kevin’s interpretation of the incidents in *Biology class*, the teacher is not morally or epistemically trustworthy: she claims to know who the wrongdoer is although she doesn’t actually know, and refuses to consider what Kevin or the others in the class say. Kevin’s word counts for nothing even though his actions do not warrant disrespect. The teacher’s actions are morally wrong. But we can gain further insight by considering the broader significance of epistemic trust.

In each of the examples of epistemic injustice, there are bad consequences. But the wrong is not just a matter of bad consequences. In Fricker’s (2007) view, testimonial injustice wrongs an individual “in her capacity as knower” (p. 20). In the simplest

sense, this involves unjustly depriving the individual of knowledge. Individuals who suffer testimonial injustice are excluded from the epistemic community and so are not granted fair access to a collective good. But what exactly is this good? If we think of knowledge as a product of inquiry and/or training, then one might construe the wrong by analogy with an unfair distribution of stuff: some of us unfairly gain greater access to or a greater proportion of the knowledge pie than others. If knowledge is the sort of thing that universities create and distribute, then unjustly depriving some groups of access to university education might be viewed in terms of an unjust distribution of knowledge-stuff (*mutatis mutandis* for K-12 education). Epistemic injustice might even be considered akin to theft: mistrust can cause an individual to lose knowledge, for if I am subject to suspicion, exclusion, or even ridicule when I put forth my knowledge in cooperative inquiry, then I may give up the belief, or the justification for it, in spite of my evidence (Fricker 2007).<sup>13</sup>

However, wrongs of mistrust and epistemic exclusion are not aptly understood by relying on a commodified understanding of knowledge, “for credibility is not a good that belongs with the distributive model of justice” (Fricker 2007, p. 19). The cooperative participation in a knowledge community—in the process of giving and receiving knowledge—is essential to who and what we are, for it is the activity that both trains us for and enables us to enact our rational capacities.

No wonder, then, that being insulted, undermined, or otherwise wronged in one’s capacity as a giver of knowledge is something that can cut deep. No wonder too that in contexts of oppression the powerful will be sure to undermine the powerless in just that capacity, for it provides a direct route to undermining them in their very humanity.... The fact that the primary injustice involves insult to someone in respect of a capacity essential to human value lends even its least harmful instances a symbolic power that adds a layer of harm of its own: the epistemic wrong bears a social meaning to the effect that the subject is less than fully human (Fricker 2007, p. 44).

Being excluded from the rational community, even subtly, and even only occasionally, matters. And if such exclusion is systematic and prejudicial, the wrong can be severe.

Drawing on Bernard Williams’ work *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002), Fricker argues further that it is in and through trustful conversation that we are able to form selves at all. The idea is not just that we need a public language in order to have a sense of self, or humankind concepts to become the kind of agent we are (Hacking 1986); we need trustful conversation in which each of us can pull together our various thoughts, desires, and fantasies into a relatively stable whole. As Williams (2002) puts it:

In different historical and social circumstances, various structures may serve to build a self that will at once make sense of episodic feelings and thoughts—render the subject, as I have put it, steadier—and also relate the person to others in ways that will serve the purposes of co-operation and trust (p. 200).

He goes on to describe these two tasks, or problems, of steadying the self and situating it in society:

One is a political problem, of finding a basis for a shared life which will be neither too oppressively coercive (the requirement of freedom) nor dependent on mythical legitimations (the requirement of enlightenment). The other is a personal problem, of stabilizing the self into a form that will indeed fit with these political

and social ideas, but which can at the same time create a life that presents itself to a reflective individual as worth living... (p. 201).

What solves these problems, together, is trustful conversation:

Drawn to bind myself to the others' shared values, to make my own beliefs and feeling steadier...I become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely profess; I become what I have sincerely declared to them... (p. 204).

So epistemic trust and credibility is not just needed to gain access to knowledge goods, but it is essential to becoming a socially situated self.

Of course it is compatible with Williams' points that one can become a self through trustful conversation with a few intimates. But to become a *socially situated self*, one must engage in more public conversations with others. These public conversations, at least in our culture, begin at school, and by the time one is an adolescent, they are a crucial part of one's daily work. The self is formed as one's internal feelings and thoughts are formulated and reformulated in response to friends, teachers, coaches, and informed by literature, history, art, and music, as well as the push and shove of life.

There are at least two sorts of injustice that can emerge in this project of self-formation. One is that one is unjustly limited to a narrow range of conversations that do not enable one to form a self that is fully integrated into public space (in the extreme case I have in mind cultures in which women do not even speak the language used in public spaces); another is that the conversations one enters into provide one with limited or distorted resources for forming a self. This latter case may be one in which one participates as if one's conversation partners are trustworthy, but they are not. Their responses, then, may lead one to self-interpretations that are distorted or socially stigmatized. For example, homosexual desire tentatively expressed in a homophobic context may prompt seemingly authoritative responses that represent such desire as shameful, and the shame is internalized; or in a racist context, some might respond to intellectual aspirations expressed by a Black girl by treating such desire as ridiculous, thus quashing the dream. Such conversations do provide information about the social identities available, but the prejudice encoded in the replies is hidden, cloaked by an air of moral and epistemic authority.

The broader worry here is that in a social hierarchy, collective understandings are structured to favor those in power. The selves we become are significantly a product of the social relations we enter into, including teacher-student relations. Individuals are judged by norms and offered identities that make them suitable for particular social roles. Those marked as destined for subordinate roles will not be recognized as full participants in conversations that make them eligible for more privileged roles. Their experiments with selfhood that reach beyond the roles assigned to them will be registered as failures. When the teacher brings to these relations prejudice that is echoed broadly in the culture, it is not surprising that education produces individuals who are most successful at becoming what they are expected to be. Anything else would be radical, dangerous.

## RACIAL SEMIOTICS

I have been suggesting that it is useful to see the issue of race in education as not simply a matter of how individuals or institutions within the educational system *respond* to race, but how the system *creates* race. Yet, one might argue, the examples I have



offered above are excellent instances of precisely how individual teachers and students respond to race. Don't the students and teachers have a race prior to their interaction? Isn't race already a fact to be dealt with in the circumstances? And isn't the failure to deal with race fairly and equitably what causes the particular forms of racial injustice just described?

There is certainly some truth in this way of representing the problem. And, to be clear, my claim is not that an individual teacher or student creates race *de novo*; rather, teachers and students are parts of a structure that racializes individuals and sustains racial hierarchy, and this is how race is constructed. As I see it, focusing on the failure of *individuals* to respond correctly to *the racial facts* tempts us to misdiagnose the problem.<sup>14</sup>

First, the belief that an individual's race is "given," that it is part of the world that we are simply responding to, often rests on a mistaken folk biology of race. Second, and more importantly for our purposes, the supposed "givenness" allows people to evade their own contribution to the social realities of race. The contributions I have in mind are not simply the biased actions that occur in interaction, but our tolerance of the racial status quo. The problem is not just that individuals are prejudiced, though they are, or have unconscious biases, though they do. The problem is that these prejudices and biases are systematically produced and sustained through the social institutions and culture we all participate in, and they persist in spite of thoughtful efforts to eradicate them and good intentions on the part of individual agents interacting across racial differences.<sup>15</sup>

One reason why individuals' good intentions are not enough is that unfairness towards Blacks as a group has a long history in this country, and the unfairness has had material consequences that are hard to overcome. Big and small injustices accumulate and place burdens on the disadvantaged that cannot be easily escaped. Antiracist attitudes on the part of individuals do little to compensate for this material disadvantage. This is why redistribution of resources and material support to underfunded schools is crucial. However, focusing primarily on the history of African American disadvantage encourages (often skewed) historical comparisons with other groups and a temptation to locate the injustice as having occurred in the past rather than the present. This emphasis on the past elides *race* as a factor in addressing the current situation. In such a "postracial" account, racial groups that were discriminated against in the past have a legacy of disadvantage to make up, but the problems are now racially neutral, because the real problems are disadvantages with respect to wealth, healthcare, education, and job opportunities, etc., that members of any racial group might face. Racism, or racial injustice, is not the problem anymore, or so the story goes.<sup>16</sup>

However, further consideration of the case studies we have examined suggests that we should consider a third factor in addition to conscious and unconscious bias, and accumulated material disadvantage. Racial injustice occurs and historical disadvantage is exacerbated because individuals of color, and their actions, are interpreted through an ideological interface—in ways similar to how language is an interface—that systematically disadvantages them. Simply asking individuals to be more conscientious in responding to racial difference neither adequately targets the normative issue, nor is sufficient to make lasting change in a context where racial meanings provide a dominant interpretive frame.

To explore this third factor we need to develop and apply the notion of *social meaning*. The idea of social meaning is relatively familiar in the case of spoken language: the meaning of the term is not determined simply by what I have in mind when I use the term (I can use the term incorrectly), but by the way a term is used and understood collectively. Use of the particular phrase 'social meaning' usually implies an extension

of the notion of meaning beyond spoken languages to action more broadly. Lawrence Lessig (1995) has done important work to clarify the notion:

Any society or social context has what I call here social meanings—the semiotic content attached to various actions, or inactions, or statuses, within a particular context...[the point is to] find a way to speak of the frameworks of understanding within which individuals live; a way to describe what they take or *understand* various actions, or inactions, or statuses to be; and a way to understand how the understandings change (pp. 951–952).

Lessig provides the example of wearing a seatbelt in a cab in Budapest (prior to the mid-1990s). Doing so, especially if the driver suggested you didn't need one, would be insulting, whether you intended the insult or not. "To wear a seatbelt was to insult the driver. That insult is a social meaning" (p. 952). Importantly, Lessig points out,

[Social meanings] change, they are contested, and they differ across communities and individuals. But we can speak of social meaning, and meaning management, I suggest, without believing that there is a single, agreed upon point for any social act.... Actions have meaning, even if their meaning differs across individuals. Even if there is no single meaning, there is a range or distribution of meanings, and the question we ask here is how that range gets made, and, more importantly, changed (pp. 954–955).

Semiotics, at least on one understanding, is the study of such social meanings, what they are, how they are created, reproduced, and disrupted.<sup>17</sup>

Even at this early stage of clarification it is useful, I think, to add two points to Lessig's characterization. First, not only actions/inactions and statuses have social meanings. Things such as traffic signals, money, jewelry, and colors can have social meaning too. As we all know, pink *means* girl and blue *means* boy, right? Of course the social meaning of things depends on attitudes, i.e., collective understandings in a context; however, the same is true of everything that has social meaning, including actions/inactions, statuses, and the like. The whole point of saying that an action has a social meaning is to understand it as having a significance by virtue of collective understandings, not just the personal meaning given to it by the agent (or patient).<sup>18</sup> This emphasis on the social collective rather than the individual, and on the background symbolic resources rather than speech events, also distinguishes a semiotic approach from a speech act approach to social meaning.<sup>19</sup>

Second, Lessig (1995) argues that in order for something to have a social meaning in a context, the meaning must be accepted by those in that context and not appear to be socially contingent:

[Social meanings] must be *taken for granted* by those within the group at issue, or put another way, they must be relatively uncontested in that context. It is not enough that individuals understand that a particular idea along with a given action may yield a given meaning. For it to function as a "social meaning" the individuals in this context must also accept it. For an action to convey a social meaning in the sense I want to use the term here, it must do so without appearing contingent or contested; it must do so in a way that feels natural. As Bourdieu describes, it must function with a sort of "social magic" (p. 959).<sup>20</sup>

Although I agree with Lessig that one way (perhaps an especially important way) that social meanings have force is by virtue of seeming "natural" or "necessary," by existing

“invisibly” and being “unnoticed” (pp. 959–960), another way is for the dominant group to take them for granted and impose them, even if they are not endorsed by everyone in the context, e.g., by those they are imposed upon. In such cases, the dominant can justify their actions by reference to social meanings, and such justification appears (and functions as) secure even if the subordinate reject the meanings and justifications in question.

In fact, Lessig’s own example of education demonstrates, I submit, that something can be socially meaningful in a context, and the meaning have social power, even if in the same context it is contested and recognized by some to be arbitrary. Education, of course, not only conveys information and academic skills, but also socializes children into a culture. Culturally mandated responses become automatized through repetition, close monitoring, and correction. In other words, education teaches us—inculcates—social meanings. But by Lessig’s own lights, it (often) does so coercively, even in cases where the coercion is not represented or commonly viewed as such. Yet surely the inculcation is often experienced as coercive (“stupid,” “insulting,” and “painful”) to the student. Lessig argues that the primary way of inculcating social meanings is to adjust context so that one comes to absorb them because it is in one’s interest to do so. This may be true. But one can certainly recognize that something is in one’s interest, while also resisting it together with the background conditions that make it in one’s interest. Returning to an example considered above, it is in Mustafa’s interest to defer to the teacher when she challenges his knowledge of Egypt, but it does not follow that he accepts her imposed social meaning of his comment or the circumstances that make it wise for him to defer. (And likewise, she may not accept his interpretation of her action.) Nonetheless, by virtue of her authority, she coerces his deference and he experiences her as coercive.

The concept of *social meanings* is an important tool for understanding social interaction because what we actually do in a context is not simply a matter of intention, but is partly determined by the meanings that are in the background in that context. The same is true of language, of course (e.g., I may intend to apologize but fail to do so because my choice of words is inapt, or because, for any number of reasons, my interlocutor doesn’t pick up what I’m trying to do). Mustafa, as we saw, attempted to correct the teacher about women’s roles in Egypt by making an assertion of fact. He interpreted her as confrontational because he exposed her ignorance and challenged her authority. This may not be how she saw the interaction; it might even be a misrepresentation of the classroom dynamics. But the meanings Mustafa and Jonathan relied on are easily and publicly available: For a teenaged male of color to contradict a teacher based on solid evidence has a meaning that the teacher must manage in order to retain her authority. Because Ms. S. lost epistemic authority concerning the facts, she asserted social authority by expelling Mustafa from the classroom. This expulsion, in turn, had meaning, namely, that his knowledge and experience are not valued, and that she is the qualified knower whose word matters.

Notice, however, that the challenge to the teacher’s authority could have occurred, even if Mustafa had not intended it; and the expulsion of Mustafa from the classroom would devalue his knowledge even if the teacher recognizes that he has knowledge of Egyptian customs. In such cases, one might make efforts to cancel social meanings but, as mentioned above, it isn’t entirely up to the agent what meanings their actions have, just as it is not entirely up to a speaker what her words mean. Elizabeth Anderson (2010) notes, social meaning “does not consist simply in private thoughts isolated in the minds of discrete individuals. It consists in the fact that these thoughts enjoy a certain public standing, coloring the meanings of interactions even among people who would prefer that these meanings not apply” (p. 53).<sup>21</sup>

The example is further complicated by the racial/ethnic differences of the participants. In the example, the teacher is White, Mustafa is Egyptian, and Jonathan, Mustafa's friend, is Black. Jonathan "reads" the interaction as racially significant: the expulsion of Mustafa is the expulsion of a male student of color; he takes it to express a devaluation of not only Mustafa's knowledge but also the knowledge of non-White males more generally. This may be an incorrect reading of the teacher's *attitudes*, but it is a reasonable reading of the social meaning of the teacher's *action*, especially if we are considering that it occurs in a large public high school where the behavior of non-White males is always under suspicion. Moreover, the dominant culture is one in which the disruptive potential of males of color is more salient than their academic potential; it is one in which their assertions of fact are read as confrontational rather than illuminating. So in an academic context, treating males of color as disruptive and confrontational when they assert the truth carries a meaning that both draws on and reinforces this broader devaluation of their intellect *whether or not it reflects the teacher's implicit or explicit attitudes at the time*. And, in turn, the message that their intellect is not valuable is something the students then must process, often in the damaging ways I have already outlined.

The effects of social meaning are also present in the other cases. When Ms. H., after engaging in a lively conversation with a female student, turns to Eli and asks, slowly, "Did you do your homework?," her intentions might have been pure. Perhaps Eli hadn't done his homework consistently in recent weeks. Perhaps her voice slowed because she wanted to emphasize the importance of finishing homework. But the contrast between the "sparkling" intellectual exchange between the two White women and the tone and content of Ms. H.'s remark to Eli has social meaning beyond her intentions. And Eli read the meaning. In that context, the teacher's actions say that Eli is not a legitimate or qualified party to her exchange with his friend, that his ideas were not valuable, and that he was first and foremost academically suspect rather than an intellectual contributor. Understandably, he experienced insult.

My point is not to criticize the teacher, or simply to highlight the potential for misunderstanding. Rather, it is to call attention to the fact that racial meanings are part of our social world, whether we like it or not, and that these meanings have profound effects, again whether we like it or not. Although in the cases discussed above the interactions between students and teachers might have occurred even if the students had been White, they wouldn't have had the same meaning (though, depending on other factors, they might have been harmful in other ways). For this reason, cross-racial comparisons are often inapt: noting that White males are also sent to the dean when they are "disruptive" doesn't take into account the semiotic differences between the two actions. (Such comparisons also typically fail to note differences in what is considered a sufficient basis for punitive action.) The question at issue is how the teacher-student relationships are constituted and how they evolve. In ordinary cases, expelling a Black male from the class will carry the message that males of color (or, more specifically, Black males) are not academic achievers, that their intellectual contributions are not valuable. This message affects everyone in the classroom and changes the relationships between students of color and other students, and between both groups of students and the teacher.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the White male it is much more likely, I submit, that he will be regarded as an individual bad actor, not a representative of his race. Moreover, hearing the message of epistemic disrespect for Blacks repeated over and over eventually leads to very damaging results, e.g., beliefs that Black males don't have what it takes to succeed academically, or that the teacher is not trustworthy, along with emotional responses that are undermining, e.g., withdrawal, anger, and depression.

I suggested above that although individual attitudes, both conscious or unconscious, play a role in perpetuating social injustice, focusing on them is neither normatively apt nor the best strategy for promoting social justice. Although sometimes individuals do wrong and are blameworthy, individual agents are not usually responsible (causally or morally) for the fact that there exist social meanings that disadvantage some racial groups and privilege others. Individuals may be responsible for knowing and managing social meanings where they can lead to injustice, but this is not always feasible. And although change on the part of some individuals may make a difference, social meanings are sustained by much broader structures that attitudes alone cannot change, (e.g., segregation, wealth imbalances, cultural and linguistic differences, and the media). Although both attitudes and the unjust distribution of resources are both part of the story, a further element—racial semiotics—is a crucial part of the mechanism of racial injustice, and as Trayvon Martin’s black hoodie testifies, it can be deadly.<sup>23</sup>

By adding a third dimension to our understanding of racial injustice—the social/cultural dimension beyond the psychological and material—we broaden responsibility for the wrongs that occur. Only some of us are responsible for providing working computers (and such) to schools, and only some of us are responsible for incidents of bias or misinterpretation that occur in a high school classroom. But we are all, collectively, responsible for the social meanings that are dominant in our culture and are all responsible for the ways that social meanings are circulated and perpetuated. The emphasis on psychology offloads the moral responsibility to individuals who are engaged in the immediate interaction, but the challenge may be too much for them, given that, in many cases, there will be almost nothing they can do to avoid the meanings they elicit (everything they do will be interpreted in ways that continue to be problematic). The real solution has to be bigger and broader, and engage different levers for social change.

## CREATING RACE

Let us return briefly to the claim that education (among other institutions and structures) creates race. I have been arguing that, at least in some contexts, it is valuable to shift from diagnosing the problem of educational inequity in terms of individual *responses* to race, and instead to analyze it as a process by which we collectively *create* or *maintain* race. To do so is to call attention to how our practices are implicated in producing the racial reality we take for granted. The shift also pushes us past the individual agent as the site of problematic “responses” to explore the social mechanisms—the practices, the relations, the meanings, and the structures—that entrench racial hierarchy. But what does it mean to create (or maintain) race?

I have mentioned before that in earlier work, I have argued that gender and race, in the core senses, should be defined in terms of social relations (Haslanger 2000). Considered simply, a relation constitutes two (or more) groups whose members serve as *relata* for the relation. Consider the social categories of *landlord* and *tenant*. These are constituted by a social relationship—renting to/from—that holds between the members of each group, i.e., membership in each of the categories is determined by virtue of standing in the relation. This relationship is possible only against a larger backdrop of economic, political, and legal conditions. Members of each category vary in their identification with the category and in their experiences as members of the category; the norms associated with the categories vary from context to context; and individuals can be members of neither or both categories and can move from one



to the other or out of both. Although there are obvious and important differences between the categories of landlord/tenant and race, I claim that racial categories are likewise constituted by social relations.

Since the 1970s, feminists have argued for the social construction of gender using the slogan: *gender is the social meaning of sex*. Although some feminists now reject this slogan, the point is to distinguish, on one hand, the anatomical features by virtue of which one counts as male or female, e.g., having XX or XY chromosomes and a variety of primary and secondary sex characteristics and, on the other hand, the relations that one comes to stand in by virtue of the social meaning of the sexed body.<sup>24</sup> In effect, having a body considered to be of a particular sex entails, socially, that one will or should participate in some practices and not others, clothe oneself in some ways and not others, and enjoy some activities and not others, etc. Of course, we don't all follow the "rules" that define us in relation to each other by sex, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. Gender results from the imposition of sex-differentiating roles, norms, and identities (i.e., from the social meaning given to sex).

As I see it, there are important parallels between gender and race. Transposing the feminist slogan yields, I argue: *race is the social meaning of "color."* "Color" in the intended sense (indicated by the use of scare quotes) 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 American context. And just as the interpretation of someone's gender is separable from the interpretation of their sex, it is not uncommon to find someone's race distinguished from their "color," as illustrated by the descriptions "oreo," "coco-nut," or "banana," and without the same inner/outer metaphor, "white chocolate." (In a more positive vein, it is not incoherent for a person "colored" white to refuse to be White.)

According to my account (see Haslanger 2000), races are constituted not by just any social meaning of "color" but, in particular, meanings that situate individuals within a relatively stable social hierarchy. It follows from this view that to eliminate "color" hierarchy is to eliminate races, and this is something we should aim for. However, this is not to recommend genocide! Cultural and non-hierarchical ethnic groups may remain even where there are no races, and terms that now pick out racial groups such as 'White,' 'Asian,' 'Black' may come to pick out non-hierarchical social groups with the same members. (In short, I think it is indeterminate at this point whether names for races rigidly designate racial groups or social groups that may, at some point, cease to be races.) Although I have argued that the ordinary English term 'race' and particular names of races such as 'White,' 'Black,' 'Asian,' 'Hispanic,' 'Native/Indigenous,' and, increasingly, 'Arab,' refer to racial categories, this is less important to me than a recognition of the social categories, whatever we call them.

Putting together the claim that race is the social meaning of "color" with the (sketch of an) account of social meaning in the previous section, we can better understand how race persists even though many of us now recognize that it is not a biological or genetic category, do not want to be racist, and actively work to embrace racial diversity. Very roughly, all bodies are marked and interpreted in light of cultural schemas that group them in accordance with the local ideology (Sewell 1992).<sup>25</sup> In the case of race, individuals are seen as having ancestral origins in a place and at a time that is taken to be significant, and there are cultural narratives explaining features of the group and its history, e.g., what members of the group have in common and why they are here. In effect, "color" has social meaning. The social relations



defining both gender and race consist in patterns of treatment towards bodies as they are perceived (or imagined) through collective frameworks of salience. Just as pink means girl and blue means boy in the contemporary United States, the bodily markings presumed to be evidence of (relatively recent) ancestry in sub-Saharan Africa “mean” (among other things) intellectual inferiority, unless canceled or inflected by other markers, e.g., of class, gender, and ethnicity.<sup>26</sup>

“Colored” and “sexed” bodies are situated socially in light of the collective meanings. Race occurs when the ideology in question supports and gives rise to hierarchy. Such narratives will typically imply that a given group is “fit” for some activities and not others, and this, in turn, motivates and “justifies” their role in divisions of labor, social domains, and other forms of activity. For these roles, then, there are norms: criteria for what it takes to do that labor or activity *well*. For example, consider a context in which those interpreted as having a “black” body are regarded as suited for menial labor. Such labor entails a different relation to education and other social goods than professional work. Correspondingly, there are different norms for those who perform such labor.<sup>27</sup> Even allowing for cultural differences, what makes a good professional is not the same as what makes a good ditch digger, janitor, or maid. For example, a good menial laborer is strong, but not too smart or too creative, doesn’t think for him or herself, but shows up on time and follows the rules.

If we suppose that a society needs some individuals to perform menial labor and to perform it well, then (in the modern context) rather than coerce individuals to fulfill this role, it is better for them to be motivated to perform it.<sup>28</sup> So in this picture, ideally, we should designate a group for these jobs and have them internalize the norms, i.e., the norms must be incorporated as part of one’s identity and represent what would count as at least part of one’s success as an individual (Foucault 1995). This process usually involves developing unconscious patterns of behavior that reinforce the role in oneself and others and enable one to judge and be judged by its associated norms. In order for large groups of people to internalize similar or complementary norms, there must be a cultural vocabulary—concepts, narratives, images, scripts, and cautionary tales—that provide the framework for action.<sup>29</sup> The cultural vocabulary, of course, will be very complex: the scripts and images for any particular individual will have elements that pertain to the multiple social roles and norms she or he is expected to satisfy.<sup>30</sup>

If we consider the pattern of experiences that males of color encounter through primary and secondary education, a pattern reflected in the examples discussed in earlier sections, it is very tempting to conclude that the educational system is preparing them for positions that are outside, or at best at the margins of, the knowledge economy. The relations that are maintained (hierarchical, mistrustful, untrustworthy), responses that are encouraged (frustration, anger, passivity, deference), the participation expected (marginal, resistant, diffident), are not the makings of a knowledge-worker. Knowledge is a valuable resource, however, and systematic exclusion has serious long-term effects:

Knowledge gives political, financial, and existential advantages to its holders. Returns from knowledge allow its holders to reproduce the institutions and relations that sustain their advantages. In such areas as public health, food supply, environmental quality, and lethal combat, applications of knowledge strongly affect who survives and who lives comfortably (Tilly 2005, pp. 122–123).

Any group that is denied full participation in the knowledge economy will be vulnerable to exploitation and ongoing subordination. Moreover, as we saw above, to be denied

access to trusting epistemic relationships is wrong in itself, for it deprives one of the resources to become self-integrated into a social network that one can wholeheartedly endorse. So unless the educational system can address not only the problematic attitudes of individual teachers and the disparity in resources students of color face, but also the racial semiotics that provide the backdrop for all of the relationships in academic settings—relationships between teachers, students, parents, administrators, and employers, etc.—the result of education will remain a racialized economy that systematically situates persons of “color” in disadvantaged positions.<sup>31</sup> This is what it is to create race.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that breakdowns of trust and trustworthiness between teachers and students can cause substantial disadvantages, and when the breakdowns happen disproportionately along lines of race, this is a source of racial disadvantage. Some of the disadvantages are academic: high achievement is much more difficult when one faces mistrust, ego depletion, effort pessimism, and insult. And within a knowledge economy, exclusion from knowledge work makes one vulnerable to injustice. But the problem goes deeper than achievement, for schools are contexts in which we develop self-understandings and identities that situate us as members of society. If students of color are systematically denied full participation in trusting conversations that create shared knowledge—in particular, knowledge that holds power within the dominant culture—they are unjustly deprived resources to form the kinds of flourishing selves that are suited to the positions of power and authority. (Of course, this is not to say that these hurdles cannot be overcome, but that there are substantial extra hurdles to be overcome.)

One model of justice in education emphasizes equal opportunity. Although there are many different models of opportunity and equality, the argument just offered suggests that there are at least two assumptions about educational opportunity to avoid. The first is that knowledge, know-how, and achievement (or access to such) are best understood simply as commodities to be distributed. Even if there are ways in which knowledge functions like a good, it is the sort of good that depends on active participation in a community governed by moral and epistemic norms. The unfair distribution of knowledge and know-how is a bad thing, but the systematic violation of moral and epistemic norms that distorts the development of flourishing (in Williams’ (2002) terms, free and enlightened) selves is the more grave injustice.

The second assumption is that opportunity is best understood as access. This assumption often occurs with the idea that once access is open, achievement is just a function of talent and desire; those who fail are either unmotivated or lack talent. Explanations of the achievement gap will often attempt to explain lack of motivation and lack of “talent” in terms of social context, so individuals need not be blamed for these lacks. But the problem is that even those who are motivated and talented can fail: they may have drained their willpower by coping with insults, or reasonably lose optimism about their efficacy. Over time, motivation may well shift away from achievement. But under the circumstances this can be a rational response. The barriers to achievement are many, but true opportunity is impossible without trust and trustworthiness.

The challenge, as I see it, is to find ways to disrupt the process of racialization that constitutes White individuals (more often than not, also male) as suited for power and authority, as full members of the knowledge/human community, and others as not.

Work on implicit bias and other cognitive and affective mechanisms is valuable, but remains mostly focused on individuals and good will. We have seen that, because the problem is collective and embodied in social relations, there are limits to what this can accomplish. Efforts to identify forms of material disadvantage have also been important, though it is difficult to create the extensive network of programs needed to address the problems. Moreover, actions to address disadvantage themselves take on social meaning, e.g., the racialization of welfare or Head Start, and through these meanings their goals are compromised. I do not know of any general procedure for changing social meanings, though others have described a variety of strategies that work in different contexts (Anderson 2010; Appiah 2010; Lessig 1995; Tilly 2005). My goal here has not been to provide a solution, but to illuminate the ways in which we continue to create race collectively, in spite of what has already been a long hard fight on the part of many to stop it.

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## NOTES

1. This paper was originally presented at the Spencer Foundation Workshop on Race, Opportunity and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, October 15, 2011. Many thanks to Lawrence Blum for encouraging me to work on education and submit the paper, and to Meira Levinson for her support. A version was also presented as a Ryle Lecture at Trent University, March 2012; as a Carus Lecture at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meetings, April 2012; at a graduate conference at CUNY in May 2012; and at the Stanford University Political Theory Workshop in January 2014. Many thanks to those who contributed to the discussions at each of these occasions. Special thanks to Alexandra Blackman, Joshua Cohen, John Camacho, Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman, Richard Holton, Christopher Lewis, Charles Mills, Sara Mrsny, Kristi Olson, Rob Reich, Debra Satz, Patrick Taylor Smith, and Manuel Vargas for valuable conversation, and to Tom Dougherty, Charles Mills, and Robert Gooding-Williams for excellent comments on an earlier draft.
2. For a useful survey of disadvantages, see Anderson (2010), particularly chapters 2–4.
3. The suggestion, borrowing from Simone de Beauvoir (1989), that individuals are not born, but *become* raced, is not new; I do not attempt to argue for the general point here. Rather, I'm interested in exploring particular mechanisms that construct raced individuals to be situated within a knowledge hierarchy. Literature on the achievement gap does not, to my mind, attend sufficiently to the micropolitics of classroom life and how such dynamics function in the construction of race. This is not to deny that there are many other factors that play a role.
4. This is not to say that we can only understand race or racism by separating it from other “confounding factors.” But the study of disadvantage should include the many ways that disadvantage is experienced, including the intersections between advantages and disadvantages. See Spelman (1990, Ch. 5).
5. Although there is some controversy over whether there are biological classifications of human beings that might count as substitutes for (or improvements on) our ordinary classifications, there is little controversy, I think, about whether our *ordinary U.S. classifications* track biological kinds. Although I do not find neo-naturalism about race plausible, I intend to leave open whether there are “natural” divisions between human beings that might be called ‘races.’ I will be assuming, however, that our enacted classifications of individuals in daily life do not correspond to genetically differentiated groups and that biological features alone are not what we are actually tracking. Useful references on this issue include Koenig et al. (2008), Whitmarsh and Jones (2010), and Spencer (2012).
6. To accommodate the global reach of races, the specifics of my account allow that an individual A may be a member of a race R in context C if that individual *would be* viewed and treated as an R when in C.

7. Laurence Thomas (1989) defends the importance of trust for the development of moral character. In this context, I'm especially interested in the role of trust for the development of epistemic agents and the importance of epistemic agency for moral agency.
8. Of course, being expelled from a classroom is a common disciplinary measure and happens to both Whites and students of color. It would be useful to have data on whether Blacks or students of color are more generally expelled from a classroom than Whites, and on what basis. Gender is plausibly a further factor that should be considered in an interpretation of this example.
9. The "distrust" feedback loop is similar to the "untrustworthiness" feedback loop, but in the latter, members of the subordinate group lose confidence (they become untrustworthy about their own epistemic abilities) and this explains their loss of status; in the "distrust" case, members of the subordinate group don't lose confidence, but rather withdraw from the exchange because they recognize the untrustworthiness of their interlocutor.
10. These points are summarized in Richard Holton (2009, p. 134). See Schmeichel et al. (2003), and Wheeler et al. (2007).
11. One debate about ego depletion is whether the effects are mediated by (implicit) beliefs about willpower, so that those who believe that willpower is an unlimited resource are not (as) depleted by exertion (Job et al., 2010). This issue, although important for developing a theory of cognitive depletion, is less relevant in understanding the occurrence of depletion in ordinary circumstances where individuals are not primed with theories of willpower. Another question is if willpower, "like a muscle," is strengthened by exertion, then why aren't those who suffer regular racial insults cognitively benefited, given the importance of willpower for executive functioning. Interestingly, some research has found that although repeated exercise of self-control can build willpower, this was not shown to hold for mood regulation. In Mark Muraven et al. (1999), those asked to practice mood regulation over a period of two weeks performed worse on the willpower tasks than they had initially, in contrast to the other self-control conditions. Although anger and frustration are not "moods," it would not be surprising if anger/frustration control showed the same results. However, even if, technically, ego depletion does not occur when managing anger, we are all aware of the distracting impact of anger and its disruptive effects on cognition.
12. Pessimism and optimism also involve explanation styles for good events too. I simplify here.
13. However, there are many ways in which knowledge is unlike other goods. Those investigating the "knowledge economy" suggest, e.g., that knowledge calls for an economics of abundance, not scarcity; that knowledge is "leaky" and cannot be taxed or contained in the same way as other goods; and knowledge is of value to business but hard to measure in annual reports. See Peters (2002).
14. I believe, actually, that there are several problems. One complication I won't pursue here is epistemic: what is going on, exactly, when people "see" (and respond to) someone's race? In seeing someone's race, one is not plausibly seeing that they have a racial essence or a genetic marker for race, because there are no racial essences or such markers corresponding to our (U.S.) racial categories. So how should we understand the suggestion that individuals "see" race and "respond to" race (assuming that these terms are factive): What is the race they "see"? It is not plausible that one's race is simply determined by one's skin color, eye shape, hair texture, etc. At least in the United States, race is not so determined, as is clear from legal cases (*Doe v. State of Louisiana* 1985; Omi 1997; Stevens 1999), personal narratives, autobiographies, and biographies (e.g., Williams 1995), etc. See also Alcoff (2000).
15. This is yet another example of the looping effects of social kinds. See Hacking (1994) and Mallon (2003).
16. See Wise (2010) for a discussion of the temptation to postracialism and its flaws.
17. Thanks to Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman (2012) for pointing me in the direction of semiotics.
18. It would be useful to develop Lawrence Lessig's conception of social meaning using Robert Stalnaker's idea of "common ground" (2002) and David Lewis's idea of scorekeeping (1979). I have explored uses of Stalnaker and Lewis for social analysis in (Haslanger 2011). Another resource here is Robert Brandom's (2001) notion of "material inferences" (p. 52). Thanks to Jack Marley-Payne (2012) for bringing this to my attention.
19. The speech act approach can be extremely helpful in analyzing the social import of action, and has been developed in brilliant ways. See Hornsby (2000), Langton (2009), McGowan (2004, 2009). I don't see these two approaches as competing, but as complementary.
20. Lessig's characterization is not precise on this point, for at some points he claims that acceptance of the social meaning is necessary, sometimes that the meaning must be "relatively

- uncontested,” and sometimes that the meaning has power to the degree that it is accepted. These are not equivalent and have importantly different consequences for the account.
21. Elizabeth Anderson (2010) considers the public nature of social meanings in the context of racial stigmatization. Although I am sympathetic with Anderson’s account, I resist her suggestion that for something to have social meaning it must be “public,” given her further claim that publicity requires common knowledge between the members of the group in question that this meaning exists. Lessig’s example of the tourist wearing a seat belt in the Budapest cab is a case in point. (I grant that Anderson may only be making the claim that for a meaning to be stigmatizing, it must be public, but I would resist this as well, given the general point that we can unknowingly convey meanings.) On my view, a meaning might have a “certain public standing” without being common knowledge.
  22. A more thorough examination of these issues would situate the semiotics of race within a relational analysis of inequality along the lines Charles Tilly (1998, 2005) has developed. As Tilly (2005) puts it, “In a relational view, inequality emerges from asymmetrical social interactions in which advantages accumulate on one side or the other, fortified by construction of social categories that justify and sustain unequal advantage” (p. 100). He continues, “Categories in such a view, do not consist of mental constructs but of socially negotiated boundaries and changing relations across those boundaries” (p. 100).
  23. Geraldo Rivera commented shortly after Trayvon Martin’s murder became news that “I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as George Zimmerman was” (Fung 2012). I am certainly not agreeing with Rivera that Martin or his hoodie were morally responsible for the shooting; Zimmerman was the wrongdoer. However, one can accept this while also allowing that black hoodies on Black males have complex social meanings that convey different things within different communities. This is another example where social meaning does not require common knowledge. The movement in which “respected” Black athletes, academics, and law students wore black hoodies to respond to Rivera (the Million Hoodie March, the Howard University “Do I Look Suspicious Campaign,” etc.) was an effort to adjust and expand the black hoodie’s social meaning.
  24. I use the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ for the currently dominant distinction between the sexes, and ‘man’ and ‘woman’ for the currently dominant distinction between genders. I will also use the upper case terms ‘White’ and ‘Black’ for races, and lower case terms ‘white’ and ‘black’ for “colors.”
  25. I am drawing here on Sewell’s (1992) theory of social structure and social practices.
  26. For example, I have observed that Blacks in the Northeast who speak with a French accent are presumed to be intelligent due to the assumption that if one is living in the United States and fluent in French, one must be intelligent; but those with a Haitian Creole accent are presumed to be unintelligent because Haitians are assumed to be uneducated economic immigrants.
  27. Marilyn Frye (1992) suggests a name for a cluster of racial dominance norms: “We need a term in the realm of race and racism whose grammar is analogous to the grammar of the term ‘masculinity’. I am tempted to recommend the neologism ‘albosity’ for this honor, but I’m afraid it is too strange to catch on. So I will introduce ‘whitely’ and ‘whiteliness’ as terms whose grammar is analogous to that of ‘masculine’ and ‘masculinity’. Being whiteskinned (like being male) is a matter of physical traits presumed to be physically determined; being whitely (like being masculine) I conceive as a deeply ingrained way of being in the world. Following the analogy with masculinity, I assume that the connection between whiteness and light-colored skin is a contingent connection: this character could be manifested by persons who are not ‘white;’ it can be absent in persons who are” (pp. 151-152).
  28. Some have argued that a broad cultural “Otherness” should define the primary social role for African Americans. Consider Perry (2003): “... ‘whiteness’ is constructed politically and culturally in opposition to ‘Blackness.’” (p. 75). See also Morrison (1992) and Roediger (1991). Perry continues, “Stated another way, ‘whiteness was not constructed in opposition to ‘Asianness’ or ‘Puerto Rican-ness,’ but in opposition to how ‘blackness’ was imagined. Thus it is not surprising that in the white imagination the qualities associated with being Asian American are the polar opposite to those associated with being African American. In the white imagination, to be Asian American is to be studious, reserved, hard-working, law abiding, polite, respectful of one’s elders, and a member of a strong family. In the white imagination, to be African American is to be lazy, criminal, from broken families, rebellious, emotional, and disrespectful of authority” (p. 75).
  29. This “modern” story should be qualified, for the current judicial system and the vast imprisonment of people of color demonstrates that the supposedly non-coercive process



of internalizing norms for being a “good laborer” has been replaced by a highly coercive and stigmatizing process (Alexander 2010).

30. See also Tilly (2005), particularly pp. 79–84.

31. It would be desirable to suggest some empirical hypotheses that could be tested (thanks to Rob Reich and others for this point). However, I am not sure how one might proceed. I am not claiming that racial semiotics are better or worse in same-race educational settings, or that social meanings cannot be overcome in multi-race classrooms. My goal has been primarily to call attention to the ways in which social meanings are a backdrop to both the psychological and material factors that are often more systematically studied. I leave it to others to consider the empirical dimension of the argument.

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