

More Race, Not Less: A New (but Responsible) Rebellion Against Mono-Racialism

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Abstract: I argue for expansionist conservationism: conserving racial classification while adding new identity-categories where justice demands. The case for expansion arises most urgently with mixed-race people, whose lived experiences are obscured by monoracial taxonomies. I show how the absence of such mixed-race identity-categories produces distinct injustices: absent-identity hermeneutical injustice and ontological oppression. To deal with this problem, I advance a novel approach to conceptual engineering that is community-first, which provides guidelines for mixed-race communities to construct their own identity-categories in a way that is genuinely emancipatory. My framework reimagines racial taxonomy in a way that centres the voices of those most affected while resisting the reification of unjust racial hierarchy.

Keywords: Mixed-Race Identity, Mono-Racial Ideology, Social Justice, Conceptual Engineering

Multiracial identity has evolved ...
into an identity in rebellion against
mono-racialism, yet it remains the
target of racist fears just as it develops
its own form of racial privilege.
—Ronald Sundstrom (2016)

10.25365/jso-2026-8848

Published online July 17, 2026

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mixed-race categories have long existed. Yet they were almost always imposed by dominant groups in the service of unjust ends (e.g., Mahtani 2014; Hom 2021, 2025). Accordingly, what has been denied to mixed-race people is not categorisation *per se* but the opportunity to shape identities *on their own terms*.

The weight of this problem is most vividly seen in testimony. In *The Mixed-Race Experience* (The Guardian), one participant describes the hardship of inhabiting a “lonely place”:

My mother is half-Jamaican and half-Indian; my dad is half-English and half-Irish. I appreciated visiting people on both sides of the family; each time I could learn and experience different and unique things about the cultures I was connected to food, music, traditions, stories. It was interesting to hear from those who spoke patois, while others spoke with London accents. *Though sometimes the middle ground felt like a lonely place.*

Existing taxonomies routinely fail to accommodate mixed-race people, forcing them into ill-fitting monoracial categories that obscure their lived experience. This is a form of structural erasure: the absence of available identities and corresponding categories that would render lives intelligible.

The ultimate concern of this paper is mixed-race justice. Specifically, my goal is to discern what it would take to remedy the structural erasure they face. To this end, I argue for the creation of mixed-race *identities*: self- and community identification that makes mixed-race lives socially intelligible, politically legible, and personally affirmable. But identities of this kind need more than expressive freedom. They require corresponding *categories*: public classificatory units that anchor social meaning and shared reference. My argument, then, is that creating mixed-race identities depends on expanding racial taxonomy. The lack of recognisable mixed-race identities and corresponding mixed-race categories generates distinctive forms of injustice that cannot be addressed without reimagining the racial system itself.

Philosophers of race have long debated the demands of racial reimagination. One line of enquiry is whether race thought and talk should be *eliminated* or *conserved*. Eliminativists seek to abolish racial categories; conversationists aim to preserve the ones we have. These positions admit of internal diversity, but both share an assumption: existing racial taxonomy is the terms of debate. Conservationism tends to preserve the categories we already have, while eliminativism seeks to abolish them outright.

If we are to fully appreciate the extent to which racial relations can be reimagined, we must consider a further possibility: *expansionist conservationism*. On this view, the spirit of conservationism is retained. Yet it insists that justice sometimes requires *more race*. To reiterate, this is not just a call for greater expressive freedom.

Rather, it is about structural change: the introduction of racial categories that can anchor identity, solidarity, and institutional legitimacy.

I defend expansionist conservationism on the grounds that it would meet the justice-demands of mixed-race lives. But any racial expansion must be responsible. The claims of mixed-race people for inclusion, representation, and recognition must be weighed against the interests of other marginalised groups. In some cases, reifying *mixed-race* could sharpen racial hierarchy rather than dismantle it (e.g., Makalani 2001; Mahtani 2014; Hom 2025). Thus, two claims structure my argument:

Favourable Conditions When the requirements of a responsible mixed-race politics are met, we *ought* to expand racial taxonomy to include categories that more accurately capture mixed-race experience.

Unfavourable Conditions When the requirements of a responsible mixed-race politics fail to be met, we *ought* to work towards creating them, with expansion only following once they are in place.

In favourable cases, expansion requires *ameliorated concepts* of mixed-race. Rather than impose a revision from above, I supply normative guidelines that orient communities in building concepts of their own, preserving sovereignty over the boundaries of their identities. I call this *community-first conceptual engineering*. In unfavourable cases, by contrast, the imperative is preparatory: to create conditions under which expansion would genuinely empower.¹ In either case, the aim is not to legislate identities but to safeguard the capacity of communities themselves to determine, contest, and transform the categories through which they are recognised.

2. IDENTITY AND CATEGORY

I argue that justice requires the creation of mixed-race identities. By implication, existing racial taxonomy must be expanded to include new mixed-race categories. To establish this, we must first clarify what is meant by “identity” and “category”, and why the former implies substantive conclusions about the latter. At first sight, it might seem possible to proliferate identities *without* altering the class of social

¹ My paper avoids US-focused discourse that has dominated contemporary race studies (Atkin 2016). I attend to overlooked contexts, such as Brazil and Canada. I am especially concerned with whether Australia has the right conditions to reimagine the relationship between mixed-race identity and Indigeneity (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Carlson 2016). “Mixed-race” has a horrific history rooted in genocidal projects. The shift in focus is motivated by two reasons. First, it reflects a political concern for representation: the literature should not be shaped exclusively by one racial context. Second, it reflects my distinct aims. Attending to alternative taxonomies exposes the contingent structure of racial classification and helps reveal the limits of U.S. centric debates regarding the metaphysics of race.

categories itself. What might be required is simply that mixed-race people are afforded greater expressive freedom to identify with the categories of existing racial taxonomy. I resist this view. My reasoning is analogous to that given in defence of non-binary gender identities. Justice for non-binary people requires more than expressive freedom: there must be a recognised social category with which they can identify and to which they can belong (Dembroff 2020). By parity of reason, justice for mixed-race people requires not merely recognition of individual expression but the creation of categories that can anchor identity. To defend this conclusion, I'll first discuss what I mean by "identity."

2.1. From Identity to Category

"Identity" is notoriously ambiguous. In one familiar sense, to have an identity is simply to be a member of a group. In another, it is to have what Dembroff and Saint-Croix (2019) call *agential identity*.

Agential identity requires the satisfaction of two conditions: self-identification and position-directed externality. The former requires that one see oneself as being a member of a particular identity group. The latter, by contrast, is more demanding:

In order to have an agential identity,

Externality one must, consciously or unconsciously, make their self-identification externally available, whether by engaging in certain behaviors or displaying certain readily perceptible features, where those behaviors or features outwardly manifest (or, in certain cases, are merely intended to manifest) social properties associated with a particular group, and

Position-directedness one must allow, or at least accept, that others take them as occupying a group associated social position as a result of fulfilling (a) (Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019, p. 577).

Importantly, agential identity is not equivalent to private self-conception. It is the relationship between how one understands oneself and how one is socially recognised. This is why it has been central to trans and non-binary struggles. Justice is not served merely by the freedom to self-describe but rather by reliable public recognition and acceptance, such as the use of correct pronouns, legal acknowledgement, and institutional accommodation.

The same point extends to mixed-race people. For them too, the central concern is how racial self-understanding can be translated into social recognition, or a framework of shared expectations and mutual acknowledgement. Recognition of this kind involves more than symbolic gestures. It requires widespread uptake of identity labels, incorporation into demographic data and institutional practice, and protection

in law (e.g., Root 1992). These are precisely the conditions under which agential identity becomes a matter of justice rather than mere expression.

How does this bear on racial *categories*? By “racial categories”, I mean the classificatory units that constitute the racial system: which races *there are*. The forms of recognition required for agential identity to meet the bar of justice are precisely the kinds of social forces that contribute to the construction of racial categories. As Sundstrom (2001, 295) says,

There social forces unify human kinds: the force from above (the act of classification or labelling by some authority), the force from below (intentionally acting under the label by the so labelled), and the lateral forces (the normative standards that become attached to the label and are applied to those within and without the label).

Human kinds became real where such forces are realised. And such forces include “labels, institutions, individual intentions, laws, mores, values, traditions” (2001, 295). Thus, we can begin to see the relationship between identities and categories. The type of identities that ought to be created for mixed-race people involves the same social forces that reify racial categories. Accordingly, where mixed-race identities are created in ways that satisfy the demands of justice, they will necessarily be accompanied by the construction of mixed-race categories. Thus, the creation of mixed-race identities entails the expansion of racial taxonomy itself. For ease of expression, I will refer to the creation of identities and the construction of corresponding categories as “identity-categories.”

2.2. A Misnomer

The difficulty is that, for mixed-race people, it is unclear what could make an identity “externally available”. There is no cluster of perceptible features that reliably signals “mixed-race” in a way that prompts the corresponding mode of social recognition. Publicly declaring oneself “mixed-race” is not enough: agential identity depends on manifesting social properties, such as appearances, behaviours, cultural cues, characteristic of the group. But what does it mean to be *interacted with as mixed-race*? If the answer is merely “to be recognised as having multiple racial ancestries”, then the putative identity collapses back into monoracial categories that have proven to be inadequate for mixed-race experience.

In reality, mixed-race people are too diverse in experience, appearance, and cultural allegiance for there to be anything unified about them that could satisfy the conditions of agential identity. To treat “mixed-race” as a singular category is to risk erasing precisely the kind of diversity we should be aiming to recognise. For this reason, “mixed-race identity”, understood in the agential sense, is a *misnomer*. Strictly speaking, there is no such identity.

What, then, is meant when someone claims a mixed-race identity? At times, it may be no more than a statement of complex ancestry. But this cannot be the whole story. Often, the claim does have an agential profile: it expresses a demand to be socially recognised in a certain way. The concern is that this aspiration runs up against the absence of any corresponding agential identity. One wants to inhabit a recognised identity, but no such identity exists. The result is that a claim to mixed-race identity functions less as an assertion of an existing agential identity than as a gesture towards its absence: a way of signalling both a desire for recognition and the inadequacy of current racial categories. Mixed-race “identity” should therefore be understood as aspirational. It is an attempt, within the constraints of an impoverished conceptual landscape, to move toward an alternative racial system; one capable of sustaining multiple, distinctively mixed-race agential *identities*.

What would such an identity look like? An agential identity for mixed-race people would require recognition of a distinct social category but without collapsing all mixed-race people into a single, undifferentiated category. Such cases are rare, but they are not unknown. The most prominent example is the Métis of Canada. As the 1996 Royal Commission into Aboriginal identity observed:

Many mixed Canadians have mixed Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal ancestry, but that does not make them Métis or even Aboriginal [...] What distinguishes Métis people from everyone else is that they associate themselves with a culture that is distinctively Métis.

The Métis stands as a racial category with a distinct identity irreducible to monoracial aggregation. They are not merely “part Aboriginal, part non-Aboriginal”, but a people with a distinctive form of life.

Yet another example comes from the academy, which draws from lived experience. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) has argued that capturing the “Borderland” experience of mixed-race people within the Latin American context requires developing a new identity-category altogether. Elena Ruíz (2020, p. 218) describes Anzaldúa’s claim for the need to develop a new “Mestiza” consciousness with clarity:

Anzaldúa’s response is not to identify with either side of the cultural binary [...] responsible for mestizx identity but to sublimate both terms and create a third open—a “New Mestiza” identity that is neither fully white nor Indigenous but breaks down existing paradigms to be able to acknowledge *all aspects* of Borderline experience.

Unfortunately, Métis and the New Mestiza are the exception rather than the rule. Most mixed-race people lack any accessible form of racial identification beyond monoracial categories. As a result, they lack agential identities. They are left to render themselves intelligible through inadequate concepts, even while gesturing beyond them.

2.3. (In)Justice

So far, I have assumed that the creation of mixed-race identities, and therefore mixed-race categories, is a matter of justice. I must now make this explicit. The absence of mixed-race identities is not a trivial shortcoming in classificatory practices. Accounts from mixed-race people repeatedly express a sense of racial “non-belonging”. Consider another testimony from *The Guardian*:

My mother is Colombian and my dad is mixed Scottish and English [...] When I was little I was very dark, but when I turned seven I became very fair. There was an awkward time when people thought my mum was my nanny. Because I was so light-skinned I would embrace being English rather than being Colombian. My son is a blond-haired, blue-eyed child, but I want him to know he is mixed Colombian (Marie Creasey, Colombian/British)

The pattern is familiar. Mixed-race people describe themselves as inhabiting a “middle ground” or a “lonely place” between monoracial categories. The expression of uncertainty about belonging and a continual negotiation of identity to avoid being seen too strongly as one thing rather than another.

The metaphor of the “middle ground” is revealing. It points to a conceptual lacuna: a gap in the available categories of racial identification. Those who do not fit neatly into monoracial taxonomy are left with only aggregation (“part one race, part another”), and must make do with identities forged within that inadequate frame. Vest (2016, 95) describes this with clarity:

Mixed people cannot exist qua Mixed. The only hope for existence for the Mixed person is in partial existence in the form of monoracialization. The only human kinds to which Mixed people can legitimately belong are monoraces; the only identity a Mixed person can legitimately assert is monoracial identity (i.e., partial identity). In a society such as ours the urge to monoracialize is strong. Everyone must assert a monoracial identity. To do otherwise is to live in a fantasy world of one’s own making...

It is important to recognise that this situation is not inevitable. It is a product of an impoverished classificatory system. My proposal aims to address this void.

The issue, however, is not merely epistemic, as if the problem were only one of misdescribing someone. Of course, the misdescription of lived experience matters deeply. But in contexts of structural marginalisation, epistemic failure is *itself* a form of injustice. Epistemic and normative concerns cannot be neatly separated (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013). Thus, the failure to represent mixed-race lives accurately is itself an injustice: it excludes mixed-race people from the construction of the classificatory terms and corresponding categories that govern recognition and belonging.

Why, then, should we care about creating mixed-race identities? I offer two connected reasons: *hermeneutical injustice* and *ontological oppression*.

Hermeneutical injustice arises when individuals cannot render their experiences intelligible, or cannot communicate them across social space, because the shared conceptual resources are deficient (Fricker 2007). For the injustice to be realised, the deficiency must stem from hermeneutical marginalisation: exclusion from the collective processes that shape interpretive resources, owing to prejudice against one's identity. Mixed-race people occupy a peculiar position here. On the one hand, they lack the conceptual tools needed to make sense of their distinct racial experiences. On the other hand, their exclusion is not straightforwardly identity-based, since mixed-race identity is not, properly speaking, an agential identity at all. The exclusion does not track prejudice against a recognised identity but rather tracks the absence of a recognised category in the first place.²

Two responses are possible. The first is to relax the requirement that hermeneutical injustice must be rooted in identity-prejudice, and to treat the case of mixed-race people as a paradigm instance of hermeneutical injustice. The other is to mark a distinct form of epistemic wrong: one where the harm arises from having no identity category available to be included in the processes of collective meaning-making. To avoid the risk of overextending hermeneutical injustice by relaxing the identity-prejudice requirement, I prefer the second option.

Absent-identity hermeneutical injustice captures the distinctive harm done to mixed-race people. For those who cannot identify in a way that properly captures their unique position within racial relations, monoracial taxonomy offers no adequate way to make sense of themselves. This deprives them of goods to which all people are entitled in any racialised social order: empowerment through political identification, participation in communities of shared allegiances, relief from racial estrangement, and a secure sense of belonging in one's social environment.

² Erica Preston-Rodder (2024) says that unjust racial denials of mixed-race people are a product of an impoverished hermeneutical environment, with those in positions of greater power can control what races there are. Saray Ayala-Lopez (forthcoming) discusses a similar but broader phenomenon whereby an injustice occurs when certain people cannot have critical experiences that might build their identities in ways that are beneficial to them.

Absent-identity hermeneutical injustice has an ontological counterpart, what Dembroff (2020) calls *ontological oppression*. Ontological oppression occurs when an identity category to which one is entitled simply does not exist. The wrong here is not primarily about intelligibility but about the non-existence of a social kind with which one could identify. A familiar case is the erasure of bisexuality, where heteronormative ideology sustains the myth of bisexuality as a temporary “phase”, preventing it from being recognised as a stable, stand-alone identity-category (2020, 6).

A similar wrong afflicts mixed-race people. The monoracial system pressures them into ill-fitting identity-categories and constrains the imagination of alternatives that would properly capture their experiences. As such, distinct mixed-race identity-categories are rarely constructed. Yet such are not mere luxuries that some will simply have to do without. They are, instead, conditions of justice. Identity-categories enable community-building, sustain solidarity, and provide belonging in a racial landscape that would otherwise leave mixed-race people suspended in conceptual limbo.

2.4. Summary

The argument of this opening section can be captured in three steps.

First, I argued that the form of identity relevant to mixed-race justice is *agential identity*. Yet agential identity cannot exist in isolation. It is the kind of social recognition that, by its very nature, participates in the construction of racial categories. Hence, wherever a mixed-race identity is created in a way that counts as justice-promoting, a corresponding mixed-race category will come into being. I will call these “identity-categories”.

Second, I argued that talk of “mixed-race identity” in the singular is a misnomer. There is no unifying set of properties that would allow all mixed-race people to satisfy the conditions for agential identity. The demands of justice, then, are not for one mixed-race identity but for the creation of distinct mixed-race *identities*, each with its own corresponding category. Only then can mixed-race people have available to them the kinds of agential identities that secure recognition and belonging.

Third, I set out the injustices that follow from the absence of such identities: *absent-identity hermeneutical injustice* and *ontological oppression*. The former consists in mixed-race people lacking the conceptual resources needed to render their experiences intelligible; the latter consists in there being an absence of social kinds to which mixed-race people are entitled.

With this in view, we are led to a pressing question: if justice for mixed-race people requires the creation of agential identities, and if agential identities imply the construction of corresponding categories, to what extent is the construction of such categories even possible? If it were not possible, there would be no justice-related

questions to ask about mixed-race identity-categories. In the next section, I resist this conclusion. The first obstacle to confront is *essentialism*.

3. ESSENTIALISM

Historically, it was accepted that races have natural essences. Call this *first-order essentialism*. Races have “underlying natural (perhaps genetic) properties that are (1) heritable, biological features, (2) are shared by all and only the members of a race, and (3) explain behavioral, characterological, and cultural predispositions of individual persons and racial groups” (Mallon 2016, p. 529).

First-order essentialism focuses on *individual* races: members of a particular race are united by some natural property. Although first-order essentialism has been discredited, a subtler essentialism tends to go unnoticed. This other form is not about the properties of any given race. Instead, it is about the racial classification system itself. Call it *second-order essentialism*.

At its core, second-order essentialism is the assumption that the categories of racial classification are exhausted and fixed. We are either Black, Indigenous, White, or Asian. At times, however, categories such as Pacific Islander, Jewish, or Middle Eastern are included. Yet these shifts are treated as anomalies or local adjustments to what is otherwise taken to be a settled framework. The appearance of regional variation, then, does not undermine the essentialist picture but illustrates how it reasserts itself even in the face of counterexamples.³

We can trace this essentialism to Enlightenment thinkers. Kant (1775)⁴ did not merely posit that races had natural essences. He also treated classificatory divisions themselves as an inalienable truth. His reasoning for this was nature’s *purposiveness* (Mosayabi 2025; McNulty 2025). Each race has hereditary features that reflect suitability to certain environments. Thus, which races there are is not a contingent fact about humanity but a carving of nature’s joints. Few contemporary theorists would defend such a strong view. Yet its legacy persists tacitly. Even among those who reject biological essentialism, the classificatory framework itself seems to function as settled. Analyses tend to treat a closed list of racial categories as the proper subject matter of enquiry. There is almost no sustained attention to the possibility that the classificatory

3 It is important to be clear about what is meant by “essentialism” in this context. I do not mean that racial taxonomies literally possess biological essences. I use the term in a looser but still serious sense. Namely, to mark a *way of thinking* that treats classificatory divisions as fixed and exhaustive. Second-order essentialism is a regulative assumption that structures racial thinking.

4 I do not mean to suggest that *all* natural historians were committed to second-order essentialism. While Kant is a clear example of such a view, it is more controversial whether the broader natural history tradition espoused essentialist thinking in this form. Some have even argued that claims about essentialism have been overstated (e.g., Winsor 2006; Levit & Meister 2006; Witteveen 2018).

system itself might be expanded. I take this silence as telling: the grip of second-order essentialism limits what questions are asked and what alternatives are considered.

The kind of essentialism that treats racial classification as joint-carving can be put thus:

Strong racial taxonomic essentialism The classifications that constitute a racial taxonomic system are necessarily unchangeable, fixed, inalienable.

Put bluntly, *we cannot add or subtract races*. The categories we have are unchangeable. On the strongest reading, it is *impossible* to revise the categories of racial taxonomy.⁵

Strong taxonomic essentialism is clearly untenable. The mere fact that we oscillate between counting Pacific Islander, Jewish, or Middle Eastern as races, rather than (just) ethnicities, reveals the instability of racial taxonomy. *How* we count races is contextual, perhaps even *ad hoc*, and this is not something to expect from a system that is impossible to change. Further, I have been speaking of racial taxonomy as if it were a stable cross-regional monolith. Yet different taxonomic systems deviate from the Western standard (Cf. Ludwig 2019, Msimang 2020).⁶

Consider Brazil. The traditional categories are *Preto* (Black), *Branca*, (White), *Indigena* (Indigenous), and *Pardo* (Mixed). A growing social movement seeks to abolish the divide between *Preto* and *Pardo* (e.g., Cicalo 2012; see also Sales & Carvalho 2025). The reasons are clear: *Pardo* people experience the same structural disadvantages as *Preto* people, including inaccessible healthcare, limited education opportunities, overrepresentation in slums and prisons, and disproportionate killings by the police. *Pardo* people make up roughly 46% of the Brazilian population, with *Preto* people roughly 8%. Subsuming both under *Negro* creates a solidarity base comprising over half the population, an intimidating political bloc against *Branca* domination. This illustrates not only that racial taxonomy is not a cross-regional monolith but also that organised social movements can successfully redraw its boundaries.

Again, few contemporary theorists would explicitly defend this view. I will not target it directly. My concern is with a weaker form. While ceding contingency in principle, it nevertheless functions as though our classificatory options were fixed in practice:

5 I am not suggesting that racial taxonomies are globally uniform. My point is that, even with regional variation, theories and institutional practices continue to treat their *local* classification system as settled, exhaustive, and able to travel across contexts. The essentialism, then, lies not in the universal fixity of particular categories, but in the regulative assumption that some bounded system is exhaustive of racial possibilities.

6 To be sure, the U.S. census has revised its racial categories over time. But these changes operate within the fundamentally monoracial paradigm. Mixed-race people are positioned as composites of monoracial kinds rather than recognised as occupying a distinct social category.

Weak racial taxonomic essentialism The classifications of a racial taxonomic system are *contingently* “fixed” or “unchangeable”.

On this view, we can *in principle* change racial taxonomy. Nevertheless, there are social mechanisms that stabilise dominant understanding of racial classification. An example is the census, where the available racial categories with which one can identify are limited and express, albeit unintentionally, the idea that *these are the only races one can be* (Fernández 1995). Another example is stereotypical racial discourse inherited from broader racially coded structures, such as the education system or legal institutions.

What is immediately clear is that weak racial taxonomic essentialism is not essentialism at all. It admits that racial categories are contingent and therefore open to revision *in principle*. Its “essentialism”, if there is one, is epistemic, describing how we come to *think* that racial taxonomy is fixed or fail to consider otherwise. Nevertheless, once we loosen the assumption of fixity, we are forced to confront some questions: *Is this the racial taxonomy that we want? If not, what should it be?*

4. A NEW POSITION IN AN OLD DEBATE

Recognising the falsity of racial taxonomic essentialism invites us to revisit a long-standing debate about racial classification. Two positions dominate: *eliminativism* and *conservationism*.⁷ The former is the idea that race-realist thought and talk should be abolished (e.g., Appiah 1992; Zack 1993; Wodak 2021; Hochman 2017); the latter is the idea that it should be preserved (e.g., Du Bois 1996 [1897]; Haslanger 2000; Hardimon 2017).⁸ The dispute often turns on a strategic question: would eliminating racial categories dismantle structural racism, or would it merely obscure its persistence?

Most conservationists are motivated by political concerns. But they tend to operate with a background commitment that I call *conformist conservationism*:

Conformist Conservationism Conserve all *and only* existing race-realist thought and talk.

Again, few explicitly defend this idea. It nevertheless serves as a default framing. Conservationism means holding on to the categories *we already have*. This assumption makes it easy to slip into second-order essentialism: if our only question is whether

⁷ For a very insightful survey of different varieties of eliminativism and conservationism, see Glasgow (2009, chapter 1).

⁸ Du Bois's (1996 [1897]) “The Conservation of Races” is a powerful example of maintaining race even after racism.

to keep or abolish *existing* racial categories, it becomes natural to assume that such categories are the only ones that could exist. Once we reject this assumption, however, logical space opens for two further positions:

Contractionist Conservationism Conserve, *but reduce*, existing race-realist thought and talk.

Expansionist Conservationism Conserve, *but increase*, existing race-realist thought and talk.

Contractionist conversationism can be politically progressive or regressive. The Brazilian activists breaking the boundaries between *Preto* and *Pardo* is a contractionist strategy aimed at strengthening solidarity against *Branca* domination. By contrast, the Australian policy that produced *The Stolen Generations* was also contractionist: conserving whiteness while erasing Indigeneity through genocide.

My concern is with *expansionist conservationism*: conserving racial classification but adding new categories where justice demands. Importantly, justice demands that new mixed-race identities, and therefore mixed-race categories, be created. Rejecting racial taxonomical essentialism, and endorsing expansionist conservationism, means that such justice demands *can be met*. We are able to create agential identities for mixed-race people and corresponding mixed-race categories.

To be clear, expansionist conservationism does not mean that individuals should be able to identify with multiple racial ancestries. This practice exists, and it is a notable step toward justice. Rather, my claim is that there are cases where justice demands recognising and institutionalising new racial categories. Such are not derivable from existing monoraces. They are stand-alone identity-categories that must be added into the racial system (e.g., *Metis*, *New Mestiza*). Importantly, this is what separates my view from existing versions of conservationism. It preserves race thought and talk but insists on the invention of racial categories.

Despite this, I am not advocating for the creation of mixed-race identity-categories under *any* conditions. This would be socially irresponsible and politically dangerous. The next section spells out what I, following Sundstrom (2016), call a *responsible mixed-race politics*. Such a politics provides the normative constraints of constructing racial identity-categories.

5. A RESPONSIBLE MIXED-RACE POLITICS

Introducing racial categories may not be emancipatory under all conditions. As Sundstrom (2016, 38) notes:

Multiracial persons and organizations are uniquely situated to cause or perpetuate racist harm, as their behavior is linked to the well-being of those who are vulnerable to racism. Multiracial individuals, through their interactions with the forces of racialization and the network of existent racial projects, have a direct effect on monoracial lives.

Why are mixed-race people uniquely situated to cause or perpetuate harm? There are at least six different concerns. I'll briefly mention five and give sustained attention to one.

1. More mixed-race identities can lead to the erasure of one or more of an individual's racial identities, particularly if society views them as "not enough" of a certain race.
2. Mixed-race categories can perpetuate the idea that there is a hierarchy of races, with mixed-race individuals being viewed as superior to less valued groups.⁹
3. Creating mixed-race identity-categories may not necessarily lead to more understanding of race, as some people may use it as an excuse to avoid addressing deeper issues surrounding racism.
4. Allocating resources towards creating and implementing new mixed-race identity categories may divert resources away from other pressing issues of social justice, such as structural racism.
5. While self-identification may be empowering, it doesn't mean that one is treated with respect and without discrimination.

The common thread is that expansion might not (only) have positive effects, such as correcting hermeneutical injustice and ontological oppression. Instead, it could *reproduce* unjust racial hierarchies (e.g., Makalani 2001; Mahtani 2014).

One risk demands closer attention: the danger of *de-Indigenisation*. This is closely related to the erasure worry but has its own distinctive political weight. The Australian context is instructive (Carlson 2016). *The Stolen Generations* reveal how mixed-race identity was once exploited for colonial ends:

[C]hildren of mixed indigenous/white backgrounds were taken from their families and raised by white families or institutions... [Australia] had a politics of racial amalgamation as a method of erasure to deal with the indigenous peoples (Salesa 2011), but [Australia] currently [has] binary racial politics that tend to see indigenous mixed as indigenous and non-indigenous as white (Fozdar and McGavin 2017, p. 6).

In such a context, "mixed" can carry the symbolism of ongoing colonial violence. The stakes are clear: preserving Indigenous identity in the face of white ancestry

⁹ To be clear, it is possible that a mixed-race identity be constituted by two marginalised identities, and in this sense, may fall to the lowest rung of the racial hierarchy.

matters for entitlements to land, political recognition, and cultural continuity. Introducing separate mixed-race identity-categories could jeopardise these entitlements and fracture the political base (Fozdar and McGavin 2017).

It's important to hear the voices most afflicted by the ongoing effects of colonization in relation to mixed-race identity. Claire Coleman (2021), an Indigenous (Wirlomin-Noongar) writer and poet, describes the pernicious forms of discrimination she has felt being someone with mixed ancestry:

I suffer discrimination because some people think I am too white to be seen as blak; that I should not identify as Aboriginal, that I should not have the right. Some people would try to remove my access to Aboriginal culture, would try to say I am too white, too mixed-race, to be allowed access to my Country and culture, family and land. Those same people think I should not access Aboriginal resources, affirmative action, land rights.

Thus, introducing mixed-race identity-categories runs a very dangerous risk:

The Problem of "De-Indigenisation."—

- Erasing or denying 'authentic' Indigenous identity.
- Reifying stratification, with 'mixed' Indigenous people higher in racial hierarchy.
- Undermines and fragments solidarity with the most marginalized base against White dominance.

The expansionist project of introducing mixed-race identity-categories *must therefore be responsible*. Even when rebelling against monoracialism, we must account for all major stakeholders in racial reimagination. A responsible mixed-race politics, then, must meet four conditions:

1. It must not reduce solidarity with marginalised groups resisting white supremacy.
2. It must not reify racial hierarchy in a way that elevates mixed-race people above others.
3. It must not render Indigenous people as "not Indigenous enough".
4. It must not entrench beliefs about racial fixity and biological essentialism.

Taken together, these considerations sketch the contours of a responsible mixed-race politics. Importantly, they articulate not fixed rules, nor conditions that demand consensus, but the moral terrain within which any project of expansionism must navigate. To be clear, the point is not to dictate how individuals should identify, or determine the category to which they belong, but to mark the kinds of risks that reimagination must work to avoid. If mixed-race identity-categories are to expand the possibilities of self-understanding rather than to foreclose them, they must be forged with these dangers in clear sight.

The next question, then, is how such identity-categories might be developed responsibly in *practice*. Here we turn to my community-first approach to conceptual engineering.

5.1. Community-First Conceptual Engineering

The rationale for expanding racial taxonomy is straightforward. Our systems of representation are not merely descriptive but productive: they create the social categories through which lives are lived (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). These systems are not immutable. They contain points of weakness and moments of disruption (Butler 1989). Introducing new concepts can be one such disruption, altering the very field of possible identity-categories. By changing the concepts through which we represent ourselves, we change who we are. This is the political potential of *conceptual engineering*: changing aspects of thought and talk to change the kinds of people we can be (e.g., Haslanger 2000, 2020; Burgess & Plunkett 2013; Cappelen 2018). So, rather than merely describing concepts, we can ask: *which concepts should we have?* By asking this question, we in turn ask: *who should we be?*

I don't believe that an answer can be given unilaterally. If new racial concepts are to be responsibly introduced, not only must they satisfy the conditions of a responsible mixed-race politics, but they must also be the product of the very communities they are meant to represent. I call this *community-first conceptual engineering*. The approach ensures that conceptual change is not imposed from above but is generated through the participatory practices that give identities their authority. Without this, expansionism risks the same paternalism and external imposition that have historically shaped, and misshaped, racial and mixed-racial, identity-categories.

Of course, this proposal faces an immediate worry. Mixed-race people are not a unified constituency, and no new categories or identities can rely on consensus across such a diverse set of individuals. Nor would it be desirable to demand this. People will continue to identify in divergent and conflicting ways. The aim of expansionism, then, is not to legislate how anyone must identify. It is to guide collective reimagining of racial categories more responsibly. What matters isn't agreement but the development of fair and participatory processes through which new identities can be created.

But what exactly is the problem with conceptual engineering as it is ordinarily understood? Much of it proceeds from the armchair.¹⁰ The general method is to reimagine a particular social category, such as a new way of thinking about *woman*, and to argue for its normative superiority over what is currently in use. Often, it is

¹⁰ This is with the exception of recent experimental philosophy. See, for example, Andow (2020) and Nado (2021).

true that reimaginings are indeed improvements: a trans-inclusive account of *woman* is plainly preferable to one that excludes trans women (e.g., Jenkins 2017).

Yet the method is vulnerable to *methodological paternalism*. Even when well-intentioned, it can bypass the participatory processes through which communities, the stakeholders of these identity-categories, determine the boundaries of their own identities. Such risks imposing an identity-category *for* a group, rather than enabling the group to engage in collective self-determination (e.g., Young 1990, 2000).¹¹

My claim is *not* that philosophers must refrain from proposing new concepts. Nor do I assume that philosophers have acted paternalistically in offering ameliorative analyses. The concern, rather, is about *where the authority of a revised concept lies*. It is one thing to defend a revision on the basis of its justice-promoting outcomes; it is another to presume that such reasons *suffice* to legitimate the concept's adoption. The position I am advancing here is that the authority of a revised concept depends not solely on the normative reasons that philosophers offer in its favour, but on its uptake and development through community processes. Philosophical reasons, then, can guide and inform these processes. Yet they cannot replace or override them.¹²

Avoiding methodological paternalism requires a shift in how philosophers understand their role. They are not the primary progenitors of identity-categories, but participants in broader community-wide processes of conceptual change (see Podosky forthcoming). Their distinctive contributions lie in clarifying normative considerations, diagnosing conceptual pathologies, and designing frameworks that communities can willingly employ when revising their own identity-categories.

On this approach, philosophers still play a role in determining the normative contours of conceptual change without dictating the outcome. The task is to offer guidelines or heuristics that help communities develop concepts without entrenching unjust hierarchies. Or, at the very least, to help identify and mitigate such risks. This is what I will offer in the next section.

6. A FRAMEWORK FOR THE UNCONSTRUCTED

The preceding discussion has urged a shift to a community-first approach. For mixed-race people, this means enabling those most affected to take the lead in constructing the identity-categories through which they are recognised. I aim to provide a source of normative orientation.

11 Compare this to the kind of conceptual engineering of Black feminists consciousness-raising groups (Cull 2020).

12 It should be said that *if* a community decides to take on board a philosopher's proposal, it is not the proposal itself that is authoritative but the community's decision.

Before articulating my framework, I'll address a possible concern. To expand the set of racial categories implies that it is *racial* categories that are being introduced, not race-like replacements (i.e., “schmacial” categories). The worry is that, if new categories are simply invented and appended to the system, they might lack continuity with the racial ontology they are meant to revise, and thus fail to ameliorate race at all.

However, the kind of expansion I defend qualifies as genuine amelioration rather than some kind of conceptual replacement. We can understand it not as an abandonment of racial concepts but as an *aspirational* process (i.e., Gray 2023): one that involves the gradual reinterpretation of a concept through social, normative, and institutional uptake. A revised racial category remains part of the racial ontology because it is taken up as such *by the communities for whom racial categorisation matters*, and because *it continues to play the role that racial concepts have historically played*: structuring social identities, grounding institutional practices, and mediating experiences of advantage and disadvantage.

Thus, the creation of mixed-race categories is not a matter of replacing “Black and Asian” with a more elegant label. The point is that conjunctive descriptions often fail to even function as categories in classificatory schemes. They mark descriptive facts about ancestry but lack the social and institutional status to ground self- and communal identification, public recognition, or political standing. The expansionist project calls for *category formation*: the construction of classificatory units that are institutionally recognised, socially intelligible, and normatively justified. These are properly racial because they are taken up and maintained through the same kinds of processes that have made race real.

My task now is to articulate a framework for responsible construction: one that helps ensure new mixed-race identities and categories are both emancipatory and non-destructive. These guidelines are not a fixed plan, but a set of constraints that structure community-led innovation without determining its content or function. Nor does it presume that mixed-race people form a unified constituency capable of speaking with one voice. What follows, then, is not a demand for uniformity but a framework to help orient collective experiments in identity and category making, whatever form those experiments take.

The starting point is the set of dangers already identified:

1. It must not reduce solidarity with marginalised groups resisting white supremacy.
2. It must not reify racial hierarchy in a way that elevates mixed-race people above others.
3. It must not render Indigenous people as “not Indigenous enough”.
4. It must not entrench beliefs about racial fixity and biological essentialism.

Such are *normative constraints*: if the construction of a new identity fails to avoid them, it is unjust *regardless* of any local gains in recognition or self-understanding. However, the framework that follows are meant to function as *heuristics* for community deliberation. They do not tell communities *what* concept to build, but they help ensure that whatever concept is built resists the worst tendencies of racial politics while opening space for genuinely new forms of belonging. Nor do they foreclose individual conscience: nothing dictates how any particular person must identify. Rather, the point is to sketch the moral terrain within which collective projects of reimagination can unfold responsibly without assuming consensus where none exists.¹³

6.1. Culture

Culture plays a crucial role in the development and recognition of mixed-race identity-categories. By “culture”, I mean the set of practices, symbols, dispositions, and modes of life that structure how a group lives and how its members are recognised as such. While I do not claim that culture is necessary for agential identity in a strict sense, it remains one of the primary means through which such identities become publicly legible and socially sustained.

For many identity groups, cultural practices are central to how identity is made intelligible to others. Consider the example of being a Taylor Swift fan: wearing friendship bracelets or attending concerts serves not only as a mode of self-identification but also as a public signal that one belongs to the group. Cultural forms mediate between the inner life of identity and the external world of recognition, and in this way, they help secure the externality condition of agential identity.

In the context of mixed-race identity-categories, culture is both a resource and a site of creation. Some mixed-race communities may build entirely new cultural formations, as in the case of the Métis in Canada or Anzaldúa’s notion of the New Mestiza, where distinctive practices and self-conceptions give rise to a new cultural identity. Others may draw selectively from their ancestral cultures, weaving together traditions, symbols, and practices in novel ways. In either case, culture functions as a medium through which mixed-race identity-categories can become socially legible, resilient, and affirmable.

13 Even within community-led construction, injustice can be present. Power asymmetries within a racial group can shape who speaks, whose experience is taken as normative, and what identities are deemed valid. This is particularly true where colourism, class privilege, or proximity to whiteness distort representation. My framework does not ignore these dangers but helps guard against them. The injunction not to reify racial hierarchy or undermine solidarity is meant to ensure that new identities are not constructed in ways that privilege dominant subgroups or reproduce intragroup injustice. Any process of deliberation must not begin with the most visible voices but those structurally marginalised even within mixed-race groups.

6.2. Hierarchy

Any viable mixed-race identity-category must include a clear-eyed understanding of the group's position within a system of unjust racial hierarchy. Without this, there is the risk of complicity: the group's practices could end up reinforcing, rather than challenging, oppressive racial relations.

Consider a case in which a new mixed-race identity-category is composed predominantly of lighter-skinned individuals who benefit from proximity to whiteness through colourism. If members are unaware of these dynamics, they are less likely to form solidarities with more marginalised groups, and more likely to leave deeper structures of racial hierarchy unchallenged.

The idea that *attitudes* can be a part of a culture is not strange. Just as the culture of being a "Swift" includes loving Taylor Swift's music, so too do many national cultures include characteristic dispositions or psychological profiles. In Australia, for instance, "tall poppy syndrome" is part of the national cultural repertoire: a shared readiness to cut down those who flaunt their wealth or success.

In this sense, a mixed-race identity-category can and should build into its culture a standing attitude of *positional awareness*: a reflexive recognition of where it fits within racial hierarchy, and a commitment to act accordingly. Without such awareness, cultural formation risks being an exercise in self-affirmation that leaves the underlying structure of injustice intact.

6.3. Contingency

To guard against the essentialisation of race, especially the idea that it is a fixed biological kind, any new mixed-race identity-category must acknowledge the contingency of its own cultural markers. The practices that constitute its culture, and serve as the public signals of belonging, are not immutable. They can and will change over time.

That cultures evolve is obvious enough. What is less obvious, and politically crucial, is whether members recognise that this evolution is possible. The history of Italian Americans is instructive. Today, Italians in the United States are firmly regarded as "white". Yet in the early days of European migration, during 18th and 19th centuries, there was a national panic about securing the future of a white, protestant, and free country. Darker-skinned Italians were considered less racially pure and 'uncivilized'. As a result, such Italians were seen as suspicious and not worthy of citizenship (Jacobson 1999; see also Staples 2019).

Whiteness here was not a timeless, biological fact but a shifting political boundary. The terms of membership changed; the identity was redefined. This example

reveals the instability of racial categories and the error of treating them as fixed natural kinds.

For a mixed-race group, recognising this contingency is not a matter of historical reflection. It is a safeguard against the drift into essentialist thinking: the very thinking that has long underpinned and stabilised unjust racial hierarchies. A culture that treats its boundaries and markers as contingent can adapt to new circumstances without reifying the very taxonomies it should resist.

6.4. Openness and Dismissal

When a new mixed-race identity-category chooses to align itself, in whole or in part, with an existing monoracial category, two forms of readiness are required: (1) openness to investing in the cultural elements associated with marginalised racial ancestry; (2) dismissal of cultural elements associated with privileged racial ancestry. The point is not that every mixed-race category *must* define itself through the cultural resources of its ancestries. Rather, if it *does* draw on such resources, it must be prepared to embrace those linked to marginalised ancestries and to reject those that sustain privilege.

Consider a category of individuals with both Filipino and white ancestry. If their identity were defined by “pride in being white-passing”, they would be reproducing the logic of racial hierarchy in which whiteness marks civilisation, purity, and superiority. Such an identity would not merely fail to challenge racial injustice but serve to entrench it.

By contrast, readiness to identify with the cultural elements of Filipino heritage, albeit not uncritically but with pride in a disrespected tradition, can help maintain solidarity with less-valued racial groups and counteract assimilationist pressures. This solidarity matters, because a mixed-race identity that detaches itself from the struggles of its marginalised ancestries risks becoming complicit in the very hierarchies it should resist.

6.5. Flexibility

A mixed-race identity-category must recognise that racial belonging can be multiple. Membership in a new mixed-race identity-category need not preclude membership in other racial categories.

This principle is important for at least two reasons. First, it can prevent *de-Indigenisation*. If one can be both Indigenous and mixed-race, then membership in the latter need not displace the former, and investment in Indigenous heritage remains possible. It also blocks the slide from skin-colour to authenticity claims: being Indigenous is not a matter of phenotype. Second, multiple belonging ensures that

identification remains *voluntary* and responsive to self-understanding. Even where someone has white ancestry, this does not entail that they are *in fact* mixed-race; it simply means they *could* identify as such if it captured their lived experience.

A final upshot is that essentialist beliefs about race can be avoided by accepting that racial identity-categories are flexible rather than fixed by virtue of being identity-categories that we can shift between (e.g., Preston-Roedder 2024). This challenges both first and second-order essentialism. It undermines the idea that one's race is unchangeable, either because one can identify with different available racial identity-categories or because one can agitate for a new one if none of the available identity-categories make sense of their racial experiences.

6.6. Summary

The point of these guidelines is not to settle the content or function of any mixed-race identity-category but to shape the conditions under which such identity-categories can emerge without reproducing racist hierarchy. A community-first approach to construction suggests that new identity-categories be culturally grounded, hierarchically self-aware, open to change, resistant to valorising privilege, and flexible in allowing multiple belonging. These constraints are not an obstacle to self-determination but rather the terms on which self-determination can be exercised responsibly in a racially stratified world. By deploying these heuristics in the process of construction, communities can ensure that the expansion of racial taxonomy is not merely an act of naming but a deliberate intervention in the structures that shape racial life.

7. PERNICIOUS CONTEXTS

Not every racial context is ready for new mixed-race identity-categories. Even if an identity-category meets the conditions of a responsible mixed-race politics, the broader environment may be so hostile that any new identity-category will be co-opted into existing structures of racism. In such contexts, the risks are not just theoretical. In Australia, for example, settler colonialism continues to shape racial politics; introducing a mixed-race Indigenous identity-category could serve the interests of those eager to question or deny the authenticity of Indigenous identity for people with white ancestry. The likely result would be *de-Indigenisation*: the imposition of a mixed-race category over an Indigenous one, with predictable consequences for land rights, political recognition, and cultural continuity.

Recognising this, the project of mixed-race construction requires a conditional approach:

Favourable Conditions When the requirements of a responsible mixed-race politics are met, we *ought* to expand racial taxonomy to include identity-categories that more accurately capture mixed-race experience.

Unfavourable Conditions When the requirements of a responsible mixed-race politics fail to be met, we *ought* to work towards creating them, with expansion only following once they are in place.

In situations like the Australian context, we should work to create the conditions that would allow for the responsible creation of mixed-race identity-categories. I do not have time to go through what would be required, but it would at least mean achieving justice for Indigenous people, which starts with a treaty. Unfortunately, Australia appears to be a long way from this. Things might be similar elsewhere. In the Brazilian context, it simply isn't the right time for new mixed-race identity-categories. First, they must erase the divide between *Preto* and *Pardo* so that a new group can emerge as a powerful force of resistance against *Branca* oppression. Yet, things might be different elsewhere. In Canada, the *Métis* people are a thriving community with a distinctive culture even in the face of ongoing colonization; in the US, the rate at which mixed Black and white children are being born could mean the start of a strong cultural shift towards mixed-race identity-categories that capture their unique experiences.

All of this is to say that whether a mixed-race identity-category should be constructed is not a question that can be answered in the abstract. It turns on the texture of the racial landscape: whether it will nurture or distort the identity-category in question. When the environment is wrong, the priority is not to abandon the project of expansion but to make it right, to build the conditions for a racial taxonomy capable of responsibly accommodating new forms of belonging.

The conditional nature of this project matters for how we think about its urgency. Expansionist conservationism is not a call for indiscriminate proliferation of racial identity-categories. It is a call for responsible construction. Where the conditions for responsible construction are absent, the task is preparatory: to change the political, cultural, and material environment so that new identity-categories can emerge without reproducing injustice. Where the conditions are present, the task is constructive: to work with communities to develop identity-categories that meet their needs and respect their histories. In both cases, the point is the same. We must go beyond the confines of monoracial taxonomy toward a racial landscape that recognises and sustains the full range of ways in which people can belong.

8. CONCLUSION

The expansionist project begins from a simple observation: the current racial taxonomy is too narrow to capture the lives it purports to order. For mixed-race people, this is a structural constraint on the possibilities of self-understanding, recognition, and solidarity. Rejecting essentialism, however, opens new conceptual space for the responsible construction of mixed-race identity-categories.

The framework I have sketched does not prescribe a single model of mixed-race identity. It instead articulates the conditions under which new identity-categories can be formed without reinforcing the very hierarchies they resist: culturally grounded, hierarchical self-awareness, openness to change, resistance to valorising privilege, and flexibility in belonging. These conditions do not stand apart from political context. In some settings, they may be readily met; in others, as in part of settler-colonial Australia or a racially stratified Brazil, they will require long-term political transformation before they can be met at all.

There is no neutral moment for the creation of a new racial identity-category. To construct one is to intervene in the material and symbolic order of race, and to do so in ways that will reverberate beyond the intentions of its creators. This is why the expansionist's task is judiciousness: to be alert to the dangers of premature construction, and equally to the injustices of doing nothing at all. The aim is not simply *more race* but *better race*. A taxonomy that reflects, rather than constrains, the complex realities of racial life, and that does so in a way that communities can claim as their own.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must thank two exceptionally generous and extremely insightful reviewers at the Journal of Social Ontology. Without their input, this paper would be far less significant, let alone interesting. It is heartening to see philosophers engaged in the politics of mixed-race identity. Moreover, I want to thank A/Prof Adam Hochman and Prof. Bronwyn Carlson for many discussions on the subject matter, as well as the audience at the Race in the Modern World workshop at Macquarie University.

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