

Racial structural solidarity¹

Abstract

Effective political action against racial injustice requires a conception of solidarity based on the social and material reality of this form of injustice. I develop such a notion of solidarity by extending Iris Young's notion of "gender as seriality" to race. Thus grounded, racial solidarity avoids the problems I show are encountered by Tommie Shelby's "common oppression view" and Robert Gooding-Williams' non-foundational view of solidarity. Against the idea that racial solidarity requires a shared ethno-cultural identity, Tommie Shelby defends the "common oppression view," based solely on the victims' shared condition of oppression. According to Shelby, all victims of racial oppression can be reasonably expected to endorse a set of principles that will move them to common action. By pointing to the highly controversial nature of claims made in politics, Gooding-Williams sheds doubts on the idea that such principles exist. Defending a view of politics as action-in-concert, marked by reasonable disagreement, Gooding-Williams advances a non-foundational view of solidarity constituted through the controversy of politics rather than given in virtue of pre-political commitments or interests. The problem with such a notion is that it is unable to link the material and social reality of the unjust structures to the forms of political action, and thus it is unable to effectively transform social reality. Extending Young's "gender as seriality" to race, I defend a notion of "structural racial solidarity," distinguished by its ability to direct political action along material patterns of inequality and disadvantage.

In the recent primary elections for the Democratic Party nominee for president of the USA, Ta-Nehisi Coates, a journalist for *The Atlantic*, sparked a debate about the black vote when he criticized Sanders for not supporting reparations.² This refusal, Coates thinks, prove Sanders to have a typically "class first" race-blind socialist program that fails to appreciate that addressing issues of minimum wage and poverty does not address issues of white supremacy, such as discrimination in the labor market or under the law.

A number of African-American intellectuals³ have criticized Coates's criticism of Sanders as indicative of an approach that separates racial from class oppression and rests, in the words of Cedric Johnson, on a claim of "racial parity" within a capitalist, market society that leaves untouched the deeper sources of inequality and poverty that lie in the

overarching processes of capitalist accumulation and the commodification of human needs.⁴

This debate raises the question of anti-racist solidarity: how should we conceive of solidarity for an effective anti-racist politics?

I turn to Tommie Shelby's and Robert Gooding-Williams's works on black solidarity to tackle this question. I argue that, their differences notwithstanding, they share a view of political action that identifies the unity of collective political action with the political purposes deliberately shared by political actors, thus failing to theorize the relationship between political action and the social and material reality it aims to change. This is a shortcoming for an account of solidarity for effective anti-racist politics for two reasons. First, because such an account needs to offer a picture of the changes aimed at by the collective effort. Secondly, because it needs to offer an account of the sources of the actors' power to effect those changes. We need a structural understanding of race, one that I sketch by extending Iris Young's conception of "gender as seriality" to race.

I. Shelby on black solidarity as common oppression

"In an effort to liberate blacks from the burden of racial oppression, black leaders have frequently called on black Americans to become a more unified collective agent for social change" (Shelby 2002, p. 231). Thus, Shelby defines the problem of solidarity as that of forging a unified collective agent out of the individuals burdened by racial oppression, a collective agent that acts to change the reality of racial oppression. For Shelby, solidarity is about motivation for action. It has to be "robust" enough "to move people to collective action" (Shelby 2002, p. 237)

For Shelby, the question of solidarity is the question of its foundation. There are five characteristics necessary and jointly sufficient for solidarity: identification with the group, special concern for the group's other members, shared values or goals, group loyalty and mutual trust (Shelby 2005, p. 68-70). He rejects "the collective identity theory," that holds that "blacks who are committed to emancipatory group solidarity must embrace and preserve their distinctive black identity" (Shelby 2002, p. 233) by arguing that such identity is not necessary for satisfying these conditions and may be self-defeating (Shelby 2002, p. 235). In contrast, black solidarity should be based on the shared condition of being a victim of antiblack racism, because the common experience of being a victim of antiblack racism provides sufficient basis for the five characteristics of solidarity (Shelby 2002, p. 247-248).

What is "antiblack racism" and who are its victims? For Shelby (2005), racism is an ideology, "a set of misleading and irrationally held beliefs and assumptions," such as the belief that blacks are intellectually inferior, "that serve to bring about and reinforce structural relations of oppression" and that "are socially reproduced through norms that are embedded in the culture." Such irrational beliefs are held because of often unacknowledged fears and desires, such as the white working class fear about unemployment and competition over scarce jobs. Racism – explicit or implicit – continues to be expressed by many (p. 142).

Thus understood, antiblack racism is only one among three sources of black disadvantage. The other two are (1) the effects of past racial domination, which create disadvantages for *some* blacks and (2) nonracial structural factors that have a negative impact on the life prospects of *some* blacks (Shelby 2005, p. 141-144).

The first of these two, disadvantages that can be traced to past racial domination, are the effects in the present of chattel slavery, land expropriation, segregation, etc. Racial disparities in wealth and education, for instance, can be traced to the history of discrimination as a result of which generations of black Americans were prevented from accumulating wealth and gaining a formal education.

The second, “nonracial structural factors” are created by social dynamics that cannot be attributed to racism, for instance the “postindustrial US economy that generally dispenses high rewards to persons with a college education and miserably low wages to those without; stagnation and decline in economic sectors that rely heavily on low-skilled workers; and changes in the tax code that favor individuals and households with significant financial assets. None of these developments rely directly on contemporary expressions of racism to produce their far-reaching social consequences. Yet they disproportionately impact blacks in a society where deep racial inequalities in education, employment opportunities, and wealth already exist, and they worsen racial inequality and create new forms of disadvantage” (Shelby 2005, pp. 143-144). For example, the tax benefits that flow from homeownership are not racist in Shelby’s terms, because they are not necessarily designed to discriminate against blacks, but they disproportionately disadvantage blacks, because they are less likely to own a home, or to own a less expensive home (Shelby 2005, p. 144).

Among these three sources of black disadvantage, Shelby argues, *only* racism qualifies as the basis of black solidarity because it is the only one that can unite *all* black Americans, can secure their commitment to fight together, for only the ideology that thinly black persons are inferior affects all black persons.

Shelby (2005) develops this argument by translating the question of solidarity into a Rawlsian sounding question: “What political principles can blacks reasonably expect *all* other blacks, because they are black, to commit to as a basis for group action?” (p. 155)

In determining these principles, i.e. principles that blacks can *reasonably* expect *all* other blacks to commit to, just in virtue of their being black, Shelby argues that the differences among black Americans can threaten black solidarity. Therefore, support for policies that “disproportionately impact” black Americans is not a reliable basis for political unity. *Black* solidarity requires collective action around consensus issues, and racism is the only such issue (pp. 155, 160).⁵

I want to raise two problems about this view.

A first problem is that it reduces solidary action to self-interested action. Shelby assumes that the likelihood that some people will defect from those forms of collective action that do not advance their interest is a reason to restrict the scope of black politics to those issues that affect the interests of *all* black people. But if shared interest can motivate us – as Shelby’s argument assumes – we do not need solidarity, for we can rely on the shared interest to do so. Solidarity, one might have thought, is necessary precisely where and because self-interest fails to motivate action. There is something unsatisfying about a view of solidarity that can deliver nothing more than what self-interest can.

A second problem, which Robert Gooding-Williams (2009, pp. 230-234) and Lawrie Balfour (2006) have pointed out, is that racism is not a unified phenomenon. Drawing on Cathy Cohen’s distinction between consensus and cross-cutting issues of black activism, they have argued that different groups of black people are affected by different sets of stereotypes and different forms of discrimination. Black feminists, among others, have

argued that the antiblack racism's representations of black women – as mammy, matriarch, jezebel, welfare queen, etc. – apply specifically to black women, they are intrinsically gendered, not particular instances of generic, antiblack stereotypes.

Therefore there is no shared interest in supporting collective action against a putatively generic antiblack racism, as such action will likely only further marginalize the cross-cutting issues that reflect minority interests.

If this is right, then we need to revisit the privileged place Shelby gives racism in his understanding of racial disadvantage. Recall that Shelby distinguishes between three sources of black disadvantage and argues that two of them – the effects of past racial discrimination and social dynamics that cannot be attributed to racism – are not properly the object of *black* politics. Let's take the latter, policies that disproportionately affect black Americans, such as IRS mandated benefits that flow to home ownership, and accept that they are not motivated by racism, but are created by social dynamics and policies that give advantages to wealth, and larger advantages to larger wealth. Shelby (2005, pp. 153, 154, 149) argues that although these social dynamics disproportionately affect black Americans, they are not proper targets of anti-racist action, because they do not affect *all* black Americans, but only the poorer ones. This shows, Shelby thinks, that black Americans are disproportionately affected by policies that give advantage to wealth because they are disproportionately among the less wealthy, not because they are black. Such policies should be the target of a different type of politics – a politics that targets wealth inequality, which any black person could join – but not of specifically black politics.

Let me analyze this argument through an analogy with policies that disproportionately affect women. On this reasoning, the lack of affordable, good quality childcare that disproportionately affects women is not a proper target of feminist action because it does not affect all women, but only those who are primary childcare providers. This disproportionate impact is due to the fact that women happen to be disproportionately represented among the (separately constituted) group of primary childcare providers, i.e. mothers, not because they are women. Hence, unless motivated by sexism, the lack of childcare facilities is not a proper target of feminist politics.

There is indeed a good case to be made that the lack of childcare facilities affects women even when it is not motivated by sexism. It does so in virtue of its intersection with other social practices, processes and structures, such as the modern organization of work as separate from care, and the lower value placed on the latter. However, feminists widely agree that the disadvantages flowing from the lack of childcare facilities are central to the disadvantages that women experience in virtue of their gender, and thus to the mechanisms that reproduce gender oppression, whether or not sexism has anything to do with it. If sexism has nothing to do with the lack of childcare facilities, then sexism is not a good explanation for these mechanisms. It does not mean that these mechanisms are not gendered in another sense. To insist that sexism alone should be the target of feminist politics because it alone affects all women is to prejudge this question of the best explanation for gender disadvantage, to assume what has to be shown.

Shelby makes a similar mistake in privileging racism as the sole object of black politics: he prejudges the issue of the best explanation of racial disadvantage and the mechanisms that reproduce it. A policy that disproportionately affects black Americans

requires an explanation. To say by way of explanation that black Americans are disproportionately among the less wealthy, and *therefore the disproportionate effect is not a matter of their race, but of their wealth level*, is to assume that race and wealth level are independent factors.

This explanation is similar to saying that women are disproportionately affected by the lack of childcare facilities only because they are disproportionately among mothers, not because they are women, thus assuming that “women” and “mothers” have entirely independent meanings and represent groups constituted through independent social practices. This is an assumption challenged by every feminist analysis of the connections between the social meanings of “woman” and “mother,” and between the social practices that constitute the two groups. That there are such connections does not mean that we cannot conceive of a woman who is not a mother, but that all women are subject to norms that include expectations about their role as mothers.

Similarly, racial and wealth disadvantage might very well be connected in the sense that the social practices that constitute race are connected to those that structure the creation and accumulation of wealth. There is no reason to assume, as Shelby does, that the two are independent. On the contrary, that black Americans are disproportionately among the less wealthy is a reason to think the opposite, that one’s race is connected to one’s ability to acquire wealth. Moreover, the connections between the American practices of race and slavery and segregation also suggest such a connection, given the economic impact of slavery and segregation on one’s access to wealth.

We need therefore a conception of race that enables us to ask questions about these connections. This is a conception of race that does not reduce race to either the practice

of assigning individuals to different racial groups, or to the ideological set of beliefs underpinning this practice, but connects it to the social and material processes that support and perpetuate it.

II. Gooding-Williams on non-foundational solidarity

By building on feminist conceptions of intersectionality, Gooding-Williams's argument that different groups of black Americans are affected by different forms of racism might be a more promising point of departure for such a conception of race.

As an alternative to Shelby's common oppression view of solidarity, Gooding-Williams (2009) suggests a non-foundational idea of solidarity that is forged in action (p. 238) rather than being based on something that precedes politics. This type of solidarity requires the reinvigoration of different publics of black politics (pp. 241-242).

This view of black politics is informed by Gooding-Williams's reading of Douglass's thought in *Bondage*, according to which Douglass proposes a notion of politics as a practice of "action in concert" between equals. Politics, on this view, is a practice of freedom based on consent and affiliation opposed to the kinship ties that slavery denies to slaves. In Douglass's thought, the plantation version of this politics is represented by the "band of brothers" that, having been thrown together on Mr. Freeland's plantation, begin to consult one another, to debate and deliberate the merits of different courses of action, thus cultivating ties of loyalty, and forming themselves "into a band of subversive activists" by "consenting through their speech, action and mutual commitments to resist slaveholder tyranny." In this way they form "affiliative relationships to one another – that is, *because each has agreed to adopt as his own* a mutually shaped sense of political

purpose.” In short, according to Gooding-Williams (2009), “Douglass portrays plantation politics as an enterprise of equals driven by a shared and discursively expressed concern to free the world of ‘tyrants and oppressors’” (pp. 186-187, emphasis added).

Thus understood, politics can and sometimes should be race-conscious, but in being so it need not be based on “antecedently formed and racially specific spiritual or cultural orientation.” Gooding-Williams agrees here with Shelby in rejecting the collective identity theory. But, unlike Shelby, he thinks the race dimension is created through politics rather than being pre-political. It is created discursively by political actors, produced through a process in which political actors invest with significance the condition of being black in light of their interpretation of what their political purposes demand (Gooding-Williams 2009, p. 189-190).

This harkens back to Gooding-Williams’s (1998) earlier distinction between “being black” and “being a black person.” “Being black” is “the product of a rule-governed social practice of racial classification,” while “being a black person” is the result of one’s “interpreting and assigning significance to being black” (pp. 22, 24). While one cannot escape being black, one is thrown into the condition of being black by a racist social practice, being a black person is a matter of self-description, of assigning meaning to that condition. Thus, one “becomes a black person only if (1) one begins to identify ... *oneself* as black and (2) one begins to make choices, to formulate plans, to express concerns, etc., in light of one’s identification of oneself as black” (p. 23) Gooding-Williams points to Sartre’s notion of being a Jew, according to which to be a Jew “is to be thrown into ... the situation of a Jew” (Sartre 1995, p. 89, cited in Gooding-Williams 1998, p. 25) as similar to his notion of being black. In explaining the notion of being a

black person, he draws on Ian Hacking's notion of 'dynamic nominalism' and its underlying thought that the possibilities of human action depend on the possibilities of description, such that "if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities of action come into being in consequence" (Hacking 1986, p. 231, cited in Gooding-Williams 1998, p. 23). Thus, "individuals classified as black become black persons just in case they begin to act in the world under a description of themselves as racially black" (p. 23).

This means that there are many ways of being a black person, corresponding to the many and conflicting interpretations of being black (Gooding-Williams 1998, p. 24; 2009, p. 191), including interpretations that embrace the racial order as just (Gooding-Williams 2009, p. 190). This diversity is at the heart of Gooding-Williams's (2009, p. 239) view of black politics "as the interplay of conflicting purposes with conflicting and likely controversial interpretations of the condition of being black," a non-foundational model of politics that he contrasts to Shelby's. A crucial difference between Shelby's model of politics and his own, Gooding-Williams (2009, p. 238) argues, is that the former conceives of "common black interests" as given prior to politics, as something that political participants "precommit" themselves to, while on his model common black interests might come out of politics itself, as the result of political argument, debate or collective action, for instance when the participants try to persuade each other of one particular interpretation of the condition of being black, including one account of the common interests that the condition entails.

While an attractive alternative to Shelby's, this picture of politics as marked by deep disagreement runs into its own problems. First, it is in tension with the "action-in-concert"

aspect of politics that Gooding-Williams (2009) also emphasizes. Douglass's the band of brothers acts in concert because they agree to resist slaveholder tyranny. They form affiliative relationships to one another because "each has agreed to adopt as his own a mutually shaped sense of political purpose". It is true that these affiliative, consent-based relationships may be formed as part of politics – consent is expressed "through their speech, actions and mutual commitments" – yet to the degree to which they act in concert they already share a purpose – "to resist slaveholder tyranny" (186). So while there is a non-foundational aspect to their politics, to the degree to which they arrive at common purposes through politics, there is another aspect, the action aspect, of their politics that is not. For they act-in-concert only once these purposes are taken as given. Thus, Douglass's band of brothers could not be said to act-in-concert with those who have fallen prey to "the slaveholding priestcraft," the view that slavery is God's will. The two groups could engage in debate and argument, each group trying to persuade the other to adopt their interpretation of the condition of being black, but they could not act together. This shows that the acting-in-concert aspect of politics requires agreement around common purposes even though politics has a deliberative aspect, one that is marked by deep disagreement. In other words, to the degree to which politics is action, not only debate and argument, Gooding-Williams's view of politics is not crucially different from Shelby's. Those who act together do so based on an agreed-upon common purpose; there may be room for disagreement on the details of this purpose, and on the means to achieve it, but there is no reason to believe that such disagreement is blocked on Shelby's account. In its action aspect, politics, even for Gooding-Williams, is unified by shared purposes. Acting-in-concert, is acting-for-shared-purposes.

It is important to note that the act through which these purposes are adopted is fundamentally an individual, not a political one. Adopting particular purposes is part of one's process of "becoming a black person," of assigning meaning and significance to the condition of being black. There is nothing essentially political about this act. It could take place in public, it could be spurred by political encounters – encounters with other political actors – but it could equally take place in private, independently of political encounters. Even when the act is spurred by political engagement, and even if political engagement were necessary to it, politics is still be externally related to it, not a constitutive condition, because, for on Gooding-Williams's account of it, it represents the interpretation taken by an individual, and over which the individual is more or less sovereign.

If this is right, then it sheds more doubts on Gooding-Williams's claim that his view of politics is non-foundational. For there seems to be a non-political act that precedes and that is necessary for political action.

Moreover, it also raises a difficulty for Gooding-Williams's view of political action, a difficulty for the aspect that makes it action, rather than the aspect that makes it political, as was the case with the first difficulty. In defining the "in-concert" character of the political action by reference to the shared purposes, adopted deliberately, Gooding-Williams's view of politics as action-in-concert leaves behind the social and material reality that forms the background against which purposes are chosen and pursued in the world. By relying on Hacking's idea that human action depends on description, and suggesting that description is an individual act of meaning-making, of creating something *new* in the world, Gooding-Williams's view of politics as action-in-concert obscures the

fact that the possibilities of action depend not only on new descriptions, but also on the material and social reality that is already in place, that the possibilities for political action and what makes it effective is not only a matter of the purposes of the actors, but also of the social and material conditions within which action take place. By making sense conceptually of the process of “becoming a black person” on the Hacking model, and connecting it conceptually to his notion of “action-in-concert,” Gooding-Williams throws away, and thus erases from our view, the thrownness character of the condition of being black.

My criticism of Shelby’s and Gooding-Williams’s positions in the last two sections suggests that we need a conception of race that would achieve two tasks. First, it would provide an understanding of the social reality of racial disadvantage that would make sense of the unity of racial disadvantage while also enabling inquiry into its connections to social processes that create disadvantages for groups other than black Americans. By doing this, it would avoid the danger of denying differences in how race and racial disadvantage is experienced by different groups of black Americans. Secondly, it would also provide a notion of action that links political action to the social reality of racial disadvantage. In what follows I argue that Iris Young’s concept of “seriality” can be extended to the concept of race to provide such an understanding of race and racial disadvantage.

III. Young on seriality and gender as seriality

Iris Young (1997) borrows Sartre's concept of seriality to articulate an understanding of gender that, she argues, represents an understanding of women as a unified group that does not deny differences among women (pp. 17, 22).

Sartre distinguishes between several levels of social collectivity by their complexity and reflexivity. One of the distinctions he makes is that between groups and series. A group is a self-consciously mutually acknowledging collective with a self-conscious purpose. It is a collection of persons that are united by action they undertake together. Individuals undertake a project together, acknowledge themselves as sharing a set of goals and as pursuing these goals through their action. Each individual takes on the common project as his or her project. "What makes the project *shared* ... is the mutual acknowledgement among the members of the group that they are engaged in the project together," which typically becomes explicit in something like "a pledge, contract, constitution." The project is *collective* in so far as the members of the group mutually acknowledge that the only or best way to undertake the project is by the group (Young 1997, p. 23, emphasis added). For both Shelby and Gooding-Williams, political action is action of such groups.

These self-conscious collectives arise from and often fall back into un-self-conscious collectives, which Sartre calls series. At this level of social reality, individuals are united, but not by shared goals and projects. They are united in an impersonal way, through particular constellations of material objects and structures or norms that constrain and enable their actions. What gives the individuals in a series *unity* is the way in which

individuals pursue their own individual ends by reference to *the same* objects and structures that is the result, often unintended, of past actions.

Sartre illustrates the concept of a series with the example of people waiting for a bus. They are united by their relation to an object – the bus – and the social norms and practices that define that object as a bus, i.e. the social practice of public transportation. This constellation of objects, social norms and practices both constrains and enables their actions. Within these constraints different individuals pursue different goals, aims, and projects. From the point of view of their aims the people in a series have nothing in common; they take different actions. However, they are united by their common orientation to the same objects and social practices. As part of the series, the individuals waiting for a bus need have nothing in common in their histories, experiences or identities. The relation between individuals in a series is impersonal and anonymous. Individuals are fungible; any individual could take any other individuals' place. They do not identify with one another, they do not acknowledge each other as engaged in a shared enterprise. The series is not a group, and its unity is not that of a group. However, the series has the potential to become a group. If the bus fails to show up, those who were waiting for it may complain to one another, and may organize themselves to go protest the bus company or to share a taxi (p. 24).

The series is what Sartre calls a *practical-inert reality*. It is *practical* because it, like all social relations, is the result of human action and history. However, the type of action that creates a series is not a self-conscious one. Or, to be precise, the aspect under which we look at an action to see what about it creates the series is not the conscious goal or purpose pursued by the action. Rather, it is the unintended consequences of action and its

relation to something external to the agents: the way their actions are constrained by the same norms and objects that are results of past action. Any material objects are experienced as *inert* because they constrain action and constitute resistance to action. This is why series, and being a member of a series, are experienced as necessities, constraints, often experienced as given and natural (p. 25).

More generally, on Sartre's view, any human action takes place against the background of the material things and collective habits, practices, rules, etc. that are the result of past human action oriented towards practical-inert objects in series, background that he calls "the milieu of action." Human action structured in this way – oriented towards and constrained by objects, and structured by practices, habits and rules that are already given – generate and continuously reproduce serial collectivities (p. 25).

Gender, Iris Young argues, should be understood as such a series. What recommends this understanding for her is that it makes sense of the idea that women form a social unity without casting that unity in terms of common attributes or essential features, which erases differences among women.

In addition, I would argue, Sartre's conception of human action as structured by practical-inert realities explains why social practices like gender and race are both resistant to change (because reproduce themselves through action in the series) and can be changed (because they are products of action).

Gender is "a structural relation to material objects as they have been produced and organized by prior history" (p. 28). But like "class" and unlike "bus riders," "gender" is a

complex, vast, overlapping set of structures and objects. What are these objects and the structures that organize them?

Female bodies are among the objects in the series gender. Female bodies should be understood as social objects, not simply as material objects. It is not simply the physical attributes of “breasts, vaginas, clitorises,” hormones and so on, or the physical processes of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth or lactation that constitute female bodies. Rather, these are constituted by the rules that structure these physical processes, and by the objects, physical spaces, institutions and practices that result from past human action taking place against this background of social objects and structures. This makes the female body a rule-bound body, defined by particular meanings and possibilities (p. 28).

Clothes are also objects in the series gender, as are cosmetics, tools and the physical separation between male and female spaces. Young writes: “I may discover myself “as a woman” by being on the “wrong” dorm floor” (p. 29).

In addition to social objects, the series gender is constituted by structures that organize these objects. Young discusses two of these, enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labor, which themselves create a multitude of objects and spaces that further reproduce the series (p. 28-29).

When they act, men and women take this background into account, even if not in a conscious manner. Self-conscious groups can arise from the social reality of gender. Not all these groups, however, are feminist groups. Young gives an example, from Meredith Tax’s novel *Rivington Street*, of a group of Russian Jewish immigrant women, who organize a boycott of the local merchant who has manipulated the chicken market to increase his profits. This group arises from the women’s serialized existence defined by

the sexual division of labor. It also arises from their serialized existence as shoppers and as Russian-Jewish working-class immigrants. But it is not a feminist group (p. 34).

Feminist groups, Young proposes, are groups who at least implicitly refer to the series of women. They draw on the experience of living within the series of gender, which is multilayered, and has a wide variety of aspects. Different feminist groups take up different aspects or parts of the series of gender, which explains the diversity of feminisms. At the same time, what makes them all feminist groups is that they refer to the series itself. Groups of women – feminist and not – will always be partial in relation to the series – because when women come together as groups, their womanliness is not the only thing that brings them together (p. 36).

IV. Race as seriality

Like gender, race, I would like to suggest, is a series. In saying this I claim that there is a unity to race. But this unity is not constituted by a shared black culture, a shared set of interests (for examples, on Shelby's interests against racist ideology), or shared features intrinsic to individuals. Rather, the unity of race is constituted by a social practice. However, the series race cannot be reduced to Gooding-Williams's social practice of classification of persons into black or white. In addition, it encompasses material objects, the rules that structure them and the institutions, spaces and practices developed through the actions oriented towards these objects and structured by these rules. Within the series race there is a distinction between black (or raced) and white persons, which is not determined by intrinsic qualities of persons, but by the shared constellation of objects, rules and practices that give different orientations to black and

white bodies. But while the series performs this distinction, the series is nevertheless shared by all social actors that inhabit it, regardless of the racial position the series assigns to them. It is shared in the sense that the series structures the action of both black and white persons. The series race is part of the background for the action of both black and white persons.

What are the objects and the structures of the series race?

Black bodies – male and female – are among the objects of the series race. Like female bodies, black bodies are not constituted simply by physical facts. Rather, they are constituted by rules, rules created over time, and that have changed over time. These rules and the ongoing action instituting them have created practices and spaces, institutions and environments where these rules are constantly reiterated, such as the barber-shops for men and beauty parlors for women, the practice of strengthening hair, the practice of the Afro hair, the association between black bodies and athleticism, black neighborhoods, urban segregation, black churches, etc.

As female bodies are created within the structures of enforced heterosexuality, black bodies, male and female, are given through rules governing the reproduction of black bodies and the sexual, familial and intimate relationships between black persons and persons of other races. They have varied over time, with the particular system of domination at a time. They have created practices like the breaking of slave families, white masters' access to the bodies of black female slaves, forced sterilization of black American women, criminalization of mixed-raced marriages, legally mandated contraception, etc (Roberts 1999).

I want to suggest that there are at least two other structures that organize the social (practio-inert) objects of the series of the black race. I will call them “the racial structure of labor” and “the racial structure of law,” which interact in various ways.

The racial structure of labor has to be understood in the historical context defined by slavery and its effects, over time, on the physical environment. It includes structures that relegate menial, low skilled and domestic labor to black persons, as well as to the structure of educational opportunities, reflected in, among others, segregated school systems, affirmative action policies, and historically black colleges.

This understanding of race enables inquiry into the connections between race and the structures that organize labor and the production of wealth in a capitalist economy with, for example, its low rewards for low-skilled work. And further, it enables an analysis of the connections between race and patterns of residential segregation, norms of work-residential segregation, transportation policy, etc.

The racial structure of law too has to be understood as the effects, over time, of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. In the current context, mass incarceration of a disproportionately large black population and the growth of the prison system are parts of this structure.

Understood in this way, as a series, the unity of race is constituted by the *practico-inert* reality of a complex, multilayered and interlocking constellation of objects and social practices and rules that structure them and that our action is oriented towards. It is unity at the impersonal level. Thus understood, the unity of race brings together not only black Americans, but all Americans, because they all share the “practico-inert” reality of

the series race, as a common background to their actions. It is the basis of a solidarity across the racial division between black and white Americans.

This way of understanding unity is also compatible with the diversity of black political life. For the diversity comes from the self-conscious groups can be created on the basis of the series. They will always be partial in relation to the series. Not all of these will be anti-racist. Like feminist groups, anti-racist groups are those who reference the reality of race as a series that, in some way, even implicitly, thematize it and attempt to change it. Different anti-racist groups will take on different parts of the complex reality of the series, and as a result will pursue different goals and aims, and will use different means.

However, all black groups will be united by the fact that they arise on the basis of the series race. All anti-racist groups will be further united by the fact that they reference the series of race. This unity of the social structure from which groups arise is a basis for solidarity. I call this form of solidarity “racial structural solidarity.” For individuals, it is solidarity in virtue of inhabiting the same social structure, of having the same social structure to orient our actions. For black groups, it is solidarity in virtue of arising out of the same social reality. And for anti-racist groups, it is also solidarity in virtue of referencing the same social reality, even if by focusing on different parts of the complex reality of the series race. This is solidarity across different political purposes, methods, strategies, and priorities. But it is not forged through political action. Rather, it is an expression of the social reality that gives rise to political action.

Conclusion

I have argued that questions of solidarity for collective action against racial oppression have to be preceded by social-theoretical questions about the social reality that our collective action aims to change. “Race as seriality,” a concept I developed in analogy with Iris Young’s “gender as seriality,” provides such a descriptive approach, I argued, one that can ground a notion of solidarity on one’s shared structural, impersonal situation. This provided an alternative to notions of solidarity based on one’s identity, on one’s experience with racial prejudice as well as to notions of solidarity forged in action.

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² <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/bernie-sanders-reparations/424602/>
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³ See <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/reparations-ta-nehisi-coates-cedric-johnson-bernie-sanders/>, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/cedric-johnson-brian-jones-ta-nehisi-coates-reparations/>, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/bernie-sanders-right-on-reparations/426720/>, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/why-we-write/459909/>, checked on
May 5, 2016.

⁴ <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/ta-nehisi-coates-case-for-reparations-bernie-sanders-racism/>, p. 14.

⁵ Shelby (2005, p. 156) does, however, argue that the non-consensus issues should be supported because they can affect racism against everyone. See Gooding-Williams 2009, pp. 228-230 for a criticism of this argument.