

Thin Skin, Thick Blood

Identity, Stability and the Project of Black Solidarity

Camisha Russell

Pennsylvania State University

What is the basis of black solidarity? We might ask this question for at least two reasons. In so far as we believe solidarity already exists among Black Americans – perhaps citing the recent demonstration in support of the Jena Six¹ – we may seek to explain the phenomenon. In so far as we wish to create or promote solidarity among Black Americans, we might argue for what the basis of such solidarity *ought* to be. Solidarity, generally conceived, is often thought to have two potential bases: first, the holding or working toward of a shared goal, often called political solidarity; second, the possession of a shared identity, or what might be called social or cultural solidarity. Though these two bases are not mutually exclusive, either might be considered sufficient for solidarity, depending on the case. For the case at hand, however, unless *blackness itself* is construed as a shared political goal, it would seem that *black* solidarity must contain at least *some* shared identity component.

But what sort of identity is this and how big is its role? Identity is a highly contested concept and one that, in the context of political movements, is often seen as a threat to individual autonomy. Thus one may be tempted to try to minimize its role in black solidarity relative to a political aim (like fighting anti-black racism). Indeed, in *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*, Tommie Shelby attempts to do just that. Recognizing that some form of black identity is necessary to argue for a *black* solidarity, Shelby works to create a notion of black identity that is neither social nor cultural but, in fact, entirely political. He calls this entirely political identity *thin black identity* and argues that it is the only form of identity even

capable of grounding black solidarity, making it both an explanation of existing solidarity and a normative ideal for future solidarity projects.

While I certainly do not oppose Shelby’s project of uniting Black Americans in terms of shared political goals, I ultimately find his “thin” identity account both unsatisfactory and unnecessary. It is unsatisfactory, I argue, in the sense that it is too individualistic and fails to ground anything that could be called a distinctively *black* solidarity. It is unnecessary because, as I will show, there is an alternative conception of black identity available that avoids the pitfalls Shelby associates with “thick” identity, while more successfully grounding the notion of black solidarity. In what follows, I will begin by laying out Shelby’s argument for “thin” black identity as the proper foundation for black solidarity. Next, as one way of illuminating my concerns with his account, I will point to similarities between Shelby’s project and that of John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. I will show how Shelby is vulnerable to critiques similar to those leveled against Rawls by communitarians and will examine how Rawls’ later work on the problem of *stability* (in *Political Liberalism*) offers a response to those critiques which may be seen as analogous to the suggestions I offer in this essay. I will then introduce my alternative conception of black identity – that of a plethora of (actual or potential) “thicker” community-based black identities (in the plural) – and discuss some of the benefits of that conception in terms of the notion of *black love*. By way of conclusion, I will briefly attempt to summarize the advantages of my account of identity over Shelby’s both in terms of giving us something that can be rightfully called *black* solidarity and in making that very solidarity possible.

Shelby’s Thin Foundations

Shelby's primary goal is to argue against "the familiar claim that it is necessary and politically useful for blacks to develop a positive shared identity—to collectively define a group-affirming conception of blackness" (11). He contends that "we should separate the need for an emancipatory black solidarity from the demand for a common black identity" (or what he calls "thick" black identity) and instead base such solidarity on a "shared experience of racial oppression and a joint commitment to resist it" (which he terms "thin" black identity) (Shelby 12). According to Shelby, we can identify five "common sense" norms of group solidarity and these norms can be achieved without appeal to "thick" identity. "Robust group solidarity exists," he argues, "whenever a set of individuals [1] identify with each other as members of a group, [2] show special concern toward one another, [3] are jointly committed to certain values or goals, [4] are loyal to the group and its ideals, and [5] trust each other" (Shelby 71). On his conception, the solidarity sometimes found between members of a sports team serves as a simple and paradigmatic case of this robust group solidarity. In spite of the reality of socioeconomic division among African Americans, says Shelby, they will be able to act on the model of a team if they can discover some common political principles; if, in other words, they develop a common "thin" identity.

Furthermore, Shelby argues that, given our contemporary political situation, a racial closing of ranks (the likes of which "thick" identity might call for) is counterproductive, threatening to isolate blacks from other progressive forces and thus reduce the overall power of the group. Thus, black solidarity across black participation in multiracial organizations is lauded as both a protection against the domination of black elite interests in all-black organizations and a more effective approach to tackling the many social justice issues that affect large numbers of blacks but not blacks exclusively. In case one wonders at this point why promote black solidarity

at all, Shelby informs us that some form of it, “at least as a last line of defense and a means of mutual support, is needed to ensure that the interests of blacks are looked after, to make sure that blacks ‘have each other’s back’ in sometimes hostile social environments where interracial coalitions are unstable and where it is often difficult to distinguish friend from foe” (133).

Shelby does acknowledge that a “thick” black identity would help to overcome two serious obstacles to solidarity: (1) the free-rider problem and (2) “the general problem that the mere acceptance of abstract principles of justice is often insufficient to motivate people to contribute the time and resources necessary for effecting meaningful social change” (204). Yet Shelby insists that the popular appeal to collective black identity of the “thick” sort (1) is “unnecessary for forging effective bonds among blacks,” (2) places “undue constraint on individual freedom,” and (3) is likely to be self-defeating (206). While he feels that his form of “emancipatory political solidarity” does not preclude and is compatible with other forms of solidarity based around collective identity – perhaps like those I promote here – he argues (importantly) that it does not *require* or *rely* upon them.

Shelby distinguishes “five familiar modes of thick blackness”: (1) the racialist mode, based on the idea of biologically innate qualities possessed only by black people; (2) the ethnic mode, based on shared ancestry and cultural heritage (either African or created in America under and after slavery); (3) the nationality mode, which Shelby does not see as significantly different from the ethnic one; (4) the cultural mode, based on “an identifiable ensemble of beliefs, values, conventions, traditions, and practices” that are distinctively black; and (5) the kinship mode, in which black identity is conceived on the model of family (211-2). (This last Shelby sees as reducible to one or more of the earlier modes, with the use of a convenient family trope as the only addition.) Shelby then points out that (1) there is no way to require those with “thin” black

identities to identify with any of these “thick” conceptions and (2) that the content of each “thick” mode is hotly contested (212-13). In other words, black people in America and their ways of living are too diverse to all subscribe to or fit under the same ideal of blackness. Shelby thus rejects a notion of black authenticity that requires one to adopt a *particular* “thick” conception of blackness in favor of a notion of authenticity that instead requires one to live up to the political principles and/or solidaristic commitments that one *chooses* to adopt.

Finally, he considers an alternate formulation of the collective identity theory: “There are persons who meet the criteria for thin blackness who also have available to them a black identity that is ‘deeper,’ that is, *thicker*, than their thin blackness, and these persons must positively affirm and preserve their thick blackness if collectively they are to overcome their racial oppression through group solidarity” (Shelby 216). Shelby asks whether such affirmation and preservation could be considered politically necessary or even helpful. On the question of necessity, he argues that: “One does not have to possess a black cultural identity—indeed one does not have to be black at all—to appreciate the value of racial equality, to condemn racism, or to abhor poverty” (Shelby 223). He cites the African-American Civil Rights Movement as an example of genuine racial cooperation that did not require a collective identity beyond the collective experience of oppression. As to the question of whether a collective black identity would at least be *helpful* to black solidarity, Shelby cites several senses in which it might actually be harmful, arguing that “the push for a collective black identity would probably worsen existing intragroup antagonisms . . . and might even produce new ones” (224). Shelby even goes so far as to argue against the possibility of constructing “a pluralistic and nuanced conception of black identity, rather than a monolithic one,” claiming that “no matter where one sets the

boundaries of thick blackness, if it is meaningful enough to have normative, and not merely descriptive, force, some blacks will be left out or forced into submission” (232).

We see clearly, then, that Shelby’s account gives priority to respect for individual freedom and choice. Indeed, while he begins with an identity that seems to require *both* the “shared experience of racial oppression” *and* “a joint commitment to resist it,” Shelby is forced to all but abandon the shared experience criterion (since things like gender and class make for different experiences of oppression) and to focus instead on the joint commitment. In other words, identity in his sense is ultimately reducible to a political choice, which opens his black solidarity to people who are not black but are committed to fighting racial oppression – an opening Shelby finds strategically helpful. But is this political identity really *identity*? Does it tell us what makes black solidarity *black*? Of course, these are the very notions that Shelby wishes to redefine. I would argue, however, that the solidarity that emerges from Shelby’s account would best be described not as *black* solidarity but as something like *anti-racist* solidarity. Shelby has attempted to merge politics and identity, but many people experience a sense of identity that goes well beyond their politics and one that is not as easily adopted or rejected as a political view or commitment.

There is, I maintain, something missing. Returning to the team analogy, the identification, special concern, joint commitment, loyalty and trust Shelby sees as experienced within teams seem to me to be capacities that team members must bring with them into the team. Thus we must ask how these capacities can be cultivated in individuals such that they will be motivated and able to join with other blacks in Shelby’s solidarity project. Regarding the example of the Civil Rights Movement, I would argue that it constitutes a gross misreading of the history of that movement to believe it could have taken place in the absence of strong local black communities

and the positive identities and love they provided. While common oppression united these communities, that oppression could never have united thousands of black people living truly *separate* lives.

Of course, even if one agrees that identity is not ultimately reducible to political commitment and that identity did play a role in past solidarity movements, one might still argue that, as far as the *future* of black solidarity is concerned, the identity component should be abandoned altogether. To show why I believe that black identities as I understand them – “thicker,” community-based and in the plural – *do* have an important role to play at the foundation of black solidarity, I will turn here to John Rawls’ response to his critics on what he called *the question of stability*. As Shelby’s view is quite Rawlsian in nature, I believe this approach to critiquing his view is not only fair, but quite productive. Just as Rawls argued that different comprehensive doctrines would provide the stability necessary for the overlapping liberal consensus he championed, I propose that different “thicker” black identities provide a stability necessary for the project of black solidarity (while also making that solidarity distinctively *black*).

The Stability Question

It is clear that both the notion of the free and equal individual and the rational theory of choice are essential components of Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*. In reviving social contract theory (if only in hypothetical form) with his notion of justice as fairness, Rawls famously defines the principles of justice as those principles “that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association” (*Justice* 11). What is less clear, however, is how this notion of the hypothetical

individual as used to set the terms for justice relates to any notion of actual individuals and their identities.

Following the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls' faced charges of what can be called *asocial individualism* by sources that can be grouped (for convenience) under the label *communitarian*. According to Mulhall and Swift's characterization of the communitarian critique, the asocial individualist view "embodies the belief that people's ends are formed independently of or prior to society, which is regarded as the outcome of negotiation between individuals whose ends are already given." The communitarians, they say, see such a view as embodying two different sorts of mistake:

It denies the important philosophical or sociological truth that people's conceptions of the good and of themselves are dependent upon a social matrix; and it ignores or represses the importance of human goods whose content is communal, in particular the significance of the good of political community – for by regarding politics merely as an arena within which people cooperate with others solely in order to pursue their private advantage, Rawls ignores the possibility that the bonds of fellow-citizenship can function as a (or the most) significant constitutive attachment in people's lives. (Mulhall and Swift 198)

In other words, Rawls' contemporary reformulation of contract theory is thought to misunderstand the complex nature of human cooperation and association, reducing it to rational negotiation in pursuit of self-interest. Similarly, Shelby's focus on "thin," freely-chosen black identity (based on shared political goals) threatens to misunderstand or ignore the complex, often "thicker" nature of black identity as experienced by many Black Americans (though certainly not in the same ways for all). Though it is possible that these communitarian critiques may in some

way reflect a misunderstanding of Rawls' original intentions, he did choose to reframe his theory in *Political Liberalism* in a way designed to answer such charges.

Rawls' major move in *Political Liberalism* is to reduce the scope of justice as fairness, specifying that it be seen not as a comprehensive doctrine, but as a specifically political conception. According to Rawls, a doctrine is comprehensive "when it includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole" (*Liberalism* 13). To say that justice as fairness is not such a doctrine means that the conceptions of person and community utilized in that theory are intended only to model how people should relate to each other as citizens in a pluralistic society; they should not be seen as descriptive of (or prescriptive for) people's actual personal or social lives. Thus people need neither see themselves as having, nor actually be capable of having, individual identities or conceptions of the good that are completely independent of their social matrixes. They need not be free, unencumbered or equal in reality; such a view of the person is simply a way to model our intuitions about how citizens who do not share the same comprehensive doctrine should interact within the wider political society. Since people are then only required to believe in liberalism in the political sense, they are free to hold any of a variety of comprehensive moral, religious or philosophical doctrines (as they undoubtedly do) and Rawls can thus answer the communitarian charges of asocial individualism by insisting that that is not how he conceives of the individual at all.

At this point in Rawls' clarification, we seem to find both a strong analogy to Shelby's account and a plausible defense of it: "Thin" identity is merely a political conception and models how blacks should think of each other for the purposes of black solidarity; various "thick"

conceptions of blackness can be held by various blacks or groups of black people, but this belongs to a more personal realm and has no place in the construction of black solidarity (where any “thick” conception of black identity could only be harmful to the cause). To make this distinction, Shelby would then argue, is not to fail to recognize the complex realities of black identification or to disallow it, but simply to relegate non-political conceptions of blackness to a realm outside of black solidarity. Rawls, however, does not stop at *allowing* for the holding of comprehensive doctrines; he sees such doctrines as playing an essential role in the stability of his political liberalism.

Given that justice as fairness necessarily allows for (and must thus contend with) a plurality of reasonable though opposing comprehensive doctrines, says Rawls, the stability of a liberal society cannot rest upon any single one of these doctrines. Instead, he argues, justice as fairness as a political conception must be able to serve as the focus on an overlapping consensus among reasonable comprehensive doctrines. The importance of stability as Rawls conceives it is not merely practical, but ideological. According to its own principles, justice as fairness only works when reasonable and rational citizens accept their society and recognize it as just. Crucially, Rawls argues that this recognition and acceptance occurs not because citizens recognize that they have no choice but to compromise (thus doing so at significant cost to the integrity of comprehensive views), but rather because “those who affirm the political conception start from within their own comprehensive view and draw on the religious, philosophical, and moral grounds it provides” (*Liberalism* 147).

Just as Shelby abandons the notion of a single “thick” black identity as the core of black solidarity, Rawls freely admits that “justice as fairness does indeed abandon the ideal of political community if by that ideal is meant a political society united in one (partially or fully)

comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine” (*Liberalism* 201). The possibility of such a community, says Rawls, is “excluded by the fact of reasonable pluralism,” just as the fact that different black people hold different conceptions of “thick” black identity argues against the attempt to adopt a single “thick” notion for the purposes of solidarity. However, Rawls takes an important step further by acknowledging that:

The doctrines that different associations [of citizens] hold and propagate . . . play a basic social role in making public justification possible. . . . The consensus of these doctrines is importantly rooted in the character of various associations and this is a basic fact about the political sociology of a democratic regime—crucial in providing a deep and enduring basis for its social unity. (*Liberalism* 389-90)

In other words, comprehensive doctrines are not merely a natural fact of human society which exists alongside freely chosen political consensus. Rather, comprehensive doctrines provide the necessary foundation for that consensus and allow it to remain stable. Shelby, however, does not make an analogous move toward recognizing “thick” identity (or identities) as essential. Worried about the dangers of “thick” identity/identities, Shelby demonstrates little concern for its/their role in people’s lives and does not theorize about how such identity/identities might actually contribute to the formation of his “thin” identity or offer the stability necessary for sustained solidarity.

While there is some question as to whether the overlapping consensus solution works fully for Rawls’ own purposes (since he would seem to require consensus from all or virtually all segments of a pluralistic society²), its concepts appear tremendously helpful in addressing the problem at hand (since black solidarity would not necessarily require the participation of all or even an overwhelming majority of “thinly” black people). By using Rawls approach to his own

stability problem as a corrective to Shelby's account in the way I will propose below, we can both uncover the significant (and neither solely nor primarily negative) role that black identity already plays in black solidarity and show how it should continue in that role. This can be done without doing harm to individual freedom, as Shelby fears, but also without mistakenly conceiving of that identity as the kind of (merely political) thing which can only be justified when adopted by rational choice.

Community-Based Identities

To this end, I would now like to introduce a conception of local, community-based, black identities in the plural (mentioned but undertheorized by Shelby). Such identities are both significantly less problematic than those forms Shelby criticizes and extremely important to the experience of a robust and satisfying sense of solidarity. Furthermore, they are necessary to the success of any solidarity project wishing to unite a significant number of blacks in collective action. In other words, they stand to provide stability to the project of black solidarity, while also explaining how such solidarity is *black*.

Both historically and more recently, social and economic forces (both internal and external) have operated to place and hold Black Americans together in concentrated areas. This reality of residential segregation, though partially based in common oppression, means that in places all over the country black people are living together, spending time together in social and religious groups, participating in common activities and experiencing a closeness and comfort with each other that goes *beyond* a sense of common oppression. It seems right to say that these groupings of black people constitute communities – even if one resists the idea that all black people in America form a single community or that they should – and by speaking of these

communities in the *plural*, one respects the various conceptions of blackness a community can hold (which might involve any degree or combination of Shelby's modes of "thick" identity described above). One simply says that black communities exist, that they play role in shaping the identities of their members, and that those identities frequently involve a positive basis (or what I will later refer to as *black love*).

Though this conception may take the black residential neighborhood as a paradigm, the idea of a local black community need not be restricted to that paradigm, nor does the experience of black identity through such a community require growing up within one. I do not argue (as Shelby worries) that affluent blacks isolated in the suburbs would have to move into less affluent black neighborhoods in order to gain this positive sense of black identity. For some, political identification in terms of common struggle alone will indeed suffice to bring them into solidarity. Others may belong to other types of black (or even mixed race) communities which help to nurture their positive black identities. Though some of these local, community-based identities may differ greatly, all will have (at least) the potential to provide their members with a positive sense of black identity, and some, many or even most of will actually overlap. This overlap in black identities held in different places across the country has been accounted for by sociologists both in terms family or community socialization to race and in terms of cultural trauma and collective memory (among other explanations); I will describe each briefly here.

The process of racial socialization (which can occur within families, extended families and/or communities) "involves message and actions that provide information on personal and group identity, interracial relationships, and social position related to race" to black children typically with the goal of helping them prepare to "cope with their social context" (Thompson 176). This receiving of racial socialization messages, particularly from adult family members

other than parents, has been associated with the experience of racial identification (185). Thus to the extent that race relations and social contexts resemble each other in various parts of the U.S., black children may receive similar messages which will influence their black identities in similar ways.

The cultural trauma theory of African American identity, on the other hand, helps place the formation of black identity on a wider national level (without claiming that it is monolithic) by arguing that it is often constructed around past traumatic events like slavery, the failure of Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow South. According to the theory, “the past is a collectively articulated, if not collectively experienced, temporal reference point that shapes the individual more than it is reshaped to fit generational or individual needs” (Eyerman 67). Unlike in common usage, trauma here, “refers to an event or an experience, a primal scene, that defines one’s identity because it has left scars and thus must be dealt with by later generations who have had no experience of the original event” (Eyerman 74-5). In other words, the effect of past traumatic events on identity formation must be understood not in terms of individual memories of an experience, but rather in terms of *collective* memory – the meanings of a past event that are collectively formed and articulated within a group (and in each subsequent generation) as a way for that group to understand itself and its relationships to other groups after and in light of the event. While those meanings may be multiple and conflicting and may be reinterpreted over time, they refer back to the same event and cannot be simply manipulated at will; their effect on the individual is greater than the individual’s ability to affect them. This creation, articulation, and continuance of collective memory does occur within local communities, but it also occurs with powerful effects through media like newspapers, music, poetry and novels, and, since the advent of television and cinema, through televised news, television specials, films and documentaries.

Thus a degree of national overlap and unity in black identities is accounted for in this theory by the fact that collective interpretations of past events are widely disseminated through various communities via mass media and by the fact that, no matter what the differences in *local* collective interpretations, it is the same past events that are being interpreted.

In short, there exists some broadly shared understanding of the social and political history of blacks as persons living in the United States. Though not entirely positive, this history, along with the sharing of residential space, can give rise to positive identification with other blacks both within and outside of the various smaller black communities. It is this feeling of connectedness that, while not serving as solidarity itself, may give rise to feelings of solidarity or offer the project necessary tools. I want to talk about this connectedness in terms of *black love*.

Love and Embodiment

*and I really hope no white person ever has cause to write about me
because they never understand Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy.*

- Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki Rosa"

Drawing here on Elizabeth Spelman's "The Erasure of Black Women," I follow her criticism of any white feminism that operates as if, "were it not for racism, there would be no important differences between black and white women." According to Spelman:

A serious problem in thinking or speaking this way . . . is that it seems to deny or ignore the positive aspects of 'racial' identities. It ignores the fact that being black is a source of

pride, as well as an occasion for being oppressed . . . as if the only reason for paying attention to one's blackness is that it is the source of pain and sorrow and agony. (44-45)

As a corrective to this tendency, Spelman suggests that, rather than denying individual situation and embodiment and aiming toward a sort of color-blindness, we follow Adrienne Rich in distinguishing between "embodiment as experience and embodiment as institution" (Spelman 55). In this way, Spelman and Rich believe that we can recognize the positive aspects of our black embodiment – our sense of positive black identity – while continuing to criticize and resist the way in which black embodiment has been a source of institutional oppression. In his commitment to liberal individualism, however, Shelby chooses to focus on the individual *choice* to fight the negative aspects of black embodiment (reducing solidarity to a "shared experience of racial oppression and a joint commitment to resist it"), rather than seriously attempting to theorize positive embodiment or the complex social context in which identity and relations to other people (including those with whom one feels solidarity) are formed.

When Nikki Giovanni speaks of black love, she is speaking primarily not of romantic or sexual love, but of family and community love – of the connections between people who share important parts of their lives. I suggest that one way of looking at this love that black people may receive from or feel for other black people is not simply as a particular example of a larger abstract, colorblind concept of human love, but as color-specific proof for black people of their own humanity. Within a wider society in which black people will often receive the message that they are unworthy of love or simply unlovable, if one can love and be loved by other black people *as* a black person (rather than *in spite of* one's blackness), such love may provide a powerful and necessary foundation for even seeing oneself and other black people as deserving of the justice to be pursued in a solidarity project. As bell hooks reminds us, love in this case

should be seen not as a “mere” affect, but also as a form of “political resistance [that] transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life” (20). Similarly, though specifically with respect to romantic love, Patricia Hill Collins argues that, for heterosexual African American men, “*choosing to love and commit to a heterosexual relationship with a Black woman is a rebellious act*” because in loving and committing to Black women they are resisting depictions of themselves as hustlers, bad boys and criminals, while at the same timing embracing women that society has demonized (250).

It is this love for or sense of attachment to specific other black folks (which both fosters a positive sense of identity and can be extended into a commitment to acting in solidarity with a larger political group to end racism) that I believe is missing from Shelby’s account and that I argue might be found in the smaller communities or groups described above. Paradoxically, Shelby’s own explanation (in the preface of *We Who Are Dark*) of how he first began thinking about solidarity underlines the necessity of positive identities fostered in a community setting. He writes of the first time he remembers hearing “Lift Every Voice and Sing” while attending the historically black university, Florida A&M: “Listening to the words then, sung by my fellow students and faculty, stirred my pride in blackness and my sense of unity with other African Americans, past and present” (Shelby x). For Shelby, the point behind the story is that deep critical thought is required to effectively transform such feelings into the basis of a unified political movement. This I do not deny. Nevertheless, the story reveals to us that the feelings of connectedness served as a starting point. As Shelby himself writes: “I only assume that *most* people do not freely make *great* sacrifices for people with whom they do not share intimate bonds” (115).

Thus we see that the many types of already existing black communities already play a role in laying the foundation for black solidarity and should be recognized as doing so. Proponents of solidarity may also wish to go one step further, however, and actively pursue public policies designed to strengthen black communities in an effort to protect and enhance the “thicker” black identities that emerge from them. To understand why this would be important – not *in spite* of Shelby’s desire to respect autonomy, but in fact *in conjunction with it* – one might look to the work of David Cochran. Cochran argues not simply that the state has an interest in promoting the autonomy of its citizens, but also that in order to promote the autonomy of its *black* citizens, the state must not only pursue certain color-blind principles that lower barriers of discrimination, but also certain group-conscious policies that seek to “strengthen black civil society and its ability to deliver autonomy-enhancing resources, as well as struggle against forces threatening autonomy within black communities” (140). This suggests that, to meet their own goals, even proponents of Shelby’s “thin” identity solidarity would need to strike a balance between respecting the individuality and individual identity of each Black American (as they are eager to do) and supporting the various black communities that serve as the ground for the creation of the positive black identities that are important to (and even defining for) many individual black people. Ultimately, it will not be enough for Shelby to *leave* a space for such positive black identities (as I believe he attempts to do); as the discussion of Rawls showed, a workable theory of solidarity must *incorporate* these identities – both recognizing and theorizing their roles – and should even consider appropriate ways of promoting them.

Through Thick and Thin

As I pointed out at the start, while solidarity as a general political concept may rely only on common goals and not require common identity, the idea of *black* solidarity seems to have

some type of black identity built in it. Recognizing this, Shelby attempts to give us an identity that can be reduced to a two-part political conception – the “shared experience of racial oppression and a joint commitment to resist it.” Yet, noting that Shelby is forced to all but abandon the shared experience criterion (given different gendered and class-based experiences of racial oppression) and to focus instead on the joint commitment (ultimately opening up his “black” solidarity to people who are not black, but are committed to fighting racial oppression), I have asked whether what remains is truly the distinctly *black* identity needed to found *black* (as opposed to simply ‘anti-racist’) solidarity. To say that solidarity, generally speaking, might properly be understood as constituted by the voluntary commitment of certain parties to a common cause is one thing; to say that black solidarity *and* the identity component necessary to it can or should be understood in the same way is quite another. Such a “thin,” voluntaristic notion of black identity seems not only to be out of keeping with the way many people think of their own blackness, but also to deprive the solidarity based on such identity of valuable – and ultimately necessary – resources.

The point in saying that various positive, community-based black identities are necessary to black solidarity is not to say that all black people must or do have them. Nor is it to say that the negative basis for unified political action that Shelby seeks to establish is not important. On the contrary, if we take the relationship Rawls posits between political liberalism and various comprehensive doctrines as our model, we can see how the two work *together*. Shelby’s “thin” (political) identity then becomes the focus of an overlapping consensus between blacks who hold different “thick” conceptions of identity and who use the resources provided by those “thick” identities to fuel their participation in black solidarity. In fact, were a good number of blacks not already joined together under positive community-based identities, it would be impossible to

gather a large enough whole under Shelby's "thin" concept. I thus contend that is it *through* their communities that a large number blacks come to see themselves as part of a group ready for solidaristic action, by developing regard, concern, and love for other black people and their plight. Understood in this way, I believe we can articulate and pursue a project of black solidarity that is neither too idealistic *nor* too individualistic – and we need no longer wonder what makes it *black*.

Notes

1. On September 20, 2007, thousands of people from across the U.S., mostly black, gathered in Jena, Louisiana “to protest what they consider the overzealous prosecution of six black high school students charged with beating a white schoolmate.” Rallies were also organized the same day in other major cities. See, for example, Peter Whoriskey, “Thousands Protest Blacks' Treatment: Six Students Who Were Prosecuted in Louisiana Town Garner Nationwide Support,” *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2007; Page A01.
2. See, for example, Michael Huemer’s “Rawls's Problem of Stability.”

Works Cited

- Cochran, David. *The Color of Freedom: Race and Contemporary American Liberalism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1999.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Eyerman, Ron. "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Giovanni, Nikki. "Nikki Rosa." *The Black Woman*. Ed. Toni Cade. New York: New American Library, 1980. 16.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992.
- Huemer, Michael. "Rawls's Problem of Stability." *Social Theory and Practice* 22 (1996): 375-95.
- Mulhall, Stephen, and Adam Swift. *Liberals and Communitarians*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1971.
- . *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Shelby, Tommie. *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005.
- Spelman, Elizabeth. "Theories of Race and Gender: The Erasure of Black Women." *Quest: a feminist quarterly* 5.4 (1982): 36-62.
- Thompson, Vetta L. Sanders. "Socialization to Race and Its Relationship to Racial Identification Among African Americans." *Journal of Black Psychology* 20.2 (1994): 175-188.