# Coalitional Racial Identities

**DRAFT – July 2026 – Annette Martín**

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I focus primarily on the political dimensions of racial identity. On a social constructionist approach, racial identities are taken to play important roles in explaining and predicting injustice. Taylor, for instance, depicts racial identities as "bundle[s] of predictions" about what is likely to happen to one in a racialized world, and which thereby help one to make sense of and prepare for those experiences.[1] Racial identities are also taken to serve as a basis for political organizing. There is, for instance, a tradition that emphasizes the importance of Black solidarity in response to a common experience of Black racial oppression[2].

But although marginalized racial identities have been emphasized as important bases for political organizing, intersectionality scholars have also highlighted key problems with many identity-based political movements. In particular, they have drawn attention to a tendency within both feminist and anti-racist movements to ignore, or even reinforce, the problems faced by Black women— or more generally, individuals whose identities reflect an intersection of multiple categories of oppression.[3] This tendency for identity-based political movements to ignore the needs of individuals with relatively less power appears to be connected to what Harris calls gender essentialism and racial essentialism.[4] Gender essentialism and racial essentialism maintain that there is a monolithic experience for any given gender or racial identity, respectively— e.g. a monolithic "women's experience" or "Asian experience." To distinguish the kind of essentialism that Harris has in mind from more widely discussed forms of essentialism, such as biological essentialism, I will refer to it as *universalizing essentialism*.

The illusion of universalizing essentialism, intersectionality theorists contend, results from taking relatively privileged members of a group to be the standard that represents the group, such that their experiences are assumed to generalize, and their interests generally determine the strategies and priorities of the political movement[5]. The problem is that, in fact,

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[1] (Taylor 2013: 222-23)
[2] For discussion, see
(Collins 2003; Shelby 2002; Sundstrom 2002b; Taylor 2000, 2013)
[3] Classic, foundational discussions include (Collective 2017; Crenshaw 1989, 1990)
[4] (Harris 1989)
[5] (Harris 1989; Spelman 1988)

different group members experience racism and sexism differently, such that the experiences of relatively dominant group members is not in fact universally representative.[6] For this reason, appeals to a common experience of oppression, which often suggest that there is a monolithic group experience, can be misleading. Pragmatically, the consequence of assuming that there is a universal group experience, which is typically equated with experiences of relatively dominant members, is that women of color, and others with relatively less power, are frequently marginalized even within liberation movements. In light of this, Crenshaw contends that "the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite– that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences."[7]

Because intersectionality scholars highlight these problems, some have worried that intersectionality ultimately calls on us to abandon identity-based politics.[8] But Crenshaw, among others, has suggested a different antidote, which involves rethinking how we conceptualize racial identities and racial oppression such as to avoid universalizing essentialism. In particular, Crenshaw proposes shifting to a coalitional picture of identity: "A beginning response to these questions requires that we first recognize that the organized identity groups in which we find ourselves in are in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed."[9] Typically, identity-based politics is juxtaposed with coalitional politics: identity groups are taken to be defined by commonality, whereas coalitions organize across lines of difference.[10] The suggestion is effectively to upend this dichotomoy and to view identities as themselves being organized across difference. Thus, rather than homogeneous, the coalitional view takes identity groups to be internally heterogeneous; and rather than being metaphysically given to individuals, it takes identity groups to be actively "organized and represented as unified" by individuals' "tacit or explicit creative acts."[11]

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[6] (Collective 2017; Collins 2019; Collins and Bilge 2020; Crenshaw 1989, 1990; Harris 1989; Spelman 1988)

[7] (Crenshaw 1990: 1242)

[8] For some overview of this debate, see (Martín 2024; Young 1994).

[9] (Crenshaw 1990: 1299). See also (Anthias 1998; Carastathis 2013; Collective 2017; Collins and Bilge 2020; Crenshaw 1990; Fuss 1989)

[10] (Carastathis 2013: 944)

[11] (Carastathis 2013: 945) To clarify, the coalitional view can be seen as responding not just to views that see identity groups as being naturally given, but also to views that see identity groups as being socially given. On the coalitional approach, "it is coalition politics which constructs the category… in the first place," rather than political coalitions being built around pre-existing identity categories. (Fuss 1989: 36) On my view, there will be some pre-existing

The coalitional approach to identity presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, as Carastathis argues, taking a coalitional approach allows us to form better political alliances, because, by recognizing the heterogeneity of the group, it empowers individuals to critique marginalizing practices within the movement.[12] On the other hand, a coalitional approach also inspires worries about group cohesion and arbitrariness. Consider, for instance, Harris's assertion that "bridges… are built, not found. The discovery of shared suffering is a connection more illusory than real."[13] While the push to build coalitional bridges can be empowering, the flipside— that there is no common experience of oppression to be discovered— seems to remove any moral basis for group cohesion or unity.[14] Further, if there is no common oppression that individuals share, then it is not clear what makes it reasonable for people of color, or women, or any other group to form an identity and begin organizing together in the first place. As Young asks, "on the basis of what do they come together? What are the social conditions that have motivated the politics?"[15] Finally, it might seem as though, in denying that there is a common experience of oppression, the coalitional view ultimately denies the existence of systematic injustice, thereby undermining our ability to identify and respond to oppression.[16]

My aim in this paper is to offer a metaphysical account of coalitional racial identity that rejects universalizing essentialism while addressing the concern about arbitrariness and safeguarding our ability to identify systematic injustice. To do so, I will take up a path suggested by Collins' description of identity groups as involving "heterogeneous commonality."[17] My account will spell out a view of what this heterogeneous commonality amounts to, thereby providing a concrete interpretation of what it means to say that identity groups are "in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed."

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categories when it comes to objective racial identities, but coalitional politics will involve the construction of new subjective racial identities.

[12] (Carastathis 2013) She also emphasizes that the coalitional view, particularly within an intersectional framework, opens opprtunities for expanding one's coalition by illuminating points of connection to other groups.

[13] (Harris 1989)

[14] Zack expresses a similar worry for feminism. (Zack 2005)

[15] (Young 1994: 722)

[16] Young makes a related argument. (Young 1994: 718-19).

[17] (Collins 2003)

My account will rely on a distinction between "objective" and "subjective" identity.[18] Objective racial identity refers to racial ascription, or the external assignment of racial categories to individuals. Objective racial identity concerns how an individual is positioned in society, and the structural constraints and enablements that come with how they are classified. Subjective racial identity, in contrast, refers to the psychological, first-personal aspects of racial identity. Subjective racial identity is concerned with how an individual sees or understands themselves in connection to racial categories. An individual can have an objective racial identity even if they do not identify with any racial category, provided that there are practices of racial ascription in their social milieu— in this sense, objective racial identity is independent of subjective racial identity. Subjective racial identity, in contrast, requires some kind of creative act on the part of individuals, whether independently or collectively.

Using this distinction, a coalitional racial identity will be a type of subjective racial identity that is grounded in collective, political acts of identification and solidarity. My account of coalitional racial identity will be layered on an account of objective racial identity, which I will call the Roles-Statuses-and-Positions (RSP) view.[19] The RSP view offers a picture of heterogeneous commonality that can serve as a non-arbitrary basis for coalition building. In this way, the RSP view makes sense of the idea that ascribed racial categories have the potential to serve as grounds for coalition-building— and are, in this sense, "potential coalitions waiting to be formed." These potential coalitions become actual coalitions through acts of identification and solidarity, thereby giving rise to subjective, coalitional racial identities.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I will motivate the RSP view by arguing that a dominant view of objective racial identity, which I call the social kind model, supports universalizing essentialism and thereby encourages the political problems that the coalitional approach aims to address. In Section 3, I will develop the RSP view of objective racial identity, and in Section 4, I will show how the RSP view offers a picture of heterogeneous commonality that offers a basis for coalition-building. In Section 5, I present my coalitional view of subjective racial identity in more detail and highlight some of the political implications of this approach. I conclude in Section 6.

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[18] See, for instance, (Appiah 2006; Bilgrami 2006; Gooding-Wiliams 1998; Jenkins 2023)
[19] I describe coalitional racial identities, or subjective racial identities more generally, as being "layered on" objective racial identities for the sake of simplicity. In fact, I expect that there will be looping effects between objective and subjective racial identities. (Hacking 1999)

**2. Diagnosis: The Social Kind Model**

Before I turn to developing my view, I first want to show how a widespread approach to the metaphysics of race, which I will call the *social kind model,* supports universalizing essentialism. This shows that the social kind model cannot offer a suitable metaphysical foundation for the coalitional view of racial identity. Rather, it is part of the problem, and an alternative metaphysical foundation is thus needed for the coalitional view.

I take the social kind model of race to be characterized both by an ontological structure and by a set of explanatory functions associated with that structure. With respect to the ontological structure, on the social kind model, race primarily takes the form of a division of human beings into a set of stable, discrete, and coherent racial kinds, or races. In contrast to a biological view of race that takes races to be natural kinds, on the social kind model races are social kinds that result from systematic social forces. Different socio-political contexts construct racial kinds, if they do, in different ways— as this is often stated, race does not "travel" between macro contexts.[20]

In addition to this ontological structure, a core feature of the social kind model of race is that it takes racial kinds to play various important theoretical functions.

First, racial kinds play an alethic, or identity-grounding function: racial kind membership determines the truth of what one "really is," racially speaking. What the criteria for membership in a particular racial kind consist in depends on how the kind is constructed in the relevant socio-political context. In the U.S., for example, racial kind membership is determined by recent ancestry tied to a particular geographical region. While there is a strong correlation between appearance and racial kind membership, it is possible for these to come apart: one can appear to be a member of race R but not actually be a member of R, if one does not satisfy the appropriate membership criteria.[21]

Second, on the social kind model, racial kinds also play explanatory, predictive, and inductive functions, particularly in connection to social scientific investigations of injustice.[22] Distinguishing between racial kinds (i.e. keeping track of who is Black, white, Asian, etc.) enables us to identify and explain significant racial disparities in, for example, health, education, income, employment, and wealth. Further, one's racial kind membership helps to

[20] (Root 2000)
[21] At least, within the American framework.
[22] (Haslanger 2019; Mallon 2004, 2016; Root 2000; Sundstrom 2002a, 2002b; Taylor 2013: 220)

predict the kind of experiences one is likely to have, particularly in domains characterized by racial inequality and injustice. The explanatory function of racial kinds is not due to some biological essence that members of the kind share, but rather to the way that racial kinds figure in a system of oppression.

A third function that racial kinds play on the social kind model, which ultimately grounds their explanatory function, is to carve out positions in an oppressive hierarchy, such that individuals are oppressed (or privileged) by virtue of their membership in a particular racial kind. In a system of white racial domination, being a member of the dominant kind *white* means that one occupies a dominant position in the racial hierarchy, and is thereby marked for systematic advantage; in contrast, membership in other racial kinds places one in a subordinate position and marks one for systematic disadvantage. This gives rise to the explanatory and predictive functions of race—it is *because they are R* that someone receives the racially discriminatory or privileging treatment that they do. It also gives grounds to the political functions of race: since members of the same racial kind occupy a shared position in the racial hierarchy and are marked for the same kind of advantaging or disadvantaging treatment, they have common experiences and a shared group interest that makes it rational for them to organize politically together.

This third function demonstrates how the social kind model supports universalizing essentialism— as a member of a racial kind R, one occupies the R position in the relevant social hierarchy, and is marked for the corresponding treatment that R's face.[23] Since what marks one for a certain type of treatment just is the racial kind that one is a member of, the statistically expected outcomes are the same for all members of the kind.[24] Hence, the social kind model suggests that there is a common experience of oppressive (or privilege) corresponding to membership in a racial kind, and thereby supports universalizing essentialism about race.

Insofar as the social kind model of race is part of a broader framework that generally analyzes oppression as a relation of domination between social kinds organized along different axes, it forms part of an additive picture of oppression that supports universalizing essentialism more generally. This more general framework offers an additive picture insofar as it analyzes

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[23] (Hardimon 2014; Haslanger 2000; Sundstrom 2002b; Taylor 2013)

[24] On this picture, there can still be differences in experience insofar as being marked for treatment X only makes it *probable t*hat one will experience X, and does not guarantee that one will experience X. But on this picture there are no *systematic* differences; the differences are merely differences of luck. See (Taylor 2013)

oppression as the sum of injustices occurring in connection to one's membership in different social kinds that are located along different, independent axes (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). On this picture, one's overall experience of oppression (and/or privilege) is the sum of one's experience along each axis. This allows for systematic differences in the experiences of, e.g., Black men and Black women, but only with respect to dimensions other than race.[25]

By supporting universalizing essentialism, the social kind model thus encourages the kinds of exclusions that intersectionality theorists have drawn our attention to, and which motivate the adoption of the alternative, coalitional view of racial identity. The social kind model thus does not offer a suitable metaphysical foundation for the coalitional view. In the next section, I turn to developing an alternative metaphysical picture that can support the coalitional view, which I will call the *Roles, Statuses, and Positions (RSP) model* of race.

**3. The RSP View**

I will start with a toy example intended to warm the reader up to my approach.

Suppose that there is construction in your office building. The construction has created a leak in the ceiling above your desk that produces regular, localized flooding. The effects of the flooding are not evenly distributed, however. Because the leak is located above your desk, it is the items that are on your desk overnight that get wet; other items stay dry.

Now compare two approaches to describing, explaining, and predicting the outcomes of the flooding. The first approach adopts a kind model, which divides the objects in the office into two stable, discrete kinds: the desk items and the non-desk items. The desk items are systematically worse off— they regularly get wet in the flooding and incur water damage. The non-desk items, in contrast, are systematically better off— they generally stay dry and intact. The kind model explains and predicts the outcomes for a particular object by determining the kind that it belongs to: if it is a desk item (and because it is a desk item), then it is likely to get destroyed by water damage; otherwise, it is likely to remain intact (because it is a non-desk item).

The second approach is a little different. Rather than dividing the objects in the office into kinds and formulating explanations and predictions in terms of those kinds, it first identifies different locations within the office that objects might occupy. Second, it establishes

[25] This aspect of the social kind model is more explicitly articulated by oppression theorists such as Cudd and Frye. (Cudd 2006; Frye 1983)

an allocation scheme that describes how objects move between locations. For example, the sticky notes and the stapler might remain on the desk at all times; in contrast, a certain textbook might be left on the desk on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but otherwise be left on the bookshelf. Note that by capturing how objects move between locations, the allocation scheme also captures how regularly an object is left on the desk overnight. Rather than identifying, explaining, and predicting the effects of the flooding in terms of kinds of objects, on this model, the theoretical work is done by the set of locations combined with the allocation scheme. In general, it is items that are regularly left on the desk overnight that incur water damage (and it is because they are left overnight that they incur this damage); further, for any particular item, the model predicts the extent of the damage it is likely to incur in proportion to how regularly the item is left on the desk overnight.

Of course, there are many similarities between these two models. In particular, both models ultimately rely on information about where objects are located to do the relevant explanatory work. However, the kind model generalizes and abstracts from this information in order to divide the office items into two discrete kinds, which are then meant to do the explanatory work. As a result, the kind model loses the ability to differentiate between objects that are members of the same kind. The kind model does not have a way of distinguishing, for instance, an object that is always left on the desk from one that is only on the desk half the time, or an item that is never left on the desk from one that is left on the desk 20% of the time— both are desk items, or non-desk items, respectively.[26] As a result, the kind model does not have the resources to explain why some desk items, for instance, are damaged beyond use or repair, while other desk items are damaged but still functional: insofar as both are desk items, the model makes the same predictions for both. The locational model, in contrast, has more resources to capture these differences, because the allocation scheme captures more nuances in terms of how the objects move between locations, and therefore how often they tend to be exposed to water.

Again, this is just a toy model to warm the reader up to the sort of shift that I will be making in presenting my alternative to the social kind model of race in the next section. My alternative, the RSP view, will have three components, instead of the two components (locations

[26] This is assuming that to count as a desk item an object must be left on the desk at least half of the time. One can construct different comparisons that the kind model cannot adequately capture depending on how one demarcates the two kinds.

and allocation scheme) of this toy model. The third component will, loosely, be akin to adding an inventory list that states where an object ought to be placed at the end of every day (which often, but not always, matches up with how it is actually allocated).

Turning now to developing my alternative view of objective racial identity, the starting point for the RSP model— as is common within a broadly social constructionist approach— is a background system of social forces. Collins, for instance, gives an account of this social background as a matrix of domination; Haslanger gives a similar account of interconnected practices, structures, and ideological schemas.[27] These background systems are site-specific and relative to a particular social milieu, taking different forms across different times and places, or *macro-contexts*.[28]

Within a macro-context like 21st century America, the matrix of domination includes a racial ideology that represents humanity as being divided into biologically-distinct racial kinds. The racial ideology includes ideas about what those kinds are, what is required to be a member of those kinds, the "proper" roles of members of those kinds, how members of those kinds ought to behave, and so on.[29] The racial schemas that make up this ideology guide individual behavior and help shape the institutions and social practices of the matrix, which also in turn help shape the ideology.

Overall, the matrix of domination is the social structural backdrop that constitutes the three major components of the RSP model: a set of racial *roles*, a set of racial *statuses*, and a space of racialized social *positions.*

***3.1. Roles***

First, social roles are nodes in the social practices and institutions of the matrix. These roles are characterized by expected behaviors, norms, constraints, and enablements. I am working with an expansive picture of social roles, to include, for instance, a role in a social script, a role in an institution, and materially- or geographically-defined roles, like residing in a food desert. Racial roles are social roles that are explicitly or explanatorily connected to the racial ideology. In the primary case, racial roles are social roles that the ideology directly associates with particular racial categories.[30] Racial roles can also be intersectional, such as race-

[27] (Collins 1993, 2000; Haslanger 2016, 2017b, 2017a, 2018)
[28] I will later distinguish different micro-contexts within a macro-context.
[29] I develop these ideas further in other work using the concept of *Sorts*. (Martín 2024)
[30] But secondarily, a social role can also be a racial role if it is causally or normatively connected to other racial roles.

and-gender-specific roles that are ideologically envisioned for Black women. For example, Collins highlights how the plantation in the antebellum South had race-class-and-gender-specific roles: the white wife of the wealthy plantation owner occupied a different role, with different constraints and possibilities, than did the wealthy white man, the enslaved woman, or the poor white woman.[31]

Individuals occupy particular roles in particular micro-contexts, and move between roles across different contexts. For instance, Aleisha may occupy the role of a Black shopper when she is at the grocery store on Wednesday, and move into the role of a Black applicant when someone is reviewing her resume on Thursday morning. Returning to the toy model, racial roles are thus akin to the locations that objects in the office move between. Racial roles operate as sites of particular forms of treatment, experience, and interaction.

### *3.2. Statuses*

Second, the set of racial statuses emerges from the racial kinds envisioned by the racial ideology. The ideologically envisioned races (Black, white, Asian, etc.) outline the different racial statuses one may have, and an individual's status assignment will be determined in accordance with the ideology's criteria for membership in a particular race. That is, someone will have the status 'white' in macro-context $\mathbb{C}$ just in case they meet the ideological criteria for being white in $\mathbb{C}$. For example, in the contemporary U.S., an individual will have the racial status 'white' if their recent ancestry traces back to Europe. Racial statuses are characterized by a set of racial roles that are normative for that status. For instance, the status 'white' is associated with a set of racial roles that are taken to be proper for, or properly occupied by, individuals with this status. Within the toy model, a simplified analogue would be the inventory list that specifies where an object ought to be placed in the office; an object's status would be the location that it is supposed to occupy.

### *3.3. Role Allocation*

Again, the role(s) that an individual occupies in a micro-context C[32] "should" (ideologically speaking) match the individual's racial status. In practice, this is not always the case. For example, someone on the phone with Lucy might implicitly categorize her as white based on her accent, and interact with her accordingly. Lucy may thus come to occupy a white

[31] (Collins 1993)

[32] By a micro-context, I mean a finer-grained context within a macro-context. I will denote macro-contexts using '$\mathbb{C}$' and micro-contexts using 'C.'

racial role in the conversation, even though her ancestry (let us suppose) designates her status as Asian, not white.

There are different ways that individuals come to occupy a particular racial role in different contexts. Sometimes, as with Lucy, one's allocation to a role is a product of being perceived or imagined to have features indicative of a particular racial status. But the process need not always involve some individual agent who implicitly or explicitly ascribes one a racial label. Individuals may also come to occupy a particular role by, for instance, having certain features that are tracked by institutional policies (e.g. as when someone is denied a loan because they have a low credit score), or by virtue of the circumstances of their birth (e.g. as when someone becomes the resident of a food dessert by being born into a family that resides in a food dessert).

While there are a variety of mechanisms by which individuals can come to occupy particular racial roles, broadly, we can say that, in allocating someone to a role in C, these mechanisms track different features that are associated with a racial category. The reference to "features" is meant to be capacious here. The relevant features can, for instance, be intrinsic or extrinsic; they can be definitive of membership in a racial category according to the ideology (e.g. ancestry tied to a geographical region), or they can be merely indicative of category membership (e.g. skin tone, accent, clothing, or an identity marker printed on a birth certificate), or they can be linked to a category through histories of racism (e.g. credit scores and zip codes). Precisely which features are associated with a racial category will depend on the ideology and practices of the matrix in question. For instance, institutional policies that require a racial marker to be printed on birth certificates and that create constraints and enablements that track these racial markers constitute these markers as features that are relevant to allocating individuals to racial roles. Likewise, beyond just race, the matrix of domination will also make various features relevant for allocating individuals to gender roles, class roles, and other kinds of social roles, including intersectional roles[33].

### *3.4. Positioning*

Finally, the third key element of the RSP view comes from considering all of the socially significant features in a macro-context— that is, all of the different features that factor into

[33] The RSP view allows that there are, e.g., race-and-class specific roles, such as the role of food desert resident. Such roles will count as racial roles (as well as class roles and race-and-class roles).

allocating individuals to social roles— as constituting a multi-dimensional feature-space. Individuals will occupy different *social positions* within this multi-dimensional space.[34] For instance, insofar as skin tone, accent, and zip code are among the factors that help determine how individuals are allocated into social roles, each of these will serve as a dimension of the space. An individual's social position in $\mathbb{C}$ will be determined by the particular features (their particular skin tone, accent, zip code, etc.) that they possess from among the array of socially significant features in $\mathbb{C}$. Overall, an individual's social position— similarly to the allocation scheme in the toy model— reflects how they are typically allocated to social roles in different micro-contexts; it reflects how the individual generally interfaces with the institutions and practices of their social milieu. An individual's social position need not be static, but can shift either as the individual's features change (e.g. someone's accent might change depending on where they go to school, or as a result of other changes in their life trajectory), or as changes in the practices of the milieu alter the significance of different features. An individual's social position will be a *racialized position*, insofar as it helps determine which racial roles they occupy, but it will also simultaneously be, e.g., a gendered and classed position. The space of social positions does not separate race from class, gender, or other social categories, but simultaneously reflects all of the different kinds of features that are relevant to allocating individuals to different kinds of social roles.

**4. Heterogeneous Commonality**

To illustrate the RSP view, and to demonstrate how it offers a picture of heterogeneous commonality that safeguards the reality of systematic injustice, consider the case of Aleisha and Brittany.

Let us suppose that Aleisha and Brittany both have recent ancestry that can be traced to Africa, and that people acquainted with them would generally agree that they are Black women. On the RSP view, Aleisha and Brittany thereby have the same racial status in the United States— they are both Black.

[34] To be clear, the multi-dimensional picture here is not one where there is one axis corresponding to race, another to gender, another to class, etc., and where the values along each dimension correspond to membership in a particular (e.g. racial) group or kind. It is more complex, with each socially significant kind of feature (skin tone, hair texture, accent, zip code, etc.) representing a different dimension of variation.

Nevertheless, Aleisha and Brittany are positioned differently due to differences in various socially-significant features.[35] Suppose, for instance, that Aleisha is a light-skinned Black woman who grew up in an under-resourced, predominantly Black neighborhood with high levels of environmental pollution and limited access to healthy foods or medical care. Suppose, too, that Brittany is a dark-skinned Black woman who grew up in a wealthy neighborhood with ample resources and whose influential parents gave her access to exclusive opportunities. As such, there are socially significant differences between Aleisha and Brittany with respect to, e.g., their skin tone, accent, zip code, wealth, and social capital, such that the two occupy relatively proximate, but nevertheless distinct, social positions on the RSP view.

These differences in their social positioning mean that Aleisha and Brittany are likely to take up different racial roles (and social roles, more broadly) in certain kinds of contexts. For instance, the differences in their skin tone make it such that Brittany is much more likely than Aleisha to be pulled over by the police while driving, and so more likely to occupy the highly dangerous role of Black driver. The differences in their zip code and access to wealth, meanwhile, mean that they occupy very different roles in the education system. Aleisha's role, which is simultaneously classed and racialized, is characterized by limited access to resources, in stark contrast to the ample resources and opportunities that Brittany has access to. Similarly, the differences in their respective neighborhoods mean that Aleisha is at higher risk of developing certain chronic illnesses, like diabetes, than is Brittany.[36] At the same time, similarities in their social positioning also make it likely that they will occupy the same, or similar, roles in certain kinds of contexts. For instance, both occupy the role of a Black woman patient in the doctor's office, with the consequence that they are both likely to receive worse care; both are likely to be surveilled and regarded suspiciously in stores as Black shoppers; both are likely to be labelled angry Black women in the context of disagreements with others. Thus, overall, the differences in their respective social positions produce differences in the roles that they occupy in certain kinds of contexts, which gives rise to significant differences in their experiences of racial oppression. At the same time, similarities in their social positioning lead them to occupy the same or similar kinds of roles in other kinds of contexts, which gives rise to significant overlaps in their experiences of racial oppression.

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[35] Socially-significant features are the features that help determine how individuals are allocated to different social roles, and thus also the features that constitute the dimensions of the multi-dimensional space of social positions.

[36] Krishnan, 2010 #625;Signorello, 2007 #626}

The RSP view makes evident the failures of universalizing essentialism. The RSP view captures and explains the fact that there is no monolithic Black experience. As illustrated by Aleisha and Brittany, different individuals, including those who share a racial status, have different experiences of racial oppression as a result of differences in their social positioning. On the RSP view, these differences are not merely coincidental or random. It is not that Aleisha and Brittany are targets for the same kinds of racial injustice and to the same degree, but sometimes one or the other of them gets lucky and avoids it.[37] Rather, there are some systematic and predictable differences in the particular forms of racial injustice that each is likely to experience. They do not interface with oppressive social structures just as instances of a racial kind (or, analogously, as individuals with a particular racial status), but as individuals with distinctive combinations of socially-significant features. As a result, their experiences are distinctive, even as they are also overlapping.

The RSP view thus gives as a picture of heterogeneous commonality— there are simultaneously significant overlaps and differences in experiences among individuals who share a racial status and who are positioned near each other in a multi-dimensional space of social positions.

### *4.1. Non-Arbitrary Bases for Coalition-Building*

A key upshot of this picture of heterogeneous commonality is that the RSP view offers non-arbitrary bases for coalition-building, and thus offers a basis for the construction of subjective, coalitional racial identities.

First, racial roles offer one kind of basis for coalition-building. Some individuals are connected by the fact that, by virtue of their racialized social position, they are regularly allocated, or likely to be allocated, to a particular kind of racial role, such as the role of Black driver or Black shopper. With this shared allocation comes a particular set of overlapping experiences that could serve as a basis for identification and solidarity. Singling out particular racial roles as a basis for political organizing makes for a relatively focused and tight movement— consider, for instance, a social movement centered on the experiences of "driving while Black."

A second, broader potential basis for coalition-building on the RSP view is shared racial status, or similarly, being regularly allocated to roles that are normatively linked to a particular racial status. This second possibility essentially identifies an interconnected set of racial roles,

[37] Cf. (Taylor 2013)

and the overlapping experiences associated with that set of roles, as a potential basis for coalition-building. This enables us to make sense of Crenshaw's claim that "the organized identity groups in which we find ourselves in are… potential coalitions waiting to be formed."[38] Specifically, we can understand the identity groups that we "find ourselves in" as corresponding to our ascribed racial statuses. The people who share a racial status make up a "potential coalition" insofar as they have overlapping experiences of racial injustice that they can reasonably organize around. The RSP view thus offers a metaphysical account that anchors and makes sense of Crenshaw's response to the challenges of universalizing essentialism.

Apart from these options, the RSP view also offers more general bases for coalition-building. While my discussion has so far focused on individuals who are connected by occupying the same kinds of social roles, we can also identify shared experiences at a higher level of description. For instance, some people— like "mixed-race" or "racially ambiguous" individuals— have distinctive experiences that stem from people not knowing what role to allocate them to in any given context. The details of those experiences might be importantly different, yet there can still be similar kinds of experiences (e.g. fielding "what are you?" questions, or feeling like there is no group that you belong to) that these individuals share. Alternately, other more general bases for coalition-building could include being oppressed in connection to *some* marginalized racial status— as suggested by "people of color," or "BIPOC." Or even more generally, we could consider a coalition of individuals oppressed in connection to some marginalized social status more broadly, or who are oppressed by particular social practices or structures, even if they are oppressed in very different ways by those structures.

Generally, then, the RSP view allows us to identify non-arbitrary bases for coalition-building, and so makes sense of the idea that there are "potential coalitions waiting to be formed," even while rejecting universalizing essentialism.

***4.2. Systematic Injustice***

Further, another upshot of the RSP view is that it preserves claims of systematic racial injustice. Although individuals have distinctive holistic experiences of oppression, there are still systematic patterns of injustice linked to particular social roles. Individuals who occupy the same unjust social role will be subject to the same kinds of unjust norms and constraints. The injustices that they thereby experience are not isolated or random, but the systematic result of unjust social practices. Thus, while on the RSP view individuals have different, overlapping

[38] (Crenshaw 1990: 1299)

experiences of oppression, these experiences are still part of a picture of systematic injustice. The RSP view thus safeguards the reality of systematic injustice while offering a picture of heterogeneous commonality in the experiences of those injustices.

**5. Coalitional Racial Identity**

Thus far, my focus has been on giving an account of "objective" racial identity. On the RSP view, an individual is ascribed a racial status and allocated to racial roles in connection to the social practices of the matrix of domination that they are embedded in. Their social position, which determines how they are generally allocated to racial roles, shapes their experience of racial oppression or privilege. The RSP view offers a picture of heterogeneous commonality in the experiences of those who share a racial status, or who are proximately socially positioned to one another. In so doing, it offers rational bases for coalition-building, while nevertheless safeguarding our ability to recognize systematic racial injustices. With the RSP view as a foundation, I now want to elaborate on my view of coalitional racial identity.

A coalitional racial identity is formed when individuals act on one of these potential bases for coalition-building in order to construct a subjective racial identity. Generally speaking, a subjective identity is constructed when someone thinks of themself as an X, feels like an X, and acts like an X. Following Appiah, an agent acts like an X when "because I am an X" forms part of their reasons for acting, and an agent feels like an X when being an X is part of the intentional content of their feelings. Similarly, on Gooding-Williams's account of what it is to be a Black person (a subjective identity that he contrasts with the objective identity of "being black"), what matters is that one begins to think of oneself and to act in association with the identity label: "One becomes a black person only if (1) one begins to identify (to classify) 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."[39]

Coalitional racial identities are subjective racial identities that are constructed collectively and oriented towards a political project. Following Carastathis, these identities are collectively constructed through "tacit, unspoken, deliberate, and explicit acts of alignment, solidarity, and exclusion."[40] These collective creative acts result in a subjective racial identity when they come to shape individuals' sense of self and their motivations for action. Coalitional

[39] (Gooding-Wiliams 1998: 23)
[40] (Carastathis 2013: 942)

racial identities are not the only kind of subjective racial identities. There are also subjective racial identities that are oriented around, for example, a shared culture and way of life.[41] Sometimes cultural and political racial identities are intertwined, although, as Shelby has argued, this need not be the case.[42]

Coalitional racial identities can be explicitly and intentionally constructed. The idea of an "Asian American" identity, for instance, emerged in the 1960s as part of an effort to construct a pan-ethnic political alliance bringing together Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino Americans, among others.[43] But this need not be the case. For instance, some may try to leverage an existing subjective racial identity for the purposes of motivating political action, without necessarily thinking of themselves as trying to construct a coalitional identity. Likewise, coalitional racial identities may not be thought of as *coalitional*, where this connotes that one is organizing a political movement across lines of difference.

***5.1. Political Upshots of the View***

This account of coalitional racial identities, built within the framework of the RSP view, has a number of political implications.

First, recognizing political racial identities as coalitional racial identities highlights the heterogeneous commonality of the group. In highlighting that the group is heterogeneous and constructed through political action, it provides a tool for resisting the pull of essentialism— in both its biological and universalizing forms— that is constantly exerted by the prevalence of essentializing ideologies. Further, it helps to remind coalition members that they are not entitled to take the interests of individuals with relatively more power as universally representative and use this to set the group's agenda. Rather, as Crenshaw emphasizes, mobilizing a coalitional identity requires negotiating the diverse political interests of the group.[44]

Second, recall that on the RSP view, there are multiple potential bases for coalition. Individuals could not feasibly act on all of these bases, and they are not required to do so. More strongly, I would suggest that individuals may not be required to participate in any coalition, though this will likely depend on their circumstances and the degree of power that they have.[45]

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[41] See, for instance, (Jeffers 2019; Shelby 2002)
[42] (Jeffers 2019; Shelby 2002)
[43] (Spickard 2007)
[44] (Crenshaw 1995)
[45] Which coalitions, if any, individuals are morally required to take part in is an interesting and complex question that I will not be able to take up in this paper.

In particular, individuals with relatively less power are not required to engage in coalition-building with others who have used their power to harm them or betray them. Rather, as Anzaldúa emphasizes, individuals with relatively less power are the ones who get to set the terms of engagement.[46] Further, Anzaldúa suggests that we should think of engaging on the work of coalition-building as being like a drawbridge— one can alternate between having the bridge down and drawing it back up to retreat for a while. This acknowledges that coalitional work is hard work, even if it is necessary for one's survival.[47]

Some may worry that emphasizing difference, making explicit that our political identities are not just given to us, and that engaging in coalitional work is not always required of one ultimately weakens political movements. Some may think that it is thereby preferable to engage in strategic essentialism, rather than to embrace the coalitional framework of the RSP view.[48] However, I think it is better to be clear-eyed about these points than to obfuscate them in the name of unity, as it is typically those who are most vulnerable who get left beyond and end up paying the costs of "unity." My view of coalitional political identities, predicated on the RSP view, identifies important points of connection that make it reasonable to organize together, but it also acknowledges the agency that individuals have in engaging in coalition-building. Individuals— particularly those with relatively greater power— must strive to be worthy coalitional partners by engaging in good faith and demonstrating solidarity.

**6. Conclusion**

Identity politics emerged as an effort to respond to shared experiences of oppression. However, as intersectionality scholars have emphasized, these movements have tended to ignore important differences and complexities in those experiences, often at the cost of those with relatively less power.

I have suggested that, in addition to widespread biological views of race that encourage biological essentialism, popular social constructionist models of identity also encourage a kind of essentialism— universalizing essentialism— that encourages the tendency to ignore important differences. I have offered an alternative social constructionist view of objective racial identity, the RSP model, that avoids universalizing essentialism. On the RSP view, there are

[46] (Anzaldúa 2009)
[47] (Reagon 1983)
[48] (Spivak 2012)

multiple racial roles that are associated with a racial status, including racial roles that intersect with gender, class, and other social categories. Different individuals occupy different combinations of these roles, depending on their complex social position, giving rise to overlapping sets of experiences of systematic racial injustice among individuals who share a racial status. In this way, the RSP view offers a picture of heterogeneous commonality that offers multiple potential bases for coalition-building. Finally, a coalitional racial identity emerges when individuals act on one of these bases to collectively construct a subjective racial identity oriented towards political action.

The RSP view, and the view of coalitional racial identity that it affords, enables us to make sense of Crenshaw's suggestion that we can help avoid the dangers of universalizing essentialism by recognizing that the organized identity groups in which we find ourselves in are "in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed."[49] The view addresses the worry that a coalitional view of identity ultimately renders political organizing arbitrary and undermines our ability to theorize systematic injustice. While philosophical theories on their own cannot be the full answer to political problems, this coalitional view of racial identity reminds us to attend to important differences and to negotiate political interests in a way that does not exclude or marginalize those with relatively less power. In so doing, it offers one useful tool for engaging in a better version of identity politics.

[49] (Crenshaw 1990: 1299)

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