Feminist Philosophy Quarterly

Volume 11 | Issue 3 Article 3

2025

Where to Start with an Ontology That Doesn’t Come First?

Camisha Russell
University of Oregon
camishar@uoregon.edu

Recommended Citation
Russell, Camisha. 2025. “Where to Start with an Ontology That Doesn’t Come First?” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 11 (3). Article 3.

Where to Start with an Ontology That Doesn't Come First?

Camisha Russell

ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I discuss two important moves in Katharine Jenkins's *Ontology and Oppression*: the development of a pluralist conceptual framework for social kinds and the rejection of an ontology-first approach to social kinds in emancipatory social struggles. While Jenkins discusses gender kinds most thoroughly, my analysis focuses on race kinds. I connect Jenkins's use of the constraints and enablements framework (CEF) with my own argument for thinking about race as a technology. I also connect her arguments against ontology-first approaches with my own claim that we ought not to focus on the metaphysics of race and should instead try to uncover its explanatory power in different contexts. While our approaches differ—particularly with respect to their positions along an analytic (Anglo-American)–Continental spectrum—they also resonate. Picking up on Jenkins's brief discussion of transracialism, I also use her rejection of the ontology-first approach as a framework for identifying the insidiousness of transgender–transracial comparisons.

Keywords: social ontology, metaphysics of race, race as technology, transracialism

In *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality*, Katharine Jenkins (2023) takes on a question that has vexed social philosophers for many decades: *What, exactly, are social kinds?* She offers an innovative response to this question. She also brings that response to bear on a contemporary issue of significant individual and political importance—struggles for gender recognition in ostensibly liberal but persistently transphobic societies. In doing so, she makes two crucial moves that enrich the social ontology literature. First, Jenkins (2023, 7) elaborates "a pluralist conceptual framework" designed to allow us "to identify many different social kinds that serve different purposes." Throughout the book, she uses race and gender kinds as exemplars, demonstrating how neither can be well understood through a unitary ontological framework. Second, in the final chapter, Jenkins argues against an "ontology-first approach" to social kinds in emancipatory social struggles. Here, she describes current battles over gender recognition in the UK and argues that arguments over what *woman* "really means" do very little to establish the actual merits and drawbacks of different social policies with respect to gender identity.

In this commentary, I will further elaborate and discuss these two important moves. While Jenkins discusses gender kinds most thoroughly, my analysis will focus on race kinds. I will connect Jenkins's use of the *constraints and enablements framework (CEF)* with my own argument for thinking about race as a technology. I will also connect her arguments against ontology-first approaches with my own claim that we ought not to focus on the metaphysics of race and should instead try to uncover its explanatory power in different contexts. (These arguments appear in my first book, *The Assisted Reproduction of Race* [Russell 2016].) While our approaches are different—particularly with respect to their positions along an analytic (Anglo-American)–Continental spectrum—I find them quite resonant. Picking up on Jenkins's brief discussion of transracialism, I will also use her rejection of the ontology-first approach as a framework for identifying the insidiousness of transgender–transracial comparisons.

Before I proceed, however, I would like to briefly note that the two moves Jenkins makes on which I am focusing here stand in some tension with each other. That is not to say that either move proves the other to be poorly executed or ill-conceived. Jenkins's assertion that social emancipation is rarely achieved by offering careful ontological accounts of social kinds (that is, by an ontology-first approach) can certainly coexist with her account of the ontological rules and assumptions by which social kinds operate and persist (the pluralist conceptual framework). Rather, the tension I observe comes from the way the two moves are situated within the structure of the book itself. By spending the *first* three chapters of the book developing a relatively general and abstract account of the ontology of social kinds (writ large), Jenkins appears to prioritize conceptual abstraction and the achievement of a clean and comprehensive definition. In the second part of the book, Jenkins moves to detailed consideration of particular social kinds like race and gender. And in the final chapter, she considers the specific case of gender recognition debates.

Yet, as Jenkins argues in that final chapter, starting from (or focusing primarily upon) ontology can be detrimental to campaigns for justice. During that argument, Jenkins (2023, 226) suggests that "discussions of gender recognition could helpfully be framed as primarily *practical* and *normative* rather than primarily *metaphysical.*" Moreover, Jenkins describes the guiding insight of her work as the recognition that what we want from any account of race and gender kinds—which are always understood to have oppressive histories and potentials—are ways to harness their *explanatory* power for emancipatory purposes. In other words, for most contemporary academics and activists, the purpose of thinking about and studying constructed categories like race and gender is to better understand how those categories create and perpetuate injustice—that is, what the operation of the categories explains about the world—so that the world can be made more just. What, then, might it look like to structure the book according to this insight? For example,

Jenkins might have instead begun in the first chapter by arguing against the ontology-first approach (using the same example of gender recognition struggles). She might then have demonstrated how a pluralist conceptual framework for the social kind of gender can be developed precisely to explain injustice for emancipatory purposes. Perhaps she would then have explored the applicability of the framework to the social kind of race, making adjustments as necessary, before venturing to elaborate an account of social kinds in general. This would model how a philosopher can follow on normative and practical movements to develop forward-looking ways of understanding social kinds (in their good and bad uses). Thus, rather than going from abstract to concrete, from generals to particulars, the account would begin with a concrete and particular case and then expand to show the possibilities for broader application.

But perhaps proceeding in that way would simply have resulted in an entirely different book. Meanwhile, my aim here and now is to describe and engage with some key achievements of the one Jenkins did write. Indeed, Jenkins's book offers substantial contributions to both identity-based political struggles and to academic understandings of social kinds. In the book's introduction, Jenkins (2023, 3–4) clearly articulates the difficult questions facing social movements seeking to counter race and gender oppression: "Should countering oppression be conceived of as involving a project of dismantling or abolishing race and gender kinds? If so, how can this be reconciled with people's experiences of identification with those kinds? And how should we approach the question of categorising people with regard to these kinds?" I believe that Jenkins's pluralist conceptual framework offers a useful way to conceptualize and manage this challenge.

The CEF and Ontological Pluralism

On the first page of my 2018 book, *The Assisted Reproduction of Race*, I shared a personal story:

> *In 2002, I was working as a Peace Corps volunteer in a village in the Central Region of Togo, West Africa. I'd been there for a year and a half when my father came to visit. My mother had visited a few months earlier, around Christmastime. I took my father to a middle school where I'd been working. The principal brought us to talk to the troisième class (roughly 9th grade) and we introduced my father to the students and then asked them if they had any questions.*
>
> *One boy raised his hand. "How is it that Camisha is white, but her father is black, like us?" he asked. To my surprise, though I grew up "black" in the United States, I had been "white" since arriving in Togo. I was still getting used to it. I opened my mouth to answer, but the*

> *principal raised his hand to stop me, indicating that he would "take this one."*
>
> *"You remember when Camisha's mother came to visit?" he asked. The students nodded. "She was short and white." The students nodded again. My mother, though she always imagined herself to be 5'6" was in fact 5'2". My father is 6'6". I am 5'9", which is pretty tall by Togo standards. "And her father," the principal continued, "is tall and black." The students nodded again. I, too, thought things were going well.*
>
> *"So you see," the principal concluded, "she got her father's height and her mother's skin."* (Russell 2018, 1)

In the context of my argument at the time, the story was meant to illustrate that, even though most places around the world have a concept of race, *what* exactly constitutes knowledge of race or correct racial classification most certainly differs, though it will be broadly shared within a particular place at a particular time.

Later in the introduction, I glossed 1990s debates over the metaphysics of race, but I did not return to examine the story from that angle. And, by the end of the introduction, I had dismissed the idea that a metaphysics of race is necessary either for the critical investigation of racism or for organizing struggles against it. In my words of that time, I argued that we ought to shift our analytical attention from the question of what race *is* to the question of what race *does*. Essentially, in Jenkins's terms, I rejected an "ontology-first" approach to the philosophy of race. I went on in the rest of the book to discuss the question of what race *does* in the context of assisted reproduction using the idea of race as "technology." But I used that idea as a critical framework (based in Continental philosophy), rather than arguing for it as ontological description of the social kind *race*. Thus, I commend Jenkins's elaboration of the *constraints and enablements framework* (CEF) as an innovative ontological account of racial and gender categories. Given my previously dismissive stance toward an ontology of race, I was pleasantly surprised by how compatible the CEF is with my "technology" approach. More than this, Jenkins is able to start from a question of what social kinds *do* and then to elaborate an *ontological* framework that provides specific and concrete ways to understand the multiple and sometimes seemingly contradictory functions of race.

The central claim of her CEF is that "what unifies the members of [social] kinds is the fact of being subject to similar social constraints and enablements—or, to put it differently, the kinds are unified by the property of *falling under such-and-such constraints and enablements*" (Jenkins 2023, 84). To show the explanatory value of the CEF for our experiences of social kinds in the world, Jenkins uses the concept of "nodes" within social structures. "Because occupants of nodes in social structures fall

under similar constraints and enablements," she writes, "we can capture significant regularities in the behaviour and experiences of people by recognising that they occupy the same node in a social structure and appealing to the social structure in our explanations" (86). For Jenkins, the CEF offers a deliberately bare and flexible theoretical structure, which can be used to guide the creation of fuller ontological accounts of specific social kinds within particular social and historical contexts. To this end, she offers three variables—scope, breadth, and granularity—which can be thought of like "sliders on a sound mixing board" where "different combinations of settings will give us different outputs. (89). I will not discuss the variables here, but Jenkins applies them to race and gender kinds to come up with important types—hegemonic, interpersonal, and identity—thus creating a pluralist ontological account of race and gender kinds.

Hegemonic race and gender kinds are those we find "if we look at the *overall patterns* of what people are and are not able to do across society as a whole," where we discern "a tendency of constraints and enablements, some more subordinating and others more privileging" (Jenkins 2023, 121). *Hegemonic* kinds are the ones we most readily identify in discussions of oppression.

Interpersonal race and gender kinds describe how a person's perceived membership in a race or gender kind constrains or enables their interpersonal interactions with other people and with social institutions. In any given location, for example, members of racial minorities are often seen as permitted to act in certain nonassertive ways, but as *not* entitled to take up too much space, to stand up for themselves, or to command full social respect. Meanwhile, members of a privileged interpersonal race or gender kind may receive implicit license to mistreat members of a subordinated kind. Demeaning, demonizing, or enacting interpersonal violence upon members of subordinated kinds thus appears understandable, nonpunishable, or even necessary.

Finally, race and gender *identity* kinds are used to understand a person's *experienced relationship* to a race or gender category. When a person identifies with a race or gender kind, it can mean that they have adopted norms associated with that category as relevant to their actions. To adopt a norm as relevant does not mean one never violates that norm; it only means that when complying with or violating that norm the person recognizes that the norm applies to their actions. For example, because I was raised in a very white community, primarily by a white mother, I have few (if any) musical preferences associated with Black people of my generation. I'm also a big fan of Taylor Swift's music. But when I'm out in the world, I experience a sense of self-consciousness about my love of her music—because it labels me not only as having mainstream tastes but specifically as having *white* mainstream tastes. Currently, both Beyoncé and Taylor Swift are on world tours, but I'm only traveling 2,500 miles to see one of them—and I know it's the "wrong" one. Another, perhaps

more active form of identification with a race or gender kind involves making decisions about how to shape one's projects in response to social labels. Often, the projects that marginalized individuals shape in response to marginalizing labels involve solidarity with others, resistance to the status quo, and collective emancipatory action. This is important to Jenkins's account because it explains why people may choose to actively identity with labels that bring them social disadvantage. It also offers an explanation (beyond the "one-drop rule") for the fact that mixed-race people with Black ancestry often self-identify as Black.

By dividing race and gender kinds into *hegemonic* kinds, *interpersonal* kinds, and *identity* kinds—which remain unified through the CEF—Jenkins makes conceptual sense of efforts to mobilize against the oppressive uses of race and gender kinds, while acknowledging and valuing the shared experiences and political solidarities that come from people's taking up of these identities for purposes of resistance. This is much what I intended to accomplish by describing race as a technology. I pointed to technologies originally developed to serve the interests of the elite or to enhance systems of social domination, which are now also employed in resistance to domination, like the internet, the precursor of which was developed in the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) under the US Department of Defense. I argued that, similarly, "concepts of race have, in many ways, taken on lives of their own and have often been employed in the service of *resistance* to systems of domination and oppression" (Russell 2018, 54). Eduardo Mendieta, for example, recognizes the potentially socially transformative roles that positively construed or oppositional racial identities may play when he describes the label "Latinos" as something that Latin Americans in the United States have "learned to identify and be identified as" not only "because the mainstream society lumped us together under a bureaucratic label created for the purposes of the Census" but also because the label "localizes the history and geography of the Latin American experience that is the background against which we must make sense of the Latino experience in the United States" and can serve as a political and cultural tool rather than a mere ethnic designator (Mendieta 2012, 152–53).

In framing race as technology, I also wished to account for the way much of our thinking about race has faded into the background, shaping our view of the world without our being fully conscious of it. A host of familiar technologies act in this way. Cars shape the way we understand time and distance. Cell phones and text messages shape the way we understand communication with and access to others. Yet we tend not to think much about them until our car breaks down or our cell phone battery dies. Thus, I contended that it is when something goes "wrong" with race—when there is a social outcome in which race plays an unexpected role or fails to play an expected role—that race comes into question for us and demands a response. I argued that this fact is demonstrated by the many publicized (and many more *unpublicized*) times

when a raced body appears in what is presumed to be a white (or nonraced) space and is met with a response of violence, as in the shooting of Trayvon Martin. I also offered a less familiar example from a 2016 documentary on O. J. Simpson. Describing the infamous slow-motion police chase following which Simpson was arrested, Zoey Tur, a news helicopter pilot interviewed in the documentary, tells the filmmakers: "If O.J. Simpson were Black, that shit wouldn't have happened. He'd be on the ground getting clubbed" (Edelman 2016). Tur's words suggest that Simpson's Blackness failed to play its expected role during the pursuit and arrest, leading Tur to the conclusion that Simpson could not rightfully be considered Black at all. On this interpretation, it is not Simpson's phenotype but the way police treated him that best defines his racial status. Moreover, Tur's surprise at the humane treatment Simpson received suggests that race is, under normal circumstances, a very effective technology for justifying inhumane levels of police violence against certain populations. Simpson thus serves as the exception that leads Tur to articulate the rule—to name one typical function of race.

I believe Jenkins's CEF framework can and does do similar theoretical work in this type of case. On her account, *interpersonal* social kinds are unified by "the property of falling under such-and-such constraints and enablements" (Jenkins 2023, 84) and thereby occupying the same node in a social structure, and this is what allows social kinds to feature reliably in our explanations of events. Thus, we might say that helicopter pilot Zoey Tur had an expectation that, as two people with the racialized features that we associate with Black men, O. J. Simpson and Rodney King would occupy the same social node. Therefore, when O. J. Simpson was slowly followed down the freeway—instead of being pulled over, removed from his car, and beaten—the expected constraints of being Black in Los Angeles in the 1990s failed to appear. Tur concludes (in keeping with the CEF) that O. J. was not, in practice, Black. Or, as Jenkins (131) puts it: "It's not only that . . . a Black person is more likely to be stopped, assaulted, or murdered by the police; it's that *being* more likely to be stopped, assaulted, or murdered by the police *is part of what constitutes the person's being Black*."

Not only does Jenkins's CEF framework resonate with my "technology" account in the way that it focuses on how race (and other social kinds) function in racialized societies on multiple levels, but it also leads me back to my own story with new insights. First, I am directed to think through the lens of Jenkins's *interpersonal* race kinds, which "are well able to capture the sense in which race does not travel: when someone leaves one context [the US] and enters another [Togo], they may well cease to be a member of one interpersonal race kind and become a member of another" (Jenkins 2023, 146). As the Togolese principal began addressing the students, I thought we were talking about the same thing, and that "thing" in precise terms was the biologically heritable phenotypic trait of skin color. In that moment, I was not

thinking about race as a social kind with political weight—and *that* I was not thinking about it was no accident, either. Race had become uncomfortable for me in a new way during my time in Togo with the Peace Corps. That I was largely considered white in Togo had been surprising—and even more so when the classification was applied to other volunteers with darker skin than mine. But what made it uncomfortable was my ever-growing experience of "white guilt."

I cannot say for certain whether it was before or after my father's visit, but I do remember that, at that same school one day, a teacher named Blaise Daké, whom I considered a friend, had said I was lucky to have been born in the US instead of in Africa. I think it was after I had taught his students the lyrics to "Lean on Me." I remember wanting to deny it; maybe I even tried to. Maybe I said something about how my ancestors were kidnapped and enslaved in a crime no passing generations could ever make worth it. I don't recall. What I do recall is what Monsieur Daké said next, pointing to the dirt field outside the classroom: "If there was a plane to America out there right now, who among us wouldn't get on it?" And I remember the students in the classroom agreed. Of course, I could have been on a real plane to America within the week if I had wanted. That was true at any point during my time in Togo—even after 9/11. And at the end of 2022, when my two years of service ended, I did take a plane home. In two years I almost never spoke to locals about my life at home, my plans, my future, because my opportunities were so far removed from theirs. I was privileged and I knew it and I did not like to think about it.

So, there I stood in front of that classroom, hoping for a benign explanation of mixed-race appearance. And I didn't get it. As has so often been required in the US, the teacher decided to choose between Black and white. He had seen my obviously white mother and my obviously Black father, and though I thought I was obviously in-between, he decided to break the tie. And maybe it was just the fact that my lighter skin stood out relative to the average Togolese person in the opposite way that, even in a multicultural "nation of immigrants," darker skin stands out against the white citizenry of the American imaginary. Or maybe the way an individual breaks a tie like that always relies on collective understandings of the node that the person they are describing will occupy in their society. In the US, few if any people with obviously nonwhite skin can truly occupy the same node as a white person with the same gender, class, or educational or professional attainment. But in Togo, I could. In fact, I couldn't *not* be understood to occupy the node of whiteness, where whiteness simply meant few constraints and many enablements—the fact of being an outsider in command of significant resources and with an international freedom of movement. Unlike the people living in my village, I had money, education, a comfortable living situation, and an American passport. I had the ability to come and go from Togo more or less whenever I wanted—therefore I was more white than Black.

The Limits of Ontology for Social Change

In the eighth and final chapter of her book, Jenkins uses political struggles over the social recognition of gender to demonstrate how an *ontology-first* approach may hinder rather than help emancipatory movements. She focuses on the UK context in a time of "severe and worsening transphobia" (Jenkins 2023, 200). For Jenkins, the ontology-first approach is a pervasive assumption in public discussions about gender that "settling questions about the current ontology of gender kinds will automatically determine what shape our gendered social practices ought to take" (201). While assertions about the "objective reality" of sexed bodies or the "common sense" differences between cis women and trans women may be the prized tactic of those who seek to deny trans rights—trans men tend to be rhetorically invisible in these debates—Jenkins notes that activists working *for* trans rights often fight back by meeting their opponents on this same ontological battleground. That is, trans rights proponents often argue that the "correct" understanding of *what gender is* puts trans women in the same category as cis women—with the idea that proving trans women are women will automatically lead to social recognition and just social policies.

Jenkins argues that allowing the battle to be fought on *ontological* grounds can distort disagreements about gender recognition and contribute to the perpetuation and amplification of transphobia. One reason for this is that the gender ontologies being used on either side of the disagreement tend to see gender kinds as being one thing, rather than as ontologically pluralist (hegemonic, interpersonal, or identity kinds) in the way Jenkins advances. Furthermore, without using a pluralist account, trans rights activists risk losing the ability to *actually explain* trans people's experiences of social stigmatization and marginalization. Jenkins agrees that it is important to recognize and acknowledge the gender *identity* kinds with which a person identifies. But she believes we miss something crucial about trans experiences of injustice if we ignore the fact that, in many contexts, trans people will not be placed under the constraints and enablements of the interpersonal gender kind that matches their gender identity—rather, they will be constrained and enabled according to the idea that their "real" gender is the one they were assigned at birth. Moreover, trans people's overall position in society and possession or lack of social goods will not map neatly onto measures of binary hegemonic gender kinds. For these reasons, Jenkins (2023, 215) argues that emancipatory movements should explicitly reject the ontology-first approach and simply refuse "the claim that gender identity kinds can do the explanatory work that we've historically asked 'gender' to do for us." Instead, such movements should adopt "a view on which social practices should *sometimes* track existing kinds and *sometimes* depart from them" and place more emphasis on "the practical upshots of different policies, especially their impact on trans people's equality and dignity" (218).

When it comes to *race* kinds and my work on how we should think about race, the identification and subsequent rejection of an ontology-first approach to (particularly academic) debates are also useful. The terms of the race debate more typically resemble earlier debates about gender, which focused on the question of whether gender was real or socially constructed. Up until recent debates over transracialism—debates that have little to do with social policies or equality—the ontology-first assumption in race debates has been something like this: *settling questions about the reality of race will automatically determine how to address racism.* Often both those arguing for the reality of race and those arguing against it have been antiracist in their aims, but they have used their differing views on the metaphysics of race to support different approaches to fighting racism. Recalling the 1990s debate between Lucius Outlaw and Anthony Appiah over the metaphysics of race, Anna Stubblefield contends that the two were essentially arguing for the racial ontologies that they believed would best support their different views on how to achieve the best outcomes for African Americans.[1] On this reading, the debate was a consequentialist one over whether taking race into account only perpetuates anti-Black oppression or is in fact necessary to effectively combat such oppression (Stubblefield 2005, 71–73).

Of course, as Jenkins also notes in the context of gender recognition, there is nothing wrong with robust arguments about how best to combat particular forms of oppression. But arguments against oppression would be clearer—and perhaps a more effective basis for compromise solutions—if they were explicitly grounded in current harms and dangers and the types of policies that might mitigate them. In my book I describe this prescription as a shift away from an unhelpful focus on what people *believe* about race to how race has been and continues to be *used*—from the question of what race *is* to what race *does*. In other words, like Jenkins, I see a rejection of the ontology-first approach to race in favor of trying to uncover its explanatory power in different contexts as a guide for ongoing emancipatory work.

Lived Identities, Not Logical Possibilities

I believe Jenkins's rejection of the ontology-first approach also provides a helpful way of thinking about the transracialism debate and the insidious transgender–transracial comparisons on which that debate typically rests. Summarizing the "presumption of equivalence" reflected in public debates on transracialism circa 2015–2017, Jenkins (2023, 235–36) outlines three steps: (1) "an ontological equivalence is assumed: race and gender kinds exist in the same way as each other . . . as a matter of 'objective truth'"; (2) "this ontological equivalence is presumed to entail a first-personal ethical equivalence: since race and gender exist in the same way, having and expressing a racial identity that is at odds with how one

[1] See, for example, Appiah (1996) and Outlaw (1996).

would usually be categorized . . . has the same moral status as having and expressing [such] a gender identity"; (3) "this first-personal ethical equivalence is presumed to entail a third-personal ethical equivalence: we ought (morally speaking) to respond in the same way to other people who express racial and gender identities that are ethically equivalent to one another." By contrast, Jenkins (238) suggests that "doing justice to questions about people's complicated experiences of racial identity that are at odds with their membership in hegemonic and interpersonal race kinds requires [engaging] these experiences in their own right and not as an offshoot of discussions about gender recognition."

I think this is basically right. When it comes to engaging experiences in their own right, however, I think it is important that "in their own right" not be understand as "on a purely individual basis." As Jenkins recognizes, race and gender kinds differ in terms of their histories, their operations, and the types of constraints and enablements associated with them. It is also worth noting, however, that they differ in terms of the low number of people asserting a phenomenological, first-person experience of "transracialism," as opposed to a widespread, long, and documented history of trans(gender) experiences. That is, there is something else wrong with the ontology-first approach here, which is more specific than the "presumption of equivalence." That something has to do with taking the well-documented existence of one identity phenomenon and using it to argue for the possible (or even likely) existence or validity of another identity phenomenon.

While it could prove problematic to require a visible collective struggle around a particular identity before we accept that identity as a true social kind deserving of our moral attention, I would still argue that it is collective struggle (rather than philosophical reasoning) that offers the surest evidence that a previously unknown social identity kind has become knowable to its members and that those members as members deserve our moral attention. Perhaps there are widespread experiences emerging somewhere that we may someday wish to discuss under the label *transracialism* in order to do justice to the people having those experiences. Perhaps, for example, that experience will emerge from the context of international and/or transracial adoption and the term will come to describe the experiences of nonwhite adoptees in white families. But we, as philosophers, will not be able to do justice to any such people until they begin describing their experiences to each other and choose the label for themselves. In other words, we should approach any limited number of transracial identity claims with an extra dose of philosophical caution and humility—and always with due attention to the ethical implications for the people already inhabiting various identities.

Ultimately, Jenkins's work reminds us that the ontology of social kinds differs from that of other kinds in the sense that it develops and shifts over time and within

different social contexts. Political decisions and social practices set up the constraints and enablements that philosophers like Jenkins can ultimately use to effectively describe the operation of things like race and gender kinds at particular historical places and times. Jenkins's success in offering such an effective description lies in her recognition that social kinds are so complex that philosophical theories will fail to explain them fully unless they are sufficiently pluralist and context-dependent. Jenkins gives us a helpful framework for recognizing and addressing this complexity and reminds us that there is little point in addressing social ontology at all unless we are clearly focused on advancing emancipatory (or, God forbid, oppressive) movements.

References

Appiah, K. Anthony. 1996. "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections." In *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, by K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, 30–105. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Edelman, Ezra, dir. 2016. *O.J.: Made in America*. "Part 3." Aired June 15, on ESPN.

Jenkins, Katharine. 2023. *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Mendieta, Eduardo. 2012. "Migrant, Migra, Mongrel: The Latin American Dishwasher, Busboy, and Colored/Ethnic/Diversity (Philosophy) Hire." In *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*, edited by George Yancy, 147–66. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Outlaw, Lucius T., Jr. 1996. *On Race and Philosophy.* New York: Routledge.

Russell, Camisha A. 2018. *The Assisted Reproduction of Race*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Stubblefield, Anna. 2005. *Ethics along the Color Line*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

CAMISHA RUSSELL is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon. She is a feminist philosopher working in critical philosophy of race with a particular strength in bioethics. In 2024/25, she was awarded a Mellon Foundation New Directions Fellowship to explore her growing interest in the relationship between Blackness and Indigeneity in (the settler colony known as) the United States. Her first book, *The Assisted Reproduction of Race* (Indiana University Press, 2018), considered the role of the race idea in practices surrounding assisted reproductive technologies and argued for the benefits of thinking of race itself as a technology. Her forthcoming cowritten book, *Assisted Reproductive Justice* (University of California Press), examines the fertility industry, family formation law, and other practices of assisted reproduction through a reproductive justice lens.