



George Yancy

# On Race

34 Conversations  
in a Time of Crisis

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George Yancy

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In loving memory of Manomano M. M. Mukungurutse

My dear friend, a remarkable human being, a brilliant philosopher



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On Race



# Introduction

## *Dangerous Conversations*

GEORGE YANCY

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*

What we face is a human emergency.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Religion and Race*

To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Initially, I had the straightforward plan to open this introduction to *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* with an explanation of the book's genesis, its scope, and some of its aims. However, a few days before I began to write, I was, to use Dr. Martin Luther King's phrase, "confronted with the fierce urgency of now" after receiving a message that was in response to the publication of "Dear White America."<sup>1</sup> The message was sent to my university email address. As I read the message aloud for the first time during an important special postelection discussion sponsored by the Program in Global and Postcolonial Studies here at Emory University, one that was designed to discuss and share ways in which faculty and students can engage in critical political work beyond the ballot, I experienced a disturbing affective intensity that shook my body. After I read it, the small group of faculty and students gathered were silent; the room was filled with the heavy air of disbelief. Disbelief, even though just days before America was inundated with news reports of swastikas being spray-painted on buildings and vehicles, Muslims being referred to

as “vile” and “filthy,” calls to make America white again, and claims that Black lives *don’t* matter. In fact, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there were 867 cases that were counted “of hateful harassment or intimidation in the United States in the 10 days after the November 8 election.”<sup>2</sup>

Within that room, there was a shared trepidation of what was to come when we finally move beyond 2016. The silence was in contrast to the applause received from those gathered after the first two presenters had delivered their short talks. As I read aloud the message sent to me, I could feel my voice tremble.

The subject heading on the email message read, “FUCK OFF BOY.” I guess that I could have deleted the message before opening it, but I didn’t. This jolting, antiquated usage of “BOY” recalled a bygone white supremacist “past” in which Black men were denied the respect due to other adult men and reduced to caricatures—rendered childlike vis-à-vis the quintessential white *man*, the white paternal figure, an exaggerated white male masculinity that needed to prove itself “superior” by beating, castrating, and lynching Black bodies. It was in the early 1920s, almost one hundred years ago, that philosopher Alain Locke, when referring to the withering away of white racist depictions of Black people, wrote that “the popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of the facts.”<sup>3</sup> The optimism Locke expressed is evident in the phrase, “*has about* played itself out” (emphasis mine). Yet, “FUCK OFF BOY” pointed to a form of relentless white racist hatred, and proved it was hardly in our past. It was traveling through time, from the author of this hateful email to me, right here in 2016.

I felt like a prisoner of a merciless temporality—one in which this word and all that it carried had never faded into the past. There was no feeling of progressive linearity concerning race matters, but a form of vicious return, a cyclical cruelty. Already decades after Locke had expressed his optimism, in 1963, fifty-four years ago, Dr. King noted some of the cruelties as to why Black people couldn’t wait for justice any longer. In addition to noting that one’s wife and mother would never be given the respect of being called “Mrs.,” he also noted “when your first name becomes ‘nigger’ and your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are),”<sup>4</sup> you can’t wait. I opened the message and it read,

I read your rant regarding white people, and I’m proud to inform you that I will never feel any guilt or shame for being white or who I am. FUCK YOU, you race baiting piece of shit! You’re just another nigger with a chip on his shoulder that’s looking for excuses to justify his hatred, and guess what asshole NOBODY WHITE GIVES A FUCK WHAT YOU THINK. My only regret is that I didn’t hear your bullshit in person so that I could call you a FUCKING NIGGER to your face you worthless bitch, and then kick your black ass until you were half dead. FUCK OFF BOY.<sup>5</sup>

I wanted those gathered to share the weight that I felt; I wanted them to be confronted with the fierce urgency of now. For me, there was both a feeling of fear, because I'm afraid of racial fanaticism, and anger, because anger grounds me; it keeps me focused. Counterintuitively, anger can provide clarity, especially within a context where my Blackness is taken as sufficient evidence that I am guilty of something, that I am disposable.

To feel the sense of fierce urgency, some readers might want to tarry longer with the words of the message, with the intent of the message, to reflect on the perverse pleasure that the writer may have obtained when the message was composed. This time, however, try reading it aloud, reading it slowly, allowing the magnitude of the violence expressed in the words to touch your conscience or sense of moral outrage.

As Black, I am apparently excrement, waste, refuse. That is an attack on my humanity. My writings on the subjects of race and white privilege are allegedly designed to induce white people to feel bad about themselves. Rather than being genuinely concerned with interrogating whiteness as a site of privilege, power, and social injustice, as a way of attempting to improve forms of human relationality, my aim is to "bait" white people, to lure them. That is an attack on my scholarship and its complexity. The writer also says "NOBODY WHITE" cares what I think. Well, that is a lot of white people. So, the writer speaks for *all* white people. That is an insult to white people. The content of what I write is referred to as 'bullshit,' which implies a form of exaggerated nonsense. That is an attack on the philosophical integrity of what I write. 'Nigger' is a grotesque term that reminds me of Black bodies swinging from the end of a rope; the word is traumatic and assaultive in its impact. Yet, I'm also a "fucking nigger," which adds intensification to the word 'nigger.' And note that the writer desires to say this to my face. This would be, I imagine, for greater confrontational effect. By 'fucking nigger,' I assume that the writer means that I'm *really* or *very much so* a "nigger." Then again, perhaps the writer meant that I'm a "worthless nigger." If so, then by white racist logic, that is simply a tautology. And then by calling me a 'worthless bitch,' the message is aimed at my sense of masculinity. I get it. In many testosterone-driven male spaces, 'bitch' signifies that I'm weak, afraid, a wuss. The writer, though, attempts to degrade me and by extension also degrades women. The modifier 'worthless' engenders the question: what is a "worthwhile bitch"? So, while I understand the hypermasculine lingua franca, I just don't have anything to prove. That one just washes off. In addition to all of these insults, however, the writer desires to kick my black ass until I'm half dead. That is an attack on my life! The existential stakes are now higher. That is an attack on all Black life! That is beyond the pale of discursive insult, but not beyond the facts of American history and not beyond the pale of the white imaginary to enact forms of grave physical violence: maim, brutalize, and murder Black bodies.

There is a part of me that would like to relegate this kind of discursive violence to media trolls who have nothing better to do with their time. I've seen this behavior many times already. After all, after the publication of "Dear White America" for the *Times*, I received hundreds of messages that were filled with white racist vitriol. But when bullying and caustic insults communicated through social media are erratically and incessantly engaged in by President Donald Trump, giving legitimacy to deploy the medium as a site for harassing others, the neofascist and existential stakes are raised. As Henry A. Giroux writes, "Trump has done more than bring a vicious online harassment culture into the mainstream, he has also legitimated the worst dimensions of politics and brought out of the shadows white nationalists, racist militia types, social media trolls, overt misogynists and a variety of reactionaries who have turned their hate-filled discourse into a weaponized element of political culture."<sup>6</sup>

Unlike any other presidential election in recent history, what we have witnessed is Faustian in nature—millions of predominantly white people were willing and prepared to sell their souls to a white man who had already confirmed their loyalty, saying he could shoot somebody and wouldn't lose any voters. That is the signature of a narcissist, one who is reckless, who can do no wrong in his eyes or in the eyes of others. That kind of self-obsession places ethics and democracy in abeyance; it is the stuff of totalitarianism and genocide. Perhaps many of us would rather be in a state of what Jean-Paul Sartre called "bad faith," which is our attempt to lie to ourselves about an unpleasant reality. In this case, though, it is more than an unpleasant reality. It is the stuff of Orwellian nightmares, the reality of unadulterated political madness and *shameless* white nativism. What we are witnessing in America is the birth of a monstrous presidential figure, one who has promised to make America "great again" and bring "law and order." These are tropes that signify, for some of us, a time in American history of *de jure* racism. There was a time when Germany needed to be made "great again," subjected to "law and order," made "racially pure" vis-à-vis the "chaos" of difference. Being made "great again," "racially pure," and subjected to "law and order" bespeaks the horrors of apotheosis and mass murder. And many were, sadly, in the case of Germany, convinced by the messenger. This is why, *inter alia*, we are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.

White people who voted for Trump, in my view, demonstrated a willingness to subordinate their freedom to a political idol regardless of his actions. Political idolatry bespeaks fanaticism and neofascism. Our current political situation might be said to be a species of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which is a film about the rise and valorization of the Ku Klux Klan, and the problematic demonization of the Black male as a "sexual predator." Keep in mind that white male Dylann Roof, who on June 17, 2015, viciously murdered nine Black people holding a prayer meeting at the historic Emmanuel Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, is reported to

have said, “I have to do it. You rape our [white] women and you’re taking over our [white] country. And you have to go.”<sup>7</sup> Both ‘our women’ and ‘our country’ are hallmarks of the white racist imaginary. It was also through the logics of the white racist imaginary that Trump, in 1989, purchased several ads in New York newspapers calling for the return of the death penalty and an increase in police presence after four Black males and one Latino were wrongly convicted in the Central Park Five case. Even now, after all five have been found innocent of any wrongdoing, Trump refuses to believe that they are innocent despite the evidence. Then again, some of us, in Trump’s eyes, are “*the Blacks*.”<sup>8</sup> We are always already stereotypically known. As Patricia J. Williams writes, “Culturally, blackness signifies the realm of the always known, as well as the not worth knowing. A space of the entirely judged. This prejudice is a practice of the nonreligious; it is profane, the ultimate profanity of presuming to know it all.”<sup>9</sup> As the entirely judged, Trump “knew” about Black people’s so-called monolithic economic plight and social pathology. This is partly why he said that we had nothing to lose by voting for him. Without any sophisticated analysis of Black social mobility or how structural racism adversely impacts Black life, Trump said, “You live in your poverty, your schools are no good. You have no jobs. What the hell do you have to lose?”<sup>10</sup> That was an insult to Black America, just as Trump’s five-year-long birtherism lie was an insult to our first African-America President and by extension Black people. If the stakes were not so high, I might, as Frantz Fanon said, “laugh myself to tears.”<sup>11</sup> But, as with Fanon, “that laughter [has] become impossible.”<sup>12</sup>

It is certainly not a laughing matter when David Duke, once the Grand Wizard of the KKK, tweets, “Our people played a huge role in electing Trump!” It is the “our” that is so frightening. To my knowledge, Trump has not unequivocally called Duke out as a *racist*. It is Trump’s reticence and perhaps unwillingness to name racism, sexism, and xenophobia that helps to form the mortar that will now scaffold the birth of this “new nation.” It is Stephen K. Bannon, now Trump’s chief strategist and senior counselor, who said that *Breitbart News* is “the platform for the alt-right,”<sup>13</sup> otherwise known as white nationalism/white nativism. It is Michael Flynn, who accepted Trump’s offer of national security advisor, who said that “Fear of Muslims is rational.”<sup>14</sup> And it is Jeff Sessions, whom Trump has selected as Attorney General, who is the same Sessions who denounced the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and who had branded the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP as “un-American.” He also said that such organizations “forced civil rights down the throats of people.”<sup>15</sup> And along with the racism, sexism, xenophobia, and ableism, Trump represents an existential threat because of his denial of climate change.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, if we love our children and our planet, remember that Trump, when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons, does not want to take the cards off the table.<sup>17</sup> In a nuclear exchange, there will be no cards and no table. To play that hand places us squarely within the space of the profane, the



unholy. Given what we have witnessed in his unpredictability, perhaps that is partly what constitutes the crime. Hence, the trauma that so many of us felt after the election of Trump is not some temporary uneasiness induced by a “peaceful” transfer of power. It is a form of mourning that cuts to the bone.

It should be noted that when Donald Trump became president-elect, America *didn't* suddenly become a nation predicated upon white supremacy. For those of us who have endured the hatred, the noblesse oblige of “good, God-fearing” white people, we didn't unexpectedly enter into a new and unforeseen nightmare. We didn't have the privilege to live in a twilight zone, a world of fantasy where things are unreal, where we get to wallow in what Richard Wright calls a form of white mania for mere trinkets. Wright says that the words of the souls of white people are “the syllables of popular songs,”<sup>18</sup> superficial distractions that speak to *nonracialized* suffering and mourning. To be fair, though, I have tried to empathize with the pain of working-class white America, those within what we all now know as the Rust Belt. I have tried to understand their feelings of exclusion and being treated as the “rural other” and as the “noncollege educated.” And I have tried to understand their specific economic anxieties and how they perceive the failure of “the establishment” to address their interests. And even as I am concerned about their economic plight, and how they have experienced alienation, as we all should be, my sense is that their vote for Trump has created a set of conditions that will further mark differently vulnerable bodies in ways that will expose us to deeper forms of social pain and suffering, ostracization, and expulsion. Part of the problem is that their class suffering was not an isolated metric used in their decision to vote for Trump. I realize that race can't explain everything, but, on my view, even as they suffered, they always knew that they were *not* Black and thereby assumed that they were *entitled* to reap the benefits of white America. Part of their frustration (for them) is that they *are white* and that they continue to be treated like “niggers.” That is their shame. Their suffering was never just economic; it was and is linked to a white vanguard mentality that has not materialized for them. So, even as they struggle economically, they voraciously feed on Trump's racist and xenophobic discourse.

As a Black person, I know that white America has always been a nightmare, a country filled with white terror, white brutality, white nativism, white hubris, white paranoia, and white privilege and power. So, for me, and for most Black people and people of color, the existential malaise that a “Trump victory” has produced is not new. Gifted with second-sight, as W. E. B. Du Bois would say,<sup>19</sup> we have always seen how whiteness operates within this country. So, for those white people who are disgusted and unhinged by Trump's election, just know that Black people and people of color have been living in the pre-Trump belly of the beast called white America for years. And for those of us who continue to believe that President Obama should have been far more vocal and interventionist (and should have transformed policy) when it came

to racism in America, and especially anti-Black racism, remember that there were times when Obama demonstrated incredible moments of critique of our polity when he seemed to argue, for example, that white racism is systemic. In a revealing and candid interview for the podcast “WTF with Marc Maron,” Obama said, “Racism, we are not cured of it. And it’s not just a matter of it not being polite to say nigger in public.”<sup>20</sup> He went on to say, “That’s not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It’s not just a matter of overt discrimination. Societies don’t, overnight, completely erase everything that happened 200 to 300 years prior.”<sup>21</sup> My sense is that even Obama didn’t see Trump coming; he didn’t see the full extent of the whitelash.<sup>22</sup> And it is that whitelash, the likes of which we have yet to see fully, that drives home the fierce urgency of now. The “browning” of America will soon become “the [site of the] great unwashed”<sup>23</sup> vis-à-vis Trump’s personal, egomaniacal white “exceptionalism.” Joel Olson writes, “White tyranny does not contradict the democratic will but is an expression of it.”<sup>24</sup>

Socrates caught hell for practicing philosophy in public spaces, for daring to speak to Athenians who would prefer to sleep. As a gadfly that stings, he refused to let them remain unconscious of their narrowness of vision and preoccupation with distractions from living a virtuous and just life. He became a victim of those who preferred to remain in Plato’s cave, those who were prisoners of that cave and saw only shadows that they took to be real. The more that I talk with many white people about the reality of race in America, the more that I realize that they have been seduced by the shadows of a “postracial” American cave, as it were. They have failed to see the reality of how race operates in insidious ways and how they are complicit with it. They reside in a cave filled with shadows that placate their white identities as free of racism. We must continue to find the appropriate discourse and metaphors to communicate to our good liberal white friends that race continues to touch every aspect of their lives despite the fact that they didn’t, even for moral, antiracist reasons, vote for Trump. Now with the alt-right in the White House, it will be perhaps even easier for many goodwill whites<sup>25</sup> to obfuscate the ways in which their own whiteness continues to perpetuate racial injustice. But it is often dangerous to call into question the ways in which shadows substitute for reality, the ways in which white people have created larger institutional structures that “validate” those shadows. To be committed to fighting against racial injustice is to be in danger. At the same time, though, how can I be true to the process of loving wisdom if I only address my fellow academics? At a time of crisis such as this, how can I avoid the importance of the value of philosophy to public discourse? How can I not wrestle with those social and existential matters that we would rather pretend are not real or are said by my fellow philosophers to be outside of philosophy? It is courageous speech, the fight against racial injustices, the belief that philosophy has a public role to play in critically engaging ideas, and the demand for clarity regarding race, that are

some of the elements that drive this book. And while all of the interviews were conducted prior to Trump becoming president-elect, each interview is shaped by a shared ethos—the realization that we are living (and have lived) in a time of crisis when it comes to race. It was this sense of crisis that led to my sense of urgency to interview prominent philosophers and public intellectuals on the theme of race. As it turns out, the crises that took place as I continued these interviews would later only seem like the beginning.

In 2014, I began reading interviews of scholars, conducted by philosopher Gary Gutting, on the subject of religion. I was intrigued by the engaged level of conversation and the conceptual accessibility that took place at the *New York Times*' philosophy column, *The Stone*. I felt this would be an important venue for engaging in conversations about race. Since 2012, I had been carrying around the weight of the tragic killing of the unarmed seventeen-year-old Black male, Trayvon Martin. I wept upon hearing about his death. At that time, I had no idea that this was just the beginning of what felt like the systematic disposability of Black bodies, a cyclical nightmare. While this is not a new phenomenon, the widespread attention brought to these killings through the exposure on social media is new. There was the killing of the unarmed seventeen-year-old Black male Jordan Davis also in 2012 by a white man. There was the killing of the unarmed twenty-four-year-old Jonathan Ferrell and the killing of the unarmed nineteen-year-old Black female Renisha McBride, each in 2013 and both by white men, Ferrell being killed by a police officer. There was also the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin. Continuing in 2014, there were the white police killings of the unarmed forty-three-year-old Eric Garner, the twenty-three-year-old John Crawford (who held a 22BB gun in a Walmart store), the unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown (along with the resultant Ferguson protests), and the seventeen-year-old Laquan McDonald (who we later discovered was shot sixteen times as he held a three-inch blade and was walking away from police officers). There didn't seem to be any end in sight.<sup>26</sup> I needed to critically discuss race through a medium that drew broad attention to the existential malaise and racial violence that was occurring.<sup>27</sup> There was that fierce urgency of now.

So, I decided to contact the cofounders of *The Stone*, philosopher Simon Critchley and Peter Catapano, the award-winning opinion editor at the *New York Times*. I asked if they would be interested in me interviewing philosophers on race for their column. Both were enthusiastic about the idea, but none of us realized just how powerful the impact of the interviews would be. After a few interviews appeared, it was clear, from the positive responses that I began to receive, that the impact was major. To my knowledge, this was the first time that race had been discussed at a prominent site like the *New York Times* through an actual series of critical interviews with philosophers and public intellectuals on race. It was important for me to engage philosophers

on the theme of race, as I believe that they have a moral responsibility, as framed through a Socratic lens, to use their critical capacities and critical tools to clarify the messiness of concepts, especially the concept of race. Engaging the views of philosophers on race was also important to me, as this engagement demonstrated just how socially and politically relevant philosophy can and ought to be, and how philosophy is a practice that all of us, as human beings, engage in. So, with Peter's enthusiasm, I conducted and we ran a total of nineteen interviews. The response was phenomenal, not just nationally, but internationally. I received email messages from many readers who had read interviews and had come to anticipate the interviews that would come out next. And the comment section of *The Stone* demonstrated not just how important and publicly enriching the interviews were, but also how race is such an emotionally and politically charged subject with great philosophical complexity. My aim was to do what *The Stone* does so well. It was to demonstrate the social relevance of philosophy, but to do so regarding an issue that may, to our national regret, cause "the fire next time."

*On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* is an expanded version of the series that began at *The Stone*. Picking up where the original nineteen interviews left off, the text is shaped by important assumptions regarding the social relevance of philosophy, that is, its need to tarry within the space of the everyday problems of human existence. In fact, philosophy as ideal theory, especially when this is taken to be its sole end or what is most exciting about it, fails us and trivializes our quotidian experiences. Philosophy as ideal theory fails to speak to the actual, often deeply tragic, experiences that we endure. As Adrienne Rich writes, "Theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth."<sup>28</sup> Philosophy must, if it is to be more than conceptual self-stimulation, smell of the earth, get dirty. Otherwise, it becomes a form of academic monasticism that remains trapped in its own hermetic silence. As Paulo Freire reminds us, "Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection."<sup>29</sup> This, by the way, is not an a priori account of philosophy and its aims, but a self-conscious historical positioning of my understanding of philosophy as that which ought to change the world, to help to rid the world of oppression and hatred. For me, philosophy is a site of suffering. I suffer when I attempt to dwell within the emotional space of human pain and agony. The weight of the mystery of human existence, and the weight of the pain we impose upon each other, is, for me, about pathos. This means, of course, that philosophy must involve deeply uncomfortable, and many times dangerous conversations, and that is what you hold in your hands. *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* consists of dangerous conversations; dangerous because they not only relentlessly mark the *tragic realities* of how race has operated and continues to operate in our world, in our lives, but they challenge the ways in which so many of us are complicit

with such tragic realities and how many of us would rather remain oblivious to the realities of race. This book asks that you join in this conversation, especially in this time of crisis. It is an invitation, an entreaty to join in this dangerous conversation as we experience, globally, the fierce urgency of now.

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PART I

*Race and the Critical Space of Black  
Women's Voices*





# bell hooks

**George Yancy:** Over the years, you have used the expression ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ to describe the power structure underlying the social order. Why tie those terms together as opposed to stressing any one of them in isolation?

**bell hooks:** We can’t begin to understand the nature of domination if we don’t understand how these systems connect with one another. Significantly, this phrase has always moved me because it doesn’t value one system over another. For so many years in the feminist movement, women were saying that gender is the only aspect of identity that really matters, that domination only came into the world because of rape. Then we had so many race-oriented folks who were saying, “Race is the most important thing. We don’t even need to be talking about class or gender.” So for me, that phrase always reminds me of a global context, of the context of class, of empire, of capitalism, of racism, and of patriarchy. Those things are all linked—an interlocking system.

**G. Y.:** I’ve heard you speak many times and I noticed that you do so with a very keen sense of humor. What is the role of humor in your work?

**b. h.:** We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor. Every time we see the left or any group trying to move forward politically in a radical way, when they’re humorless, they fail. Humor is essential to the integrative balance that we need to deal with diversity and difference and the building of community. For example, I love to be in conversation with Cornel West. We always go high and we go low, and we always bring the joyful humor in. The last talk he and I gave together, many people were upset because we were silly together. But I consider it a high holy calling that we can be humorous together. How many times do we see an African-American man and an African-American woman talking together, critiquing one another, and yet having delicious, humorous delight? It’s a miracle.

**G. Y.:** What is your view of the feminist movement today, and how has your relationship to it changed over time?

**b. h.:** My militant commitment to feminism remains strong, and the main reason is that feminism has been the contemporary social movement that has most embraced self-interrogation. When we, women of color, began to tell white women that females were not a homogenous group, that we had to face the reality of racial difference, many white women stepped up to the plate. I'm a feminist in solidarity with white women today for that reason, because I saw these women grow in their willingness to open their minds and change the whole direction of feminist thought, writing, and action. This continues to be one of the most remarkable, awesome aspects of the contemporary feminist movement. The left has not done this, radical Black men have not done this, where someone comes in and says, "Look, what you're pushing, the ideology, is all messed up. You've got to shift your perspective." Feminism made that paradigm shift, though not without hostility, not without some women feeling we were forcing race on them. This change still amazes me.

**G. Y.:** What should we do in our daily lives to combat, in that phrase of yours, the power and influence of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? What can be done on the proverbial ground?

**b. h.:** I live in a small, predominantly white town in the Bible Belt. Rather than saying, "What would Jesus do?," I always think, "What does Martin Luther King want me to do today?" Then I decide what Martin Luther King wants me to do today is to go out into the world and in every way that I can, small and large, build a beloved community. As a Buddhist Christian, I also think of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who talks about throwing a pebble into the water, and while it may not go far in the beginning, it will ripple out. So, every day, I'm challenging myself. "What are you doing, bell, for the creation of the beloved community?" Because that's the underground, local insistence that I be a fundamental part of the world that I'm in. I've been to the Farmer's Market, I've been to the church bazaar this morning. I really push myself to relate to people, that is, people that I might not feel as comfortable relating to. There are many Kentucky hillbilly white persons who look at me with contempt. They cannot turn me around. I am doing the same thing as those civil rights activists, those Black folk and those white folk who sat in at those diners and who marched.

It's about humanization. And I can't think of another way to imagine how we're going to get out of the crisis of racial hatred if it's not through the will to humanize. Personally, I draw incredible strength from the images of Black people and white people in social movements. I personally did not think *Selma* was a great film, but the strength that I gained from the film was thinking about all of those people, those white folks who see *Selma* and say, "My God, this is unjust! Let's go do our part." And it's awesome when we're called. There

are many times in this life of mine when I ask myself, “What are you willing to give your life for, bell? When are you willing to get out in the streets knowing that you’re risking your health?” And if those older Black women who were there in Selma, Alabama, can do this stuff, it just reminds you how incredibly vital this history of struggle has been toward allowing you and me to be in the state of privilege that we live within today.

**G. Y.:** That point hits home, especially as I think about my own intellectual identity and yet often fail to think about the privilege that comes with it.

**b. h.:** I am a total intellectual. I tell people that intellectual work is the laboratory that I go into every day. Without all of those people engaged in civil rights struggles, I would not be here in this laboratory. I mean, how many Black women have had the good fortune to write more than thirty books? When I wake up at four or five in the morning, I do my prayers and meditations, and then I have what I call my “study hours.” I try to read a book a day, a nonfiction book, and then I get to read total trash for the rest of the day. That’s luxury, that’s privilege of a high order—the privilege to think critically, and then the privilege to be able to act on what you know.

**G. Y.:** Absolutely. You’ve talked about how theory can function as a place of healing. Can you say more about that?

**b. h.:** I always start with children. Most children are amazing critical thinkers before we silence them. I think that theory is essentially a way to make sense of the world. As a gifted child growing up in a dysfunctional family, where giftedness was not appreciated, what held me above water was the idea of thinking through, “Why are Mom and Dad the way they are?” And those are questions that are at the heart of critical thinking. And that’s why I think critical thinking and theory can be such a source of healing. It moves us forward. And, of course, I don’t know about other thinkers and writers, but I have the good fortune every day of my life to have somebody contacting me, either on the streets or by mail, telling me about how my work has changed their life, how it has enabled them to go forward. And what greater gift to be had as a thinker-theorist, than that?

**G. Y.:** How do you prevent yourself from being seduced by that? I think that there is that temptation by intellectuals/scholars, who are well known, to be seduced into a state of narcissism. How do you resist that?

**b. h.:** First of all, I live in a city of twelve thousand people where most of them don’t have a clue about who bell hooks is for the most part, or where someone asks, “Is bell hooks a person?” There is humility in the life that I lead, because one thing about having my given name, Gloria Jean, which is such a great Appalachian hillbilly name, is that I’m not walking around in my daily life usually as bell hooks. I’m walking around in the dailiness of my life as just the ordinary Gloria Jean. That’s changing a bit in the little town that I live

in because more of me as a thinker, writer, and artist is coming out into the world of the town that I live in.

I think that I've been coming out more and more in the fact that the work that I'm writing is about spirituality, because one of the central aspects that has kept me grounded in my life has been spirituality. Growing up, when my mom used to tell me, "You're really smart, but you're not better than anyone else," I used to think, "Why does she go on about that?" And, of course, now I see why. It was to keep me grounded and to keep me respecting the different ways of knowing and the knowledges of other people, and not thinking "Oh, I am *so* smart," which I think can happen to many well-known intellectuals.

I always kind of chuckle at people labeling me a public intellectual. I chuckle because people used to say, "How have you written so much?" and I'd say, "By not having a life." There is nothing public about the energy, the discipline, and solitude it takes to produce so much writing. I think of public intellectuals as very different, because I think that they're airing their work for that public engagement. Really, in all the years of my writing, that was not my intention. It was to produce theory that people could use. I have this phrase that I use, 'working with the work.' So if somebody comes up to me, and they have one of those bell hooks books that's abused and battered, and every page is underlined, I know they've been working with the work. And that's where it is for me.

**G. Y.:** Is there a connection between teaching as a space of healing and your understanding of love?

**b. h.:** Well, I believe whole-heartedly that the only way out of domination is love, and the only way into really being able to connect with others, and to know how to be, is to be participating in every aspect of your life as a sacrament of love, and that includes teaching. I don't do a lot of teaching these days. I am semiretired. Because, like any act of love, it takes a lot of your energy.

I was just talking with a neighbor about what it feels like to be working at a need-based college like Berea, where none of our students pay tuition, and many of them come from the hills of Appalachia. We often get discouraged any time we feel that our college isn't living up to its history of integration and of racial inclusion. But then we'd see we have students who are doing such amazing things, from the hills of Virginia, or Tennessee. You just know, I am right where I am meant to be, doing what I should be doing, and giving and receiving the love that comes anytime we do that work well.

**G. Y.:** You've conceptualized love as the opposite of estrangement. Can you say something about that?

**b. h.:** When we engage love as action, you can't act without connecting. I often think of that phrase, *only connect*. In terms of white supremacy right now, for instance, the police stopped me a few weeks ago here in Berea, because I was doing something wrong. I initially felt fear, and I was thinking about the fact

that in all of my sixty-some years of my life in this country, I have never felt afraid of policemen before, but I feel afraid now. He was just total sweetness. And yet I thought, what a horrible change in our society that that level of estrangement has taken place that was not there before.

I know that the essential experience of Black men and women has always been different, but from the time I was a girl to now, I never thought the police were my enemy. Yet, what Black woman witnessing the incredible abuse of Sandra Bland can't shake in her boots if she's being stopped by the police? When I was watching that video, I was amazed the police didn't shoot her on the spot! White supremacist white people are crazy.

I used to talk about patriarchy as a mental illness of disordered desire, but white supremacy is equally a serious and profound mental illness, and it leads people to do completely and utterly insane things. I think one of the things that is going on in our society is the normalization of mental illness, and the normalization of white supremacy, and the evocation and the spreading of this is part of that mental illness. So remember that we are a culture in crisis. Our crisis is as much a spiritual crisis as it is a political crisis, and that's why Martin Luther King Jr. was so profoundly prescient in describing how the work of love would be necessary to have a transformative impact.

**G. Y.:** And of course, that doesn't mean that you don't find an important place in your work for rage, as in your book *Killing Rage*?

**b. h.:** Oh, absolutely. The first time that I got to be with Thich Nhat Hanh, I had just been longing to meet him. I was like, I'm going to meet this incredibly holy man. On the day that I was going to him, every step of the way I felt that I was encountering some kind of racism or sexism. When I got to him, the first thing out of my mouth was "I am *so angry!*" And he, of course, Mr. Calm himself, Mr. Peace, said, "Well, you know, hold on to your anger, and use it as compost for your garden." And I thought, "Yes, yes, I can do that!" I tell that story to people all the time. I was telling him about the struggles I was having with my male partner at the time and he said, "It is OK to say I want to kill you, but then you need to step back from that, and remember what brought you to this person in the first place." And I think that if we think of anger as compost, we think of it as energy that can be recycled in the direction of our good. It is an empowering force. If we don't think about it that way, it becomes a debilitating and destructive force.

**G. Y.:** Since you mentioned Sandra Bland, and there are so many other cases that we can mention, how can we use the trauma that Black people are experiencing, or reconfigure that trauma into compost? How can Black people do that? What does that look like therapeutically or collectively?

**b. h.:** We have to be willing to be truthful. And to be truthful, we have to say, the problem that Black people face, the trauma of white supremacy in our lives, is not limited to police brutality. That's just one aspect. I often say that

the issue for young Black males is the street. If you only have the streets, you encounter violence on all sides: Black on Black violence, the violence of addiction, and the violence of police brutality. So the question is why at this stage of our history, with so many wealthy Black people, and so many gifted Black people, is it that we don't provide a place other than the streets for Black males? And it is so gendered, because the street, in an imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, is male, especially when it is dark. There is so much feeling of being lost that it is beyond the trauma of racism. It is the trauma of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, because poverty has become infinitely more violent than it ever was when I was a girl. You lived next door to very poor Black people, but they had very joyful lives. That's not the poverty of today.

**G. Y.:** How is the poverty of today different?

**b. h.:** Let's face it, one of the things white people gave us when they gave us integration was full access to the tormenting reality of desire, and the expectation of constant consumption. So part of the difference of poverty today is this sort of world of fantasy—fantasizing that you'll win the lottery, fantasizing that money will come. I always cling to Lorraine Hansberry's Mama saying in *A Raisin in the Sun*, "Since when did money become life?" I think that with the poverty of my growing up that I lived with and among, we were always made to feel like money is not what life is all about. That's the total difference for everyone living right now, because most people in our culture believe money is everything. That is the big tie, the connecting tie to Black, white, Hispanic, native people, Asian people—the greed and the materialism that we all invest in and share.

**G. Y.:** When you make that claim, I can see some readers saying that bell is pathologizing Black spaces.

**b. h.:** As I said, we have normalized mental illness in this society. So it's not the pathologizing of Black spaces; it's saying that the majority of cultural spaces in our society are infused with pathology. That's why it's so hard to get out of it, because it has become the culture that is being fed to us every day. None of us can escape it unless we do so by conscious living and conscious loving, and that's become harder for everybody. I don't have a problem stating the fact that trauma creates wounds, and most of our wounds are not healed as African-Americans. We're not really different in that way from all the others who are wounded. Let's face it—wounded white people frequently can cover up their wounds, because they have greater access to material power.

I find it fascinating that every day you go to the supermarket, and you look at the people, and you look at us, and you look at all of this media that is parading the sorrows and the mental illnesses of the white rich in our society. And it's like everybody just skips over that. Nobody would raise the question, "Why don't we pathologize the rich?" We actually believe that they suffer

from mental illness, and that they deserve healing. The issue for us as Black people is that very few people feel that we deserve healing. Which is why we have very few systems that promote healing in our lives. The primary system that ever promoted healing in Black people is the church, and we see what is going on in most churches today. They've become an extension of that material greed.

One of the reasons for why so many Black rebel antiracist movements failed is because they didn't take care of the home as a site of resistance.

**G. Y.:** As you shared being stopped by police, I thought of your book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, where you describe whiteness as a site of terror. Has that changed for you?

**b. h.:** I don't think that has changed for most Black people. That particular essay, "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," talks about whiteness, the Black imagination, and how many of us live in fear of whiteness. And I emphasize the story about the policeman because, for many of us, that fear of whiteness has intensified. I think that white people, for the most part, never think about Black people wanting to be in Black-only spaces, because we do not feel safe.

In my last book, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, I really wanted to raise and problematize the question: Where do we feel safe as Black people? I definitely return to the home as a place of spiritual possibility, home as a holy place.

I bought my current house from a conservative white male capitalist who lives across the street from me, and I'm so happy in my little home. I tell people, when I open the doors of my house, it's like these arms come out, and they're just embracing me. I think that is part of our radical resistance to the culture of domination. I know that I'm not who he imagined in this little house. He imagined a nice white family with two kids, and I think on some level it was very hard for him to sell his house to a radical Black woman, a radical Black feminist woman. I think all of us, in terms of houses, have our idea, when we love our home, of who we want to be in it. But I think Black folks in general across class have to restore that sense of resistance in the home.

When we look at the history of antiracist rebels among Black people, so much organizing happened in people's homes. I always think about Mary McLeod Bethune: "Let's just start the college in your living room." Self-determination really does begin at home. We're finding out that one of the reasons for why so many Black rebel antiracist movements failed is because they didn't take care of the home as a site of resistance. So, you have very wounded people trying to lead movements in a world beyond the home, but they were simply not psychologically fit to lead.

**G. Y.:** That's an important segue to the question about your concept of "soul healing" with respect to Black men. What does soul healing among Black men



look like? And what role do you think Black women play in helping to nurture that soul healing?

**b. h.:** Every now and then, George, I write a book that hardly anyone pays any attention to. One such book in my life is my book on Black masculinity, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. An aspect of that book that I found deeply moving is when I use the metaphor of Isis and Osiris. Osiris is attacked, and his body parts are spread all over. Isis, the stern mother, sister, and lover, goes and fetches those parts and puts him back together again. That sort of metaphor of harmony and friction that can be soul-healing for Black people is so real to me. Often I feel sad, because I think we are in a culture that keeps Black men and women further apart from one another, rather than meeting us in that place of shared history, shared story.

I am so grateful for the Black male friends in my life. Like so many professional Black women, I don't have a partner. I would like to have one, but I've been grateful for having conscious, caring, Black male comrades and friends, who keep me from any kind of integration of Black masculinity, who just keep me in this space of loving Blackness.

To have that kind of bonding is precious. These are the constructive moments of our time, and they're not televised. When Malcolm X said we have to see each other with new eyes, I think that's where self-determination begins and how we are with one another. Let's face it, so many Black males and females have suffered mental abandonment, and more than police brutality, that's the core for many of us of our trauma. Betrayal is always about abandonment. And many of us have been emotionally abandoned. These are the wounds we have yet to correctly attend to so both Black children and biracial children can have the opportunity to truly care for themselves in a way that's optimal for all.

**G. Y.:** How are your Buddhist practices and your feminist practices mutually reinforcing?

**b. h.:** Well, I would have to say my Buddhist Christian practice challenges me, as does feminism. Buddhism continues to inspire me because there is such an emphasis on practice. What are you doing? Right livelihood, right action. We are back to that self-interrogation that is so crucial. It's funny that you would link Buddhism and feminism, because I think one of the things that I'm grappling with at this stage of my life is how much of the core grounding in ethical-spiritual values has been the solid ground on which I stood. That ground is from both Buddhism and Christianity, and then feminism that helped me as a young woman to find and appreciate that ground. The spirituality piece came up for me in my love of Beat poetry. I came to Buddhism through the Beats, through Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac—they all sort of gave me this other space of groundedness.

I talk about spirituality more now than ever before, because I see my students suffering more than ever before, especially women students who feel like so much is expected of them. They've got to be the equals of men, but then they've got to be submissive if they are heteronormative; they have to find a partner. It's just so much demand that has led them to depression, to addiction, or suicide. And it's amazing how spirituality grounds them.

Feminism does not ground me. It is the discipline that comes from spiritual practice that is the foundation of my life. If we talk about what a disciplined writer I have been and hope to continue to be, that discipline starts with a spiritual practice. It's just every day, every day, every day.



# Patricia Hill Collins

**George Yancy:** Speak to the contemporary importance of Black feminist thought and its relevance to making our society aware of the *intersectional* dimensions of Black women's oppression.

**Patricia Hill Collins:** Black feminist thought centers on a few simple ideas. At its essence, Black feminist thought examines how Black women's ideas, experiences and actions reflect their social location within racism, sexism, class exploitation and similar intersecting systems of oppression. These intersecting oppressions structure social inequalities, which in turn result in specific social issues such as wage inequality, stereotypical and demeaning media images, limited educational opportunities, and differential access to health services. Because individuals, as well as the social groups to which they belong, are differentially positioned within power relations, their analyses of, experiences with and actions in response to social inequalities vary greatly. Drawing from the distinctive social location of African-American women at the intersection of racism, class exploitation, sexism, and heterosexism as systems of power, Black feminism argues that trying to address the social problems that Black women encounter through mono-categorical lenses is inadequate.

In the United States, Black feminism has highlighted the particular intersections of race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality. Yet within this broader intersectional framework, race and racism constitute foundational systems that, by law or by custom, have regulated everything from where African-American women could live, the schools they attend, the opportunities they encounter, to whether they could keep their children. Black feminist thought thus brings a more complex view of racism to the forefront of analysis, as well as how a more complex understanding of racism might shape social problems and solutions to them. Yet the core ideas of Black feminist thought concerning intersecting power relations, complex forms of social inequality

and the particularities of social problems can be and have been broadly applied. Specifically, the saliency of particular intersecting power relations reflects particular histories. Across diverse social contexts, varying combinations of ethnicity, religion, age, and nationality are all possible.

Many people think that Black feminist thought is primarily for and about African-American women. Black women are at the center of Black feminism, yet the ideas of Black feminist thought have travelled far beyond the forms they've taken within the US context. The term *intersectionality* has been closely associated with US Black feminism, in part because African-American women have consistently advanced this interpretive framework as a way of thinking more expansively about inequality. Yet intersectionality is applicable beyond the experiences of African-American women. The tools of intersectional analysis, with its emphasis on intersecting systems of power as foundational to social justice, appear within such contexts as diverse as global Human Rights initiatives, within social media, across academic fields, as well as within policy venues.

Rather than seeing Black women primarily as victims of oppression, a broader intersectional lens also examines Black women's actions as political actors in resisting multiple oppressions. Black feminism exists not simply to document oppression, but also to do something about it. Rather than being a victim-claiming discourse that teaches Black women how oppressed they really are, Black feminism aims to empower Black women by showing all the ways that Black women have resisted oppression.

Black women's resistance to intersecting oppressions can take multiple forms. It can be something as simple as my mother's insistence that I needed to go to school every day. She convinced me that reading was fundamental and that, although she didn't say it, words could serve as powerful weapons against racism and sexism. Through their activities as mothers, artists, grandmothers, teachers, community other-mothers, intellectuals, and leaders, numerous Black women have taken on the task of nurturing children of African descent and carrying the weight for assaults on Black populations. For example, African-American women who show a powerful commitment to their families in the face of policies of the mass incarceration of their sons, brothers, and grandsons exemplify this resistance. Most understand on some level how power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality coalesce in shaping not only their own experiences as African-American women but also those around them.

**G. Y.:** In your book, *Black Feminist Thought*, you write, "One key feature about the treatment of Black women in the nineteenth century was how their bodies were objects of display. In the antebellum American South white men did not have to look at pornographic pictures of women because they could become voyeurs of Black women on the auction block." In the various ways in which Tennis player Serena Williams, for example, has been the object of racist and

sexist caricature, one might argue that she has been returned to a symbolic “auction block” despite her success and athletic genius. In what ways do you think Black women, in the twenty-first century, continue to be objects of sexual oppression?

**P. H. C.:** Because I don’t routinely separate out racial oppression and sexual oppression, it’s hard to parse out the specific effects of sexism. I’ll begin to answer this question by examining how the body politics that construct ideas about Black femininity and Black masculinity are central to intersecting systems of oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Privileged, straight white men encounter a distinctive form of body politics that ironically disembodies them by attributing characteristics such as intelligence and leadership ability to those inhabiting these idealized white, straight male bodies. People of color and women encounter a different body politics, one that attributes characteristics such as lack of intelligence, hypersexuality, and a lack of leadership ability to those who are ostensibly ruled by their female and/or colored bodies. An intersectional framework provides a more finely-tuned analysis of how diverse social locations contribute to the different body politics.

For example, young African-American men and women living in poor or working-class urban neighborhoods encounter an historically specific form of body politics that reflects their placement within intersecting oppressions—how police, teachers, social workers, and judges perceive the bodies of young Black people contributes to the gender-specific treatment they receive. The easiest way to see the workings of body politics is to consider changing places with someone who inhabits a different body. How many white men would consider changing places with Black women, or Black straight men with Black lesbians? Would they recognize themselves as the person they understand themselves to be if their lived experiences occurred a different body?

Like most African-American women, for reasons of survival, Serena Williams has developed her own interpretations of the body politics that permeate racism, sexism, heterosexism and class exploitation. In this context, the issue of representations of Serena Williams is more complex than her being watched on an auction block by consumers who fetishize her body as a pornographic object. Certainly some viewers will do this, but contemporary mass media has facilitated new understandings of auction blocks and viewers who enjoy them as entertainment. In *Black Feminist Thought*, I wrote about the power of controlling images that aim to influence how we think about each other’s and our own bodies. Controlling images are most effective when they create pornographic representations of African-Americans that in turn dehumanize Black people. Yet African-American women who are armed with an analysis of how controlling images work in shaping our daily experiences often bring different analyses to the same set of images and, via these oppositional interpretations, undercut the power of controlling images.

The case of actual Black people who were displayed on auction blocks during slavery and of representations of Black people within contemporary mass media spectacles of sports in particular resemble one another, yet they are not the same. First, Serena Williams and her sister, Venus Williams retain their agency in how they take the stage. Over the course of their careers, they have consistently worked to strip the tennis court of its power to function as a “symbolic auction block.” Venus and Serena Williams reject the uniformity of tennis whites, choosing instead bright colors, unusual outfits, and ostensibly black hairstyles such as African-influenced beads and colorful weaves. The Williams sisters have rejected the social scripts of how women tennis players should look and perform. Neither Venus nor Serena can hide the fact that they are Black women, nor do they try. They are strong and athletic. And they win. There’s visible agency in all of their choices. This was not the case for enslaved African women. The important idea here is that ideas and images do not “make” anyone do anything. Society may provide social scripts and derogatory interpretations of how Black women are supposed to look and act if they want to be successful. Yet it’s up to Black women whether we choose to believe and act on them.

Second, by claiming control over her own image while on the court, Serena Williams demonstrates her resistance to longstanding body politics in women’s tennis. We will never know with certainty how the women on the actual auction block felt about their nakedness and treatment and what strategies they deployed to protect their dignity. Yet, because the awareness of always being under surveillance has long been a core theme within Black feminist thought, we do know much about how contemporary African-American women use the inordinate attention given to their bodies in public space. The Williams sisters have broken new ground in women’s tennis, but they are not alone. Popular culture icons such as Nicki Minaj, Viola Davis, Beyoncé Knowles, and Janelle Monae all claim their representations in public space and use that space differently. Behind the scenes, the cultural production of African-American women artists and filmmakers such as Shonda Rhimes turn traditional scripts concerning Black womanhood on their heads. Serena Williams is but one figure in this universe of African-American women who lay claim to representational space.

Third, Serena did not prevail in women’s tennis as a solitary individual. Venus and Serena Williams both competed and won. Neither could be discredited as the exceptional individual—here were *two* exceptional individuals. I suspect that because they had each other, the Williams sisters were better able to ward off the crippling effects of hypersurveillance and the negative treatment both encountered during their long and stellar careers. Serena’s success is her own, but she did not do it alone. Moreover, Serena and Venus Williams may be sisters, but they are also quite different from one another. As individuals, they each unsettle notions of the exceptional Black woman who

must hew to one set of standards for acceptance. Each sister is the exception to the rule that the other seemingly invokes.

The case of the Williams sisters suggests that Black women's resistance to oppression generally, and the hypersurveillance of mass media venues, can occur in public areas with longstanding rules of body politics. There is something empowering about knowing the history of one's group, because it helps make sense of the present. For example, Venus and Serena Williams play championship tennis in part because they are talented, work hard, and show a passion for their sport, and in part because they are mentally equipped to reject the "symbolic auction block." But as young Black women, they knew that they would be judged by a different set of standards. They seemingly learned not to take the racism and sexism that they experienced personally because the differential treatment they received had little to do with them as individuals. In this context, their brilliance within women's tennis by challenging the body politics of championship tennis has also redefined representations of excellence.

**G. Y.:** Define how you understand an Afrocentric feminist perspective and how it functions as a critical framework for resisting and fighting against such oppressive assumptions about Black women.

**P. H. C.:** I don't use the term 'Afrocentric feminist perspective' any more, in part, because the term 'Afrocentric' became redefined and subsequently devalued in the 1990s in ways that didn't resemble my understanding of the concept. My original use referred to cultural continuities that were taken up differently by people of African descent in a diasporic context in response to heterogeneous experiences with colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. This usage positions African-American women's experiences in relationship to those of Black women in the Caribbean, Latin America, especially Brazil, continental Africa, and Black diasporic populations in Europe. It focuses on how culture can empower and draws upon the work of complex approaches to culture of Frantz Fanon and similar anticolonial theorists. In the face of structural oppressions, culture can become a weapon, but it can also become a confining straightjacket if understood as a static bundle of performed traditions. Unfortunately some strands of Afrocentric thinking in the US embraced static notions of black authenticity that manufactured ideas about a glorious African past that was more imagined than real. Unfortunately, these strands also incorporated patriarchal and heterosexist ideas that I categorically reject.

I also have moved away from the phrase because my own thinking has evolved, in part because Black feminists in the late twentieth century were successful in carving out a space for Black feminist thought; and in part because poststructuralist social theory offered a set of conceptual tools for examining constructed social realities generally, and the meaning of Blackness. In my earlier work, I was concerned with the political difficulties of carving out a



clear space for African-American women to do intellectual work. Racism operated by categorizing Black women as inferior and then dismissing our ideas and experiences. We had to create the conditions that made our own intellectual production possible. I wrote the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought* in that narrow context. In contrast, the current expansive space enjoyed by contemporary Black women to critically engage a host of issues speaks to the success of earlier struggles for voice.

One no longer has to refute claims that anything associated with Blackness is worthless. Now there is space to analyze varying understandings of Blackness, including Afrocentric approaches. I now see Blackness as a political category, one that carries cultural meaning but that cannot be reduced to culture itself. The idea of Blackness is clearly tied to racism—there were no populations of actual Black people before slavery, colonialism and imperialism. The varying ethnicities of African descent carried distinctive names and cultures. Blackness emerges in the context of white supremacy, yet has never been a mere reaction to racism. Instead, Blackness has carried, since its inception, inherently political meanings. By queering categories of power, poststructuralism provides a vocabulary for examining hegemonic understandings of Blackness and how Black people shape interpretations of Blackness from one context to the next. Given the scope of lived experience with white supremacy and the depth of intellectual tools that are now available, performing some version of an authentic Afrocentric identity grounded in a cultural African identity seems ill equipped to handle contemporary social problems.

Cultural continuities, an idea that is central to Afrocentric analysis, are important. Yet when it comes to understanding Blackness as a political entity, continuities of Black social movements and of Black activism may be even more significant. A new generation of Black women has made real strides in applying Black feminism to contemporary social, economic and political challenges. The field of Black women's studies has progressed to the point where a new generation of young Black women embrace heterogeneous understandings of Blackness, including Afrocentrism, and use the tools of Black feminism to shape their contemporary political activism. Many of these women have moved beyond misguided views that view feminism as the property of white women or Afrocentrism as the litmus test for authentic Black womanhood. The idea of women's empowerment expressed within transnational feminism is rapidly putting the white/Black version of feminism honed within a US- or European-based race-relations framework to rest. In its place, a Black feminism that embraces a critical intersectional framework has the potential to offer much in challenging not only African-American women's oppression but also global injustices. Political resistance to social injustice as understood through intersectional frameworks is emerging as one important dimension of a Black diasporic feminism that is actively engaged in decolonizing thought and practice.

In the US, the emergence of visible political activism by young African-American women and their allies caught many by surprise. The tremendous growth of grassroots organizations for social justice such as the Black Youth Project 100 in Chicago or the Black Lives Matter Movement speaks to the aspirations of a new generation of Black people for equity and equality. Yet media coverage of this activism routinely depicts African-American women as the penultimate victims of police brutality, poor schooling, and limited job opportunities and looks to men as leaders of social movement organizations. In this context, intersectionality serves as a corrective to either/or thinking that reduces complex ideas to a matter of simple choice of race over gender or vice versa. Stated differently, elevating Black men above Black women, or straight Black people above LGBTQ people is unlikely to bring social justice to anyone.

Today, the Black Lives Matter movement is still in its infancy. Yet its four-year emergence in 2012 from a hashtag responding to the death of Trayvon Martin to its organizational responses to urban unrest in Ferguson, Missouri (2014) and Baltimore, Maryland (2015), shows its commitment to resisting and fighting public policies and representations that derogate Black people. Moreover, since African-American women constitute a substantial part of this movement, both as participants in local struggles and as leaders of grassroots initiatives and the national organization, the Black Lives Matter movement exemplifies the ways in which intersectionality contributes to contemporary Black feminist projects.

**G. Y.:** Speaking of the Black Lives Matter movement, what do we say to mothers of Black sons who constantly fear the possibility that their sons could be another Trayvon Martin or Tamir Rice? It seems to be that mothers of Black sons are experiencing forms of trauma that will need to be addressed.

**P. H. C.:** I think the issue is less what the assumed “we” of academics, policy makers, community leaders, or political pundits say *to* Black women, women of color, mothers of Black children, poor people, and similarly located groups who care about Black youth, than what this group can say to the seeming experts about the routinized violence that targets Black youth. The experts on any given topic, in this case, the challenges that face the mothers of Black sons, or daughters for that matter, need not be the army of academics who have claimed expertise about race, gender, family, trauma, and a host of topics. The cottage industry of pundits on talk radio and television are not much help either. My sense of the Black Lives Matter movement, for all its heterogeneity and growing pains, is that everyday people who embrace the projects that are the bedrock of the Black Lives Matter movement recognize that they are the “experts” on their own lives. They exemplify identity politics, the idea of critically analyzing and speaking from the specifics of one’s social location, that constitutes one fundamental tenet of Black feminism itself.

The Black Lives Matter movement challenges the social hierarchies that produce experts and victims in order to build new intellectual and political communities. Black feminist thought and intersectionality thus directly influence the Black Lives Matter movement. An intersectional framework is rarely decontextualized—one need be neither a mother nor African-American to be concerned about the precarious status of Black boys and youth in the United States. Mothers of Black boys are front-line actors and, as such, have a distinctive standpoint on the challenges that face their sons. The question is more one of who has their backs, not whose latest book on their lives reaches the *New York Times* best-seller list.

The vast majority of Black boys are raised by their Black mothers, but not all Black youth live in African American families. Many Black youth are raised by their grandparents, their fathers, other relatives, the state or are in foster care. Still other Black youth live in multiracial, multiethnic families. Despite this variability, Black mothers not only carry a disproportionate responsibility for protecting their children from racial oppression, they see how racial oppression affects their sons and daughters differently. Charged with helping their children live to adulthood, Black mothers confront the vulnerabilities that their LGBTQ children face. Some Black mothers living in poverty have gone under, whereas others have found a way to “make a way out of no way.” African-American mothers of Black children can draw on prior generations’ experiences with navigating the challenges of white supremacy—Black mothers have always had to fear for our children.

Black children and youth in the US, especially those who are poor and working class and who live in urban areas, experience overt or subtle forms of macro- or microaggressions that limit their opportunities. Regardless of social class, Black youth are pressured to go to their assigned places. Adolescent boys and young men on the street encounter a heightened and often tragic version of these general social relations. Specifically, differential policing contributes to their being far more likely to have criminal records than other groups, and to be injured or killed by police. Adolescent girls and young women are differently vulnerable; they encounter gender-specific yet equally harmful mechanisms of enforcement. Sexual assault of young Black girls in private spaces of families, churches, and communities, often by the very people who should be protecting them, can leave wounds that are just as damaging as the bruises on young Black men who have been victimized by the police. Many African-American mothers sense these dangers that lie ahead for their children.

Albeit a much smaller group, White mothers of Black and/or biracial children encounter a different set of issues, especially those who are middle class. White, middle-class mothers are more likely to have resources that provide important forms of protection for their children, yet neither white parents nor money provide the full level of protection of having white skin. Many white mothers are surprised by the differential albeit often more subtle treatment

their Black and/or biracial children receive, even in the best of neighborhoods and schools. The same gender-specific processes affect their children, not because people actively discriminate against them. Rather, the seemingly hardwired residue of racism makes their children vulnerable as well. The fact of Blackness in the US means that if you are obviously identifiable as Black, Latino, and/or Muslim, if you are young, and male, and are in the wrong place at the wrong time, you are at risk.

When will American adults begin to see that the current treatment of children constitutes a failure of the democratic possibilities of the American Dream? Placing Black children in the precarious position of fearing for their lives from one generation to the next impoverishes us all. No child should live in fear and poverty; the fact that children do so in a global context, especially children of color, is more than a trauma for those who love them—it is a tragedy.

**G. Y.:** You've discussed the importance of love in reference to the work of June Jordan, Katie G. Cannon, and Toni Morrison. What does political work look like when it is fueled by love?

**P. H. C.:** My comments about the kinds of advocacy we must do on behalf of Black children and youth, children and youth of color, and children living in poverty stems from this kind of deep love. The notion of privatized love, of seeing one's own child as one's own private property to do with whatever one wishes, contributes to a host of social problems.

I aim to draw upon traditions among African-American women of caring for the community's children, a commitment to youth and the next generation that is fueled by a form of love. I remain awed by what Black women have and can do on behalf of children. This is a politics that stems not solely from the intellect, but from the heart. It can be a focused, razor-sharp analysis where a Black mother confronts an uninformed and unsympathetic teacher because her child's future is at stake; or acts of organized political activism, as is the case in the work of Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and other important yet-lesser-known figures of the Civil Rights Movement. Neither romantic nor sentimental, this kind of love is fueled by a passion for social justice.

The problem is that far too few of us go above and beyond what is expected. This kind of love can easily slide into exploitation, one where everyone expects African-American women to take care of others before they care for themselves, with little reciprocity in mind. I am heartened to hear the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement raise issues of self-care. They realize that they cannot continue their political work that is grounded in this kind of love without the support of allies, friends, colleagues, and communities; they cannot sustain political work that is not fueled by love.

**G. Y.:** You've also talked about the importance of spirituality. In *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice*, you write, "Spirituality broadly

defined continues to move countless African-American women like Sojourner Truth to struggle in everyday life.”<sup>1</sup> In what way does spirituality play a role within your scholarship, your life?

**P. H. C.:** There are many forms of spirituality, some religiously inspired, others less so. The term ‘spirituality’ is not one that I apply to my everyday life or to my scholarship. I have a deep respect for people who manage to claim forms of spirituality that work for them, yet when it comes to my work, I aim to retain space that can accommodate womanist theologians, Muslim clerics, Christian evangelicals and atheists. Any system of ideas that so powerfully draws people into political engagement cannot be uncritically censured and condemned or, alternately, uncritically followed as truth.

I do think that living by ethical principles is important and that this notion of ethics differs from general understandings of spirituality. Stated differently, I see a third space between the secularism of the the academy and the religiosity of oppressed peoples who often call upon a Supreme Being to get through times of trouble. In my own work, I rely on a short list of ethical principles to shape my everyday decision-making. Social justice is one of them. I’m especially drawn to Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Pauli Murray, and similar Black women intellectual-activists who have expressed a passion for justice. The idea of justice was not a philosophical construct, but was something that permeated their everyday lives. They breathed life into the idea of social justice by the actions they took in their everyday lives. This perspective draws upon experience as the crucible for testing beliefs. I see ethical work as neither a dogma of applying a theology or ideology to society and following the rules, nor as a way of working that is untethered from ethical considerations.

**G. Y.:** What are some conceptual gaps and problems vis-à-vis the sociological imagination that you would like to see critically engaged when it comes to the issue of race in America. Of course, I’m thinking of race through an intersectional lens.

**P. H. C.:** Quite frankly, the US has a wonderful vision of what society should be. Equity and opportunity—it’s that simple for me and, most likely, for many new immigrant populations who strive to come to America despite significant personal or financial cost. People want to live in a society with opportunities, and they want those opportunities to be fairly distributed. Yet because the denial of both opportunity and equity in the US fosters intergenerational social inequalities, participatory democracy in the US is potentially unstable and most likely unsustainable. Despite the specific topics we study, the broader issue of social justice should inform our sociological imaginations. No one has all the answers because no one can see the myriad configurations of the social problems that accompany social injustice.

No one wins within a society characterized by bitter partisan politics that pits one political party against the other; or who engages in endless arguments

to rank *either racism or sexism or class exploitation* as a more fundamental oppression; or the frontier mentality in some urban neighborhoods that pressures twelve-year-olds of color to choose their gang colors for safe passage to a failing public school. Holding fast to a worldview of winners and losers makes losers of us all.

The way forward regarding racism in America lies, in part, in critically analyzing our most cherished assumptions about what we think we know to be true. For many people living in the US, our media experiences are far more desegregated than anything we experience in everyday life. Intersectionality can help with this. No one wants to be wrong, but sometimes we are. We'll never know how wrong or right our ideas actually are until we listen to alternative perspectives. Remaining within insulated social groups with threadbare explanations that doing so protects our children, or that we just want to be with our kind of people ring hollow. Refusing to settle for the status quo and imagining something different, or at least believing in the possibility of such, begins with individual commitment to critical thinking.

The way forward regarding racism in America lies in choosing to commit to building something new. We have to commit to something bigger than ourselves. People of color have a long history of being on the front lines of antiracist projects, primarily because our safety and futures depend on it. African-Americans who want to see our children and grandchildren not only survive but also thrive know we cannot do it alone. Like the Black mothers discussed earlier, we do this work without expectation of praise or acknowledgement. I would like to see an army of quiet, committed, everyday activists, who get up every day and try to do the right thing, especially when no one is looking.

## NOTE

1. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 247.



## Hortense Spillers

**George Yancy:** In perhaps your most frequently cited essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” you discuss how, as a marked woman, you are nominated as “Peaches,” “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire,” “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” a “Miss Ebony First,” and so on. Within this context, you show, quite powerfully, that Black women have been stereotyped through a certain racist and masculinist discourse or grammar. Since the publication of that essay in 1987, in what ways has that grammar book expanded? In what ways are Black women or women of color still overdetermined by what you call “nominative properties”?

**Hortense Spillers:** My genuine surprise is that the picture whose outlines were rather starkly clear to me in 1987 has not been radically displaced or replaced by a different synthesis of discursive elements. Even though the public image horde of faces has been multiplied across the color line—in the movies, on television, and in other symptoms of media presence, i.e., cyberspace—the fundamental “grammars” of interracial relations and exchange still mandate “Blackness” as social deficit. We know this primarily by way of the acute outbreak of racist pathology that has shadowed and accompanied the presidency of Barack Obama; that it is still possible to draw him in malicious effigy and to mock the features of the First Lady as an exercise in denegation; that police brutality not only persists, but appears to have increased to the point of deliberate systematicity and provocation. All of this suggests, to my mind, that the mechanisms of public relations and belonging that situate individuals in the general economy of citizenship have not been sufficiently altered or even challenged. It is simply not enough that Black names and faces have been “added” to the national imaginary so much so that they are now no longer “alien” to the dream life of the nation, but whether or not such appearances have reconfigured the scale of value—in other words, the count or account in *quantity*



must be subtended by a respect of persons that would disallow the everyday re-embrace of toxic misnaming. The fraternity jingle concocted by the frat boys at the University of Oklahoma recently lends a case in point—one can say such things just as a matter of course!

**G. Y.:** The point that you raise about First Lady Michelle Obama is an important one. She has also been caricatured as a male. I'm also reminded of what Shamil Tarpishev, Russian president of the Tennis Federation, said regarding the Williams sisters. He referred to them as "the Williams brothers" and said that it is "frightening" to play against them. Here we've got the masculinization of Black women's bodies in the twenty-first century, which perpetuates forms of toxic misnaming. Is this way of denigrating Black women's bodies still implicated in the nineteenth-century assumptions of the Cult of True Womanhood, especially with respect to the denial of any measure of "femininity" to Black women?

**H. S.:** Something quite peculiar has taken place: the "Cult of True Womanhood" no longer fits the ambitions of any American demographic, I would say, but its values have been absorbed into the national imaginary in such a way that the old "cult" has generated powerful surrogates that perform overtime. Today's "powerful" female, or "power" woman, is all the more fetching and seductive because she is presented *contrastively* to the outgoing "feminine mystique." As far as I can tell, African-American women, as a national demographic, do not participate in this mythos, or myth-making, except as a glaring absence. When one speaks of, or thinks of, women "overcoming," they usually do not mean Black women at all. It just occurred to me again that the major beneficiaries of the Civil Rights era, or we could say, the major "subjects" or "symptoms" of the Civil Rights era, which I'd say runs from 1948 (and Truman's Executive Order that mandated the desegregation of the armed forces of the United States), through the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court case in 1954, to the presidential election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, were Black men and white women. Relatedly, the measure of the nation's success as an open and assimilative engine is determined by these subjects' access to the public sphere. Supposedly, one relinquishes "femininity" in achieving public standing, but it seems to me that it is precisely the *denial* of the feminine that rethreads it because one can now appreciate the "new" woman only insofar as she repeats the "old" one, *by contrast, by contradiction*. There seems to me an element of deep erotic (and male?) pleasure attached to this reel of a "wonder woman" with beautiful tits, or a queen in armor, wielding it over the guys in her band as a "femme fatal." It only appears to be female empowerment, while in truth it is a delicious disguise that fools no one, although we pretend to be deceived. And that's part of the fun, of the joke, that a critically emancipatory scheme has sadly become.

**G. Y.:** As you put it, this toxic misnaming is also evident in the racist chant that was captured on video of members of the University of Oklahoma's Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter where "nigger" is used and where there is reference to lynching Black people. Say more about how you see anti-Black racism as not merely an aberration, but as something far more pervasive and systemic.

**H. S.:** Since Trayvon Martin's murder by a citizen-vigilante, the incidence of Black men shot down by police force seems to have soared. If you ask me, we are in the midst of a veritable pandemic of such killings. Need we be reminded that this pandemic is taking place, despite the fact that there is now a considerable number of Black law enforcement officers across the country and up and down it, that the Department of Justice is currently headed by a Black person, and if Attorney Loretta Lynch is ever confirmed, will continue to be? What does this mean? It is nearly unbearable that perhaps it doesn't mean very much in terms of actual power. We can certainly not say with unalterable conviction that it doesn't mean zip because a Black attorney general does hold tremendous *symbolic* power. But such power has not yet wielded sufficient *real* power enough to stare down anti-Black racism. I cannot get over those US senators and their letter to the Iranian government, for example, or the congressional approval that lent a stage to a foreign prime minister in defiance of the President of the United States. This stuff goes deep, and I cannot for a moment imagine it happening to a Bill Clinton or a Bush, the elder or the younger; the racial antipathy in these cases goes well beyond party and strikes at the very heart of the republic and its constitutional order. The President of the United States takes an oath of office to defend the country against *all enemies, foreign and domestic*. But are we keeping quiet because we're looking an enemy in the face, and it is us? We're quiet because it's true and to do something about it would move our heaven and our earth. That's how deep anti-Black racism is: we can't even talk about it, but only nibble around the edges.

**G. Y.:** I recall US Representative Joe Wilson, though I understand that he apologized, saying to President Obama in 2009 during his health care speech, "You lie!" Is it possible to disconnect this sort of outburst from the exercise of white male power? What does this sort of disrespect say about mere *symbolic* power?

**H. S.:** Actual power strikes fear while symbolic power does not necessarily do so. As I understand it, symbolic power is akin to something nice. One can take it or leave it, while what I am calling actual power or material power has genuine consequences. As far as I remember, nothing about the life of Representative Wilson changed as a result of his outburst. He was neither booted out of office or prosecuted for anything, nor lost life, limb, or income. I'm not necessarily saying that any of that would have been a desirable result in this case, but I am saying that *consequences* matter, and everybody understands that they do, and especially a congressman!

**G. Y.:** If it is true that we are keeping quiet because the enemy is us, what should we be saying? What is it that we should be admitting to ourselves, especially when it comes to the issue of race?

**H. S.:** It's hard to say all at once what we should be saying because there would be too much to try to sum up here. In thinking about an answer to this question, it occurred to me that the crisis of race, as old and time-honored as it is, cannot be "answered" all the time at the place of race, if that makes sense. In other words, certain race matters might be cleared up if we were more conscious about our own lives—what goes into our minds and bodies; James Baldwin says everywhere in his work, especially "Notes of a Native Son,"<sup>1</sup> that white America has a problem with Blackness because it evades and avoids dealing with its own denial of death, its own inability to face its vulnerabilities, its humanness. The determination to confront one's own demons is what I mean by greater consciousness. Racism seems to come out of a profound self-ignorance that expresses itself variously, e.g., a congressman yelling out in public space, the arrogance of power, etc. It also occurs to me that racism is one kind of problem, but actually, there is another and related one that I would call a form of "tribalism," which disorder appears to affect and infect metropolitan police departments in particular. This is an infantile view of the world, really, that demands, indeed *expects*, to find little replicas of itself repeated all over the place. For the "tribalist," the world is no bigger than his den and everybody in it looks like his mama and daddy and sisters and brothers, or ought to, and when they don't, he is disturbed! This family model of gaining access to the world through the assumptions and lenses of one's own family meets neither the requirements of modern living, nor the strenuous cordiality, let's call it, of fellow citizenship; in the latter case, the citizenry does not always, does not most of the time, repeat me, or give me back a friendly or exact image of myself, and coexistence is the game of learning to live with that. We call it "difference," and I suppose that's what it is, but to say difference is to speak about having to accept the dire fact that the world is big, and everybody in it does not know me. But some theorists suggest that learning to live with such ideas is what it means to live in a nation-state, which is not based on ethnicity and race, but rather the *political* idea. For example, American citizenship is not based on race or blood, at least not in its *theory* about itself. In other words, we are *constitutionally* defined, which has nothing to do with the way we look, the color of our skin, what God we serve, etc. The "tribalist" didn't get the memo, however!

**G. Y.:** I think that what Baldwin says is profound and important. So, how do we get white people to love themselves?

**H. S.:** George, if I knew the answer to that one, I'd patent it and retire a rich woman! I really don't know the answer to that question at all. But my guess is that it has something to do with parenting and working at eliminating all the

funky little tyrannies and cruelties that begin, ironically enough, with family at the parental knee! But that's the chicken and the egg debate, isn't it? Better education? Greater self-esteem? I think I can catch hold of this question only *after* the tide comes in: my observation is that predominantly white organizations or units, for example—many of them academic—tolerate a lot of abuse, a great deal of *psychological* violence, carried out by immature actors, or people we'd call "a-holes," really; what we've isolated as "domestic" and "spousal" abuse, mostly directed at women and children, seems to identify a much broader pattern of dominance and timidity and willful surrender that expresses itself as the unhealthy status quo of many of our institutions. Probably wider spread than we realize, the kind of violence I am talking about often finds displacement in debates about the worth and significance of intellectual work, and because our highest value is critical intelligence and the production of knowledge, we often overlook conduct, which we read as "personal" or noninstitutional. The only conduct that we outright invigilate in our precincts is known as "sexual harassment," but it is clearer and clearer to me that there are whole provinces of the ethical that go untended in, for example, administrators' relations to faculty and staff, and in the latter's relations with each other. When this stuff crosses racial lines, you will discover, if you look closely enough, that the racial angle is often only the most visible and dramatic layer of an underlying fault line of fear and malice that racism allows to be staged. I'm certainly not saying that academic institutional racism is not real, but rather that it scratches the surface sometime of a more encompassing dis-ease. If academic white people, as a portion of a much larger human sample, cannot practice charity and intelligence in mutual human contact, then we really shouldn't be all that surprised that greater numbers do not either, those who supposedly don't know any better. I am suggesting that Baldwin was right to maintain that some of the racist cure would have to be sought elsewhere, in combatting the failures of self-love and regard. In racism, one finds distraction from the one subject that he utterly refuses to confront precisely because it is so repulsive to him! Baldwin, however, was no less vigilant and articulate about the spiritual health of Black folk in part because that of white folk was so poor.

**G. Y.:** Given what you've said about Black men and white women, perhaps when it comes to Black women, we need to ask a more specifically intersectional question: Do the lives of Black women, especially *poor Black women*, matter in America?

**H. S.:** The truth is that—and this is my strengthening impression—no one matters in America anymore! That's a far-out statement, but when you think about what's happening to our bought-off, bought-out political class, what I am suggesting gains some force. If you need two billion dollars nowadays to run for presidential office, that means that the office is out of the people's

hands and into the hands of those who can afford to play the game. That is a transformation in American political life that we'd better pay careful attention to. What kind of system is it where those who rule are those who can pay? This has a name, and it is too fearful to repeat. Under such conditions, it might not be ridiculous to say that the posture of poor Black women is representative for any number of others.

**G. Y.:** And, yet, despite the claim that “no one matters in America anymore,” which I think is indicative of moral decay, Black men continue to go missing. As one recent article has shown, “For every 100 Black women not in jail, there are only 83 Black men. The remaining men—1.5 million of them—are, in a sense, missing.”<sup>2</sup> The concept of missing suggests the sense of having been abducted, or missing in action, or having been stolen.

**H. S.:** Yes, you've hit on a key narrative of Black presence in the West and the demographic and other complexities that such presence has assumed over the centuries. But it's interesting to me that what “begins” in abduction, if we think of the slave trade as a sustained story of theft and alienation, continues on this side of Middle Passage; I have often wondered what geographers might tell us if they could guess what the percentages of African losses have been since the fifteenth century when the transatlantic trade opens by way of Lisbon. If I'm not mistaken, this marks a pre-Columbian conjuncture that gathers speed and momentum as time passes, and the African Continent never recovers. I'd be curious to know how this massive human gap might be explained, compared to rates of growth in other parts of the world. I guess I'm asking a kind of counter-intuitive question that defies words, but it goes something like this: all things being equal and correcting for natural and man-made disasters, what would be the number of African peoples on planet Earth today if the transatlantic trade had not happened, or had been definitively interrupted sooner than the early nineteenth century? Closer to home, we wonder what the implications of that missing million and half men might be today—for sure, a lot of people don't get born, but even more importantly, those who do are not always properly nurtured and cared for. In the final analysis, that, to my mind, is the real import of “Black Lives Matter”: in other words, Black life is not spawned or self-generating like amoeba (this seems to have been the idea of slavery), but must actually come into *birth*, and that is a supremely social idea. We can have children, can have generations, but what *happens* to them?

## NOTES

1. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Beacon Press, 1965).
2. Dartagnan, “The Unspoken American Experience: 1,500,000 Missing Black Men,” *Daily Kos*, April 21, 2015, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2015/4/21/1379162/-The-Unspoken-American-Experience-1-500-000-Missing-Black-Men>.

# Joy James

**George Yancy:** There are times when I've asked myself if philosophy can console in times of pain and suffering. Among my friends and colleagues of all races, the killings of Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner and so many others like them have caused emotional pain—feelings of being sick and hurt, feelings of depression, angst, hopelessness. It's crazy.

**Joy James:** That's grief. And yes, it is crazy. Welcome to Black life under white supremacy.

Grief as a painful historical trajectory is one thing; to grieve intensely in the misery of the present moment is another. Ferguson, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and Cleveland (we can add Detroit for seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Bastrop, Texas for Yvette Smith)—these dispersed sites have forced diverse people around the country and internationally to huddle closer together as we scrutinize laws and policies that reward police violence with immunity.

Being denigrated and victimized by your designated protectors is shocking to the core, because their job is to protect and serve. We're stunned because our trust in law is violated; police departments tolerate hyperaggressive officers by underreporting and underdisciplining them. These officers are not "going rogue" in wealthy, white communities because those communities have the economic and political resources to discipline them.

Police are our employees whom we have to obey ostensibly for our own safety and that of the general good; but also because they will hurt us, often with impunity, if we don't and sometimes even when we do obey.

Of course, police crime and the duplicity of law are not new to America. During the convict prison lease system and Jim Crow, a Black person could easily be arrested for not stepping off the sidewalk to let a white person pass. In Ferguson, it appears that not stepping on the sidewalk to let a white person

pass—one whose salary was paid in part by Blacks—sparked the encounter that ended Michael Brown's life.

Nonetheless, despite how disturbing these structural and episodic assaults are, they also work as catalysts for substantive change. Police incompetence, malfeasance, and murder inspire outrage.

**G. Y.:** What are your thoughts on the killings of officers Wenjian Liu and Raphael Ramos? Does it complicate these issues?

**J. J.:** The murders of these New York City police officers highlight the dangers that both police and public face. When Ismaaiyl Brinsley first shot his former female partner in a domestic violence dispute in Baltimore then traveled to Brooklyn to randomly kill police officers, he invoked the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as motivation. This invocation has been denounced by the Brown and Garner families, civil rights activists, the president and attorney general, and city leaders. What any mentally ill or criminal person does is not representative of a movement for human rights.

**G. Y.:** What are the implications of the suffering amid police violence?

**J. J.:** In a democracy, the implications for an ill-informed citizenry are grim. The recent tragedies remind us that this violence is sadly familiar to those who have a complex memory. We've grappled with racial animus and hatred from overseers, Klansmen and women, police, segregationists, integrationists, and various sectors of society from academia to athletics.

The implications of public servants and deputized vigilantes violating Black life with impunity are profound, especially for young Black people. If police are sending some message indicating that, despite having a Black president and attorney general, in regards to anti-Black violence, the police have immunity and a renewable license to overcriminalize, overprosecute, traumatize, and kill, then their position has been noted in social media throughout the globe.

We need to publicly debate whether it is just, moral, and appropriate, or even safe and sane, to believe in modern policing given the fallibility, corruption, and danger present in the institution. Police agencies have a history of racial bias and violence that has been investigated and condemned by governments as well as civil and human rights organizations. Citizens are supposed to flee or fight criminals, not the police. But reality teaches you that in Black life you need to be ever vigilant for both.

We have diverse strategies. Some offer extensive documentation on how the legal system adversely and disproportionately affects Black life due to gender and racial-economic bias. Some debate those who deny crises structured through state-sanctioned violence. Others expand the civil rights struggle into international human rights, using petitions to the UN and testimony before the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT).

Many instruct their children about the meanings of teenagers and children dying violently at the hands of those seemingly "above the law": the



Michael Browns, Tamir Rices, Renisha McBrides, Aiyana Stanley-Joneses, Trayvon Martins. A few have the ironic pleasure of false hope fading into realism when they see that their children can instruct them; for example, the Deacons for Defense Robert Williams audio-documentary they are listening to is not a courageous NPR special report sensitively attuning its listeners to the historic place and need for Black self-defense from racist violence, but a CD offering slipped into the player by an inquisitive six-year-old, a random act of grace.

**G. Y.:** What do we do with despair at the moment regarding these killings? What do we do to avoid feelings of implosion?

**J. J.:** We mix sorrow with something else. We've historically done that as a people. Ida B. Wells as an antilynching activist, who was eventually marginalized by more integrated and institutionally powerful Blacks, always said she would sell her life "dearly" to a lyncher. She didn't have to (apparently she died from exhaustion and lack of support for her radical opposition to racism). Ida B. Wells loved, deeply and immensely; traumatized and transformed by the Memphis lynching of Thomas Moss, the father of her goddaughter, she became an activist. Targeted for economic competition with whites, Moss was lynched in 1892 with other Black men following the exchange of gunfire with white, unidentified policemen who approached the Black grocer's store at night, through a dark alley, with their guns drawn. Realizing the injured men were police, Moss and his associates went to the police to explain the mistake. Their murders at the hands of mob and police sparked an antilynching movement.

Decades later, just before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat because, she stated, she thought of Emmett Till, Mamie Till defied the law and held an open casket for her mutilated fourteen-year-old son, Emmett, who broke "law" and custom by allegedly whistling at a white woman. He had a lisp; and later, in 2017, the press reported that the woman felt "tender sorrow" for lying in court that the teen had accosted her. Emmett was subsequently tortured and murdered; his white killers acquitted, later confessed to the crime for a \$3000 payment in a LIFE interview. Women activists such as Till and Parks loved life, family, and community and inspired the courageous reinvention of America through social and political movements.

People sometimes miss that outrage and resistance are guided by love and the desire to bring honor to life brutally taken. We continue to remember atrocities through demonstrations and protests in sports, although traumatized by social and domestic violence and struggling with depression or lack of resources, Black communities still organize forums against gun violence, unequal educational resources, drug addictions, gentrification, employment and housing discrimination.

**G. Y.:** Why has racism persisted so long within the North American context?



**J. J.:** Because it is desirable and profitable. As the late great civil rights leader and historian Vincent Harding noted, this crisis is structural and endemic. But it is not evenly felt and for some it is enjoyable. Anti-Black prejudicial bias exists not only in policing but also in education, employment, health, and housing. “The law” has been an impediment to Black lives mattering since the “three-fifths clause” to the US Constitution legalized bodily theft to build a democracy favoring white property holders placing presidential power disproportionately into the hands of southern slave owners who benefited from the electoral college counting of nonvoting enslaved. The Thirteenth Amendment, known as the emancipation amendment, legalized slavery for those duly convicted of crimes, establishing the foundation for the convict prison lease system where Blacks died faster in freedom than they had on plantations as they were worked to death to benefit northern capital, emergent southern state economies, and an expansion of the white middle class through the trade of Black bodies via policing, courts, agricultural and infrastructure development. Jim Crow, foster care disproportionality, racially fashioned policing and incarceration and—as Marvin Gaye notes in “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)” —“trigger-happy policing” are all part of the fabric of American life that has a historical relation to Black lives based on consumption.

North American (Canadian, US, Mexican) racisms have violent directives tied to genocidal wars of annihilation and capture of Native and African Americans. In the ambitions of assimilation, one of the fastest ways to become “American” is to become “white.” So, various ethnic groups position themselves along the continuum in which Blacks and Blackness are the antithesis of white as civic virtue and economic wealth. Racism is also economically and existentially profitable. Proximity to “whiteness” helps, as studies have shown, in obtaining jobs, housing, promotions; just as gender and sexism lead to differential pay for women, race and racism create differentials in the acquisition of resources.

Racism is sexualized, embedded with racial–sexual slander, and micro- and macroaggressions against Blacks (males and females, trans and gender fluid people). Normative as entertainment, fungible and edible, we are key to the American “libidinal” economy. For some, Black suffering is enjoyable as spectacle; and so for Black people in public or private life, there is in first and all encounters no suffering or confusion that is sacred or worth protection.

**G. Y.:** How does your understanding of that persistence relate to the current situation?

**J. J.:** Now, as historically, there is inadequate public thought and language about institutional, interpersonal, and internalized violence consuming Black people and society in general.

2014 is our 1892 (the year whose atrocities sparked Ida B. Wells’s anti-lynching crusades). In 2014, we saw more clearly the “crazy” of our social order

and how important and necessary international interventions are, such as CAT (which ruled that the US needed to de-militarize its police; address torture of minorities in police custody and diminish rape in prison). In October 2014, former Chicago police commissioner Jon Burge was released from prison, after running a torture ring that imprisoned over one hundred Black men. For over twenty years, Burge, who is white, led an anti-Black torture ring to obtain false confessions. Torture included cattle prods to their genitals, and near suffocation through plastic bags over their heads (some of the tactics evoke the report on the CIA's interrogation techniques). Due to the statute of limitations, Burge was convicted of perjury in 2010 and sentenced to four and a half years in prison. The officer-torturers now reportedly collect millions in pensions; and Chicago has settled more in compensation to their victims. Where the nation compensates racial and sexual predators by keeping them on the taxpayers' rolls, restorative justice remains elusive and structural accountability is rarely possible. Talking about the tragic murder rate in Chicago of mostly Black males is empty talk if it is severed from predatory policing, exploitative governance, the scarcity of decent jobs, housing, food, and schooling.

Restorative justice is complex. It is also unnecessarily complicated by police structures that claim omnipotence in the face of Black lives. In the absence of a clear line between criminal and police behavior, fear is the enforcer. Ironically, Black Americans are regularly taxed to pay salaries, pensions, and benefits to police forces that disproportionately target Black life through penalties and fines, brutality, and disrespect. We are also, like other Americans, taxed to pay for military interventions waged for geopolitical dominance rather than the expansion of human rights. In 2014 as our 1892, the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on CIA interrogation reported that the CIA lied to the public and government about its use of torture, and that its human rights violations rendered the United States not safer but more barbaric. Why would state and local police expect a different outcome if they treat Black communities as "enemies" and against whom excessive force can be legitimately deployed?

**G. Y.:** So, where do we go from here?

**J. J.:** When Congressman John Lewis, a former SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) activist, stated at the beginning of the rebellion that Ferguson may have sparked another Civil Rights Movement, he was initially met with skeptics from the president through media to the local preacher. One constant is that older generations, and nonactivists, tend to underestimate the power of outraged, young Black people who demand justice. During the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement, Ella Baker emphasized that the movement was about "more than a hamburger," that is, its goals aspired to more than access to consumer society at the highest levels. Historical leadership of Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Audre Lorde prepared us for the present moment.

We've witnessed, feared and contested police violence for centuries. Resistance is resilient until it is broken; then for a time, it becomes dormant, but it always reappears. Today more attention is paid to sexual and physical assaults against Black women and girls, and structural, social, and interpersonal violence against transwomen, girls, women, boys and men, by state and society. The demands for institutional and communal goals of "zero death" and "zero trauma" increase as we better understand our real vulnerabilities and our desires to transcend them.

*Black lives matter* as a coda is both an assertion and a desire. The women who crossed gender divisions to follow in and bend traditions of political leadership to make this a shared language maintain that Black lives matter because we make them matter. Yet, all Black lives do not equally matter even to us. Propertied and impoverished Blacks are exhausted by legal and policing apparatuses that have historically preyed upon Black life. Transgressions into Black lives cut across class lines, but disproportionately the poor and working class are the most vulnerable to violence.

If we as ideologically diverse Black people have a no-divorce clause with US democracy, the site of our battery, then where do we go from here? The divide between de jure and de facto justice concerning Blacks in the Americas is a chasm. Our struggles are opportunities to bridge or jump; either way we are engaged in movement for security, justice, and a greater democracy.

## PART I DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hortense Spillers and Patricia Hill Collins discuss the divisive tendency of some forms of love and love's privatization. Love of this sort appears to bring about and perpetuate racial hate. The inclusive, public, and expansive kind of love that bell hooks discusses is likely crucial in overcoming racial hate, but it also requires vulnerability. George Yancy asks Hortense Spillers how we can get white people to love themselves; but how do we even secure the condition for the possibility of love, namely that white people become vulnerable with respect to race?
2. How can we incorporate self-criticality among white people that encourages self-awareness without fueling counterproductive self-hatred?
3. Joy James points out that civil and human rights movements are about more than acquisition through consumerism, or, in reference to Ella Baker's assertion: "the movement was about 'more than a hamburger.'" How might we redirect consumer society's (surplus) consumption and excess toward a public ethics focused on universal access to healthcare, economic decency and employment, and the right to life and security from violence and neglect?

4. One of the strengths of Black Feminist thought is its intersectional capabilities and the ability to appreciate and account for the multiplicity of suffering beneath layers of oppression. How can one avoid falling into relativism when including many intersections of oppression and injustice in a single person's experience? Does ideology play a role in our analysis of intersectionality?



PART II

*Race and the Naming of Whiteness*



# Judith Butler

**George Yancy:** In your 2004 book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, you wrote, “The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?”<sup>1</sup> You wrote that about the post-9/11 world, but it appears to also apply to the racial situation here in the United States. In the wake of the recent killings of unarmed Black men and women by police, and the failure to prosecute the killers, the message being sent to Black communities is that they don’t matter, that they are “disposable.” Posters reading “Black Lives Matter,” “Hands Up. Don’t Shoot,” “I Can’t Breathe,” communicate the reality of a specific kind of racial vulnerability that Black people experience on a daily basis. How does all this communicate to Black people that their lives don’t matter?

**Judith Butler:** Perhaps we can think about the phrase, “Black lives matter.” What is implied by this statement, a statement that should be obviously true, but apparently is not? If Black lives do not matter, then they are not really regarded as lives, since a life is supposed to matter. So what we see is that some lives matter more than others, that some lives matter so much that they need to be protected at all costs, and that other lives matter less, or not at all. And when that becomes the situation, then the lives that do not matter so much, or do not matter at all, can be killed or lost, can be exposed to conditions of destitution, and there is no concern, or even worse, that is regarded as the way it is supposed to be. The callous killing of Tamir Rice and the abandonment of his body on the street is an astonishing example of the police murdering someone considered disposable and fundamentally ungrievable.

When we are talking about racism, and anti-Black racism in the United States, we have to remember that under slavery Black lives were considered only a fraction of a human life, so the prevailing way of valuing lives assumed that some lives mattered more, were more human, more worthy, more



deserving of life and freedom, where freedom meant minimally the freedom to move and thrive without being subjected to coercive force. But when and where did Black lives ever really get free of coercive force? One reason the chant “Black Lives Matter” is so important is that it states the obvious but the obvious has not yet been historically realized. So it is a statement of outrage and a demand for equality, for the right to live free of constraint, but also a chant that links the history of slavery, of debt peonage, of segregation, and of a prison system geared toward the containment, neutralization, and degradation of Black lives, to a police system that more and more easily and often can take away a Black life in a flash all because some officer perceives a threat.

So let us think about what this is: the perception of a threat. One man is leaving a store unarmed, but he is perceived as a threat. Another man is in a chokehold and states that he cannot breathe, and the chokehold is not relaxed, and the man dies because he is perceived as a threat. Mike Brown and Eric Garner. We can name them, but in the space of this interview, we cannot name all the Black men and women whose lives are snuffed out all because a police officer perceives a threat, sees the threat in the person, sees the person as pure threat. Perceived as a threat even when unarmed or completely physically subdued, or lying in the ground, as Rodney King clearly was, or coming back home from a party on the train and having the audacity to say to a policeman that he was not doing anything wrong and should not be detained: Oscar Grant. We can see the videos and know what is obviously true, but it is also obviously true that police and the juries that support them obviously do not see what is obvious, or do not wish to see.

So the police see a threat when there is no gun to see, or someone is subdued and crying out for his life, when they are moving away or cannot move. These figures are perceived as threats even when they do not threaten, when they have no weapon, and the video footage that shows precisely this is taken to be a ratification of the police’s perception. The perception is then ratified as a public perception, at which point we not only must insist on the dignity of Black lives, but name the racism that has become ratified as public perception.

In fact, the point is not just that Black lives can be disposed of so easily: they are targeted and hunted by a police force that is becoming increasingly emboldened to wage its race war by every grand jury decision that ratifies the point of view of state violence. Justifying lethal violence in the name of self-defense is reserved for those who have a publicly recognized self to defend. But those whose lives are not considered to matter, whose lives are perceived as a threat to the life that embodies white privilege, can be destroyed in the name of that life. That can only happen when a recurrent and institutionalized form of racism has become a way of seeing, entering into the presentation of visual evidence to justify hateful and unjustified and heart-breaking murder.

So it is not just that Black lives matter, though that must be said again and again. It is also that stand-your-ground and racist killings are becoming

increasingly normalized, which is why intelligent forms of collective outrage have become obligatory.

**G. Y.:** The chant “Black Lives Matter” is also a form of what you would call “a mode of address.” You discuss questions of address in your essay, “Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre on Fanon,”<sup>2</sup> where Fanon, for example, raises significant questions about sociality in talking about his freedom in relationship to a “you.” “Black Lives Matter” says something like, “*You*—white police officers—recognize my/our humanity!” But what if the “you,” in this case, fails to be moved, refuses to be touched by that embodied chant? And given that “racism has become a way of seeing,” is it not necessary that we—as you say in your essay “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia”—install “an antiracist hegemony over the visual field”?<sup>3</sup>

**J. B.:** Sometimes a mode of address is quite simply a way of speaking to or about someone. But a mode of address may also describe a general way of approaching another such that one presumes who the other is, even the meaning and value of their existence. We address each other with gesture, signs, and movement, but also through media and technology. We make such assumptions all the time about who that other is when we hail someone on the street (or we do not hail them). That is someone I greet; the other is someone I avoid. That other may well be someone whose very existence makes me cross to the other side of the road.

Indeed, in the case of schematic racism, anti-Black racism figures Black people through a certain lens and filter, one that can quite easily construe a Black person, or another racial minority, who is walking toward us as someone who is potentially, or actually, threatening, or is considered, in his or very being, a threat. In fact, as we can doubtless see from the videos that have swept across the global media, it may be that even when a Black man is moving away from the police, that man is still considered to be a threat or worth killing, as if that person were actually moving toward the police brandishing a weapon. Or it could be that a Black man or woman is reaching for his or her identification papers to show to the police, and the police see in that gesture of compliance—hand moving toward pocket—a reach for a gun. Is that because, in the perception of the police, to be Black is already to be reaching for a gun? Or a Black person is sleeping on the couch, standing, walking, or even running, clearly brandishing no gun, and there turns out to be evidence that there is no gun, but still that life is snuffed out—why? Is the gun imagined into the scene, or retrospectively attributed to the standing or fleeing figure (and the grand jury nods, saying “this is plausible”)? And why when that person is down, already on the ground, and seeks to lift himself, or seated against a subway grate, and seeks to speak on his own behalf, or is utterly subdued and imperiled by a chokehold, does he never stop looming as a threat to security, prompting a policeman to beat him or gun him down?

It may be important to see the twisted vision and the inverted assumptions that are made in the course of building a “case” that the police acted in self-defense or were sufficiently provoked to use lethal force. The fleeing figure is coming this way; the nearly strangled person is about to unleash force; the man on the ground will suddenly spring to life and threaten the life of the one who therefore takes his life.

These are war zones of the mind that play out on the street. At least in these cases that have galvanized the nation and the world in protest, we all see the twisted logic that results in the exoneration of the police who take away the lives of unarmed Black men and women. And why is that the case? It is not because what the police and their lawyers present as their thinking in the midst of the situation is very reasonable. No, it is because that form of thinking is *becoming more “reasonable” all the time*. In other words, every time a grand jury or a police review board accepts this form of reasoning, they ratify the idea that Blacks are a population against which society must be defended, and that the police defend themselves and (white) society, when they preemptively shoot unarmed Black men in public space. At stake is a way that Black people are figured as a threat even when they are simply living their lives, walking the street, leaving the convenience store, riding the subway, because in those instances this is only a threatening life, or a threat to the only kind of life, white life, that is recognized.

**G. Y.:** What has led us to this place?

**J. B.:** Racism has complex origins, and it is important that we learn the history of racism to know what has led us to this terrible place. But racism is also reproduced in the present, in the prison system, new forms of population control, increasing economic inequality that affects people of color disproportionately. These forms of institutionalized destitution and inequality are reproduced through daily encounters—the disproportionate numbers of minorities stopped and detained by the police, and the rising number of those who fall victim to police violence. The figure of the Black person as threat, as criminal, as someone who is, no matter where he is going, already-on-the-way-to-prison, conditions these preemptive strikes, attributing lethal aggression to the very figure who suffers it most. The lives taken in this way are not lives worth grieving; they belong to the increasing number of those who are understood as ungrievable, whose lives are thought not to be worth preserving.

But, of course, what we are also seeing in the recent and continuing assemblies, rallies, and vigils is an open mourning for those whose lives were cut short and, without cause, brutally extinguished. The practices of public mourning and political demonstration converge: when lives are considered ungrievable, to grieve them openly is to protest. So when people assemble in the street, arrive at rallies or vigils, demonstrate with the aim of opposing this form of racist violence, they are “speaking back” to this mode of address,

insisting on what should be obvious but is not, namely, that these lost lives are unacceptable losses.

On the one hand, there is a message, “Black Lives Matter,” which always risks being misheard (“What? Only *Black* lives matter?”) or not heard at all (“these are just people who will protest anything”). On the other hand, the assembly, even without words, enacts the message in its own way. For it is often in public spaces where such violence takes place, so reclaiming public space to oppose both racism and violence is an act that reverberates throughout the public sphere through various media.

**G. Y.:** I’ve heard that some white people have held signs that read, “All Lives Matter.”

**J. B.:** When some people rejoin with “All Lives Matter,” they misunderstand the problem, but not because their message is untrue. It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter, which is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered, and are struggling to matter in the way they deserve.

Claiming that “all lives matter” does not immediately mark or enable Black lives only because they have not been fully recognized as having lives that matter. I do not mean this as an obscure riddle. I mean only to say that we cannot have a race-blind approach to the questions: which lives matter? Or, which lives are worth valuing? If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation “all lives matter,” then we miss the fact that Black people have not yet been included in the idea of “all lives.” That said, it is true that all lives matter (we can then debate about when life begins or ends). But to make that universal formulation concrete, to make that into a living formulation, one that truly extends to all people, we have to foreground those lives that are not mattering now, to mark that exclusion, and militate against it. Achieving that universal, “all lives matter,” is a struggle, and that is part of what we are seeing on the streets. For on the streets we see a complex set of solidarities across color lines that seek to show what a concrete and living sense of bodies that matter can be.

**G. Y.:** When you talk about lives that matter, are you talking about how whiteness and white bodies are valorized? In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, you discuss gender as “a stylized repetition of acts.”<sup>4</sup> Do you also see whiteness as “a stylized repetition of acts” that solidifies and privileges white bodies, or even leads to naïve, “postracial” universal formulations like “all lives matter”?

**J. B.:** Yes, we can certainly talk about “doing whiteness” as a way of putting racial categories into action, since whiteness is part of what we call “race,” and is often implicitly or explicitly part of a race project that seeks to achieve and maintain dominance for white people. One way this happens is by establishing whiteness as the norm for the human, and Blackness as a deviation

from the human or even as a threat to the human, or as something not quite human. Under such perceptual conditions built up through the history of racism, it becomes increasingly easy for white people to accept the destruction of Black lives as the status quo, since those lives do not fit the norm of “human life” they defend. It is true that Frantz Fanon sometimes understood whiteness in gendered terms: a Black man is not a man, according to the white norms that define manhood, and yet other times the Black man is figured as the threat of rape, hypermasculinized, threatening the “virgin sanctity” of whiteness.

In that last formulation, whiteness is figured as a young virgin whose future husband is white; this characterization ratifies the sentiments that oppose miscegenation and defend norms of racial purity. But whose sexuality is imperiled in this scene? After all, Black women and girls were the ones who were raped, humiliated, and disposed of under conditions of slavery, and it was Black families who were forcibly destroyed: Black kinship was not recognized as kinship that matters. Women of color, and Black feminists in particular, have struggled for years against being the sexual property of either white male power or Black masculinity, against poverty, and against the prison industry, so there are many reasons why it is necessary to define racism in ways that acknowledge the specific forms it takes against men, women, and transgendered people of color.

Let us remember, of course, that many Black women’s lives are taken by police and by prisons. We can name a few: Yvette Smith, forty-eight, in Texas, unarmed, and killed by police; or Aiyana Stanley-Jones, age seven, killed while sleeping on her father’s couch in Detroit. After all, all of those are remembered by the people on the street, outraged and demonstrating, opposing a lethal power that is becoming more and more normalized and, to that degree, more and more outrageous.

Whiteness is less a property of the skin than a social power reproducing its dominance in both explicit and implicit ways. When whiteness is a practice of superiority over minorities, it monopolizes the power of destroying or demeaning bodies of color. The legal system is engaged in reproducing whiteness when it decides that the Black person can and will be punished more severely than the white person who commits the same infraction, or when that same differential is at work in the question, Who can and will be detained? And who can and will be sent to prison with a life sentence or the death penalty? Angela Davis has shown the disproportionate number of Americans of color (Black and Latino) who are detained, imprisoned, and on death row. This has become a “norm” that effectively says, “Black lives do not matter,” one that is built up over time, through daily practices, modes of address, through the organization of schools, work, prison, law, and media. Those are all ways that the conceit of white superiority is constructed.

**G. Y.:** Yes. Whiteness, as a set of historical practices, extends beyond the skin. And yet, when a person with white skin walks into a store, it is assumed that she is not a threat. So, there is an entire visual technology that is complicit here, where the skin itself, as it were, is the marker of innocence. It is a visual technology that reinforces not only her sense of innocence, but that organizes the ways in which she gets to walk through space without being profiled or stopped. Hence, she contributes to the perpetuation of racial injustice even if she is unaware of doing so.

**J. B.:** Well, of course, class is also there as a marker of how anyone is perceived entering the door to the public building, the office, the post office, the convenience store. Class is in play when white people fail to look “monied” or are considered as working class, poor, or homeless, so we have to be clear that the “white” person we may be talking about can be struggling with inequality of another kind: whiteness has its own internal hierarchies, to be sure. Of course there are white people who may be very convinced that they are not racist, but that does not necessarily mean that they have examined, or worked through, how whiteness organizes their lives, values, the institutions they support, how they are implicated in ways of talking, seeing, and doing that constantly and tacitly discriminate. Undoing whiteness has to be difficult work, but it starts, I think, with humility, with learning history, with white people learning how the history of racism persists in the everyday vicissitudes of the present, even as some of us may think we are “beyond” such a history, or even convinced that we have magically become “postracial.” It is difficult and ongoing work, calling on an ethical disposition and political solidarity that risks error in the practice of solidarity.

Whiteness is not an abstraction; its claim to dominance is fortified through daily acts that may not seem racist at all precisely because they are considered “normal.” But just as certain kinds of violence and inequality get established as “normal” through the proceedings that exonerate police of the lethal use of force against unarmed Black people, so whiteness, or rather its claim to privilege, can be disestablished over time. This is why there must be a collective reflection on, and opposition to, the way whiteness takes hold of our ideas about whose lives matter. The norm of whiteness that supports both violence and inequality insinuates itself into the normal and the obvious. Understood as the sometimes tacit and sometimes explicit power to define the boundaries of kinship, community, and nation, whiteness infects all those frameworks within which certain lives are made to matter less than others.

It is always possible to do whiteness otherwise, to engage in a sustained and collective practice to question how racial differentiation enters into our daily evaluations of which lives deserve to be supported, to flourish, and which do not. But it is probably an error, in my view, for white people to become paralyzed with guilt and self-scrutiny. The point is rather to consider those ways

of valuing and devaluing life that govern our own thinking and acting, understanding the social and historical reach of those ways of valuing. It is probably important, and satisfying as well, to let one's whiteness recede by joining in acts of solidarity with all those who oppose racism. There are ways of fading out whiteness, withdrawing from its implicit and explicit claims to racial privilege. Demonstrations have the potential to embody forms of equality that we want to see realized in the world more broadly. Working against those practices and institutions that refuse to recognize and mark the powers of state racism in particular, assemblies gather to mourn and resist the deadly consequences of such powers. When people engage in concerted actions across racial lines to build communities based on equality, they defend the rights of those who are disproportionately imperiled to have a chance to live without the fear of dying suddenly at the hands of the police. There are many ways to do this, in the street, the office, the home, and in the media. Only through such an ever-growing cross-racial struggle against racism can we begin to achieve a sense of all the lives that really do matter.

## NOTES

1. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 20.
2. Judith Butler, "Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre on Fanon," in *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 171–98.
3. Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15–22; 17.
4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, [1990] 1999), 179.



## Alison Bailey

**George Yancy:** I came across an important endnote in your chapter entitled “Strategic Ignorance.” You wrote, “Whites may be privilege-cognizant but metaphysically comfortable.”<sup>1</sup> What exactly do you mean by ‘metaphysically comfortable’?

**Alison Bailey:** That’s an important endnote and one that requires some unpacking, so please bear with me! In the early days of critical whiteness studies, Ruth Frankenberg made a useful distinction between the *privilege-cognizant* and *privilege-evasive* responses that white women gave to a series of questions about how whiteness was lived, discussed, and experienced. She was one of the first scholars who prompted me to notice how much we can learn about white ways of knowing and being, by listening to how white people talk about race. Privilege-cognizant responses acknowledge and engage white privilege (e.g., “I understand how my whiteness is an asset for any move I want to make in life”). These responses are epistemically opening; they offer us an epistemic traction that moves conversations forward. Privilege-evasive responses are defensive, epistemically closing moves that maintain white ignorance. What Alice Macintyre calls “white talk” (e.g., “I’m not racist, most of my friends are Latinx,” or “I get stopped by the police too!”) are examples of this. These engagements offer no epistemic traction in social justice discussions. The endnote that caught your attention asks readers to look deeply at the common metaphysical foundation that underwrites *both* sets of responses.

Robin DiAngelo’s account of “white fragility” has advanced my understanding of the deep and abiding hold metaphysical comfort has on white folks’ sense of ourselves as so-called white people. White people live in a social environment that insulates us from race-based anxiety and stress. This protective environment fosters expectations of racial comfort. We feel entitled to



be racially at ease most of the time, and indeed most of us have the freedom to structure our daily lives and movements to ensure that we are. In general, white fragility triggers a constellation of behaviors that work to steer us back to places where we feel whole, comfortable, innocent, and good. These expectations of racial comfort mean that, with few exceptions, white folks have a low tolerance for racial stress. This deep urge to remain metaphysically comfortable drives *both* privilege-evasiveness and privilege-cognizance. Also, privilege-evasive responses are privilege preserving: they maintain white comfort through denial and defensiveness. Consider the anger-laced claims such as “I am the *least* racist person you’ve ever met.” These responses are a form of worldview protection—they work to resist new information that deeply unsettles white folks’ sense of entitlement to comfort and how we understand our place in the social order. When a particular core belief—say about the United States being a meritocracy—is challenged, we become deeply agitated, unsettled, and defensive. We attempt to bolster our metaphysical wholeness with stories about our merit-based accomplishments, family immigration history, or the long hours we’ve worked. These narratives are one way that we keep ourselves intact.

The urge for metaphysical comfort also drives privilege-cognizant white responses, but this point seems counterintuitive, so it’s easy to miss. Most white people resist doing deep critical antiracist work. We have a tendency, as Sara Ahmed puts it, to “flee the unfinished history”<sup>2</sup> of racism. Highlighting white goodness and innocence masks our fragility; it allows us to embrace whiteness in ways that don’t threaten our metaphysical comfort. We engage racial injustice movements *in safe ways* by steering conversations back to our good deeds, quoting people of color, taking minimal emotional risks, whitewashing our family histories, and following *#BlackLivesMatter* on Twitter, but not in our community. The energy we put into assuring others that we are good-hearted and loyal allies is another means of holding white selves together. These moves are, in a subtle way, also privilege preserving: they bolster our metaphysical invulnerability by insulating us from race-based anxiety.

I am continually astounded by the persistence and depth of these yearnings in my own conversations with folks of color, and how often, despite my efforts to be mindful of the twin lures of defensiveness and goodness, I’ve caught myself steering a particular conversation back to a more comfortable place. White folks’ efforts to work toward privilege-cognizance in ways that preserve metaphysical comfort worry me. I think that for white people to do deep, meaningful, antiracist work, that we need to not be afraid to fall apart.

**G. Y.:** I see. But these moves illustrate how white people keep it together. What would it really look like for white people to “fall apart”? I like your use of this metaphor because it implies a form of crisis.

**A. B.:** Yes, I think crisis is an accurate description here. Crises throw us into spaces where the center doesn't hold. These spaces produce anxiety, fear, panic, and foment an urgency to repair the situation by restoring the world to *exactly* the way it was before the crisis. The image that comes to mind for me is the town that gets hit by a tornado and decides to rebuild their community using the original city plan, hiring the same architects, keeping the old street names, building the same houses in the same places, and painting them the same colors. White defensiveness and retreats to goodness are responses to crisis in this sense of the word. The responses aim at restoring the comfort of the old order, and that's not what I'm after here.

Your own use of 'crisis' is closer to its Greek origins in 'decision.' Decisions are represented geographically as crossroads or turning points. I have mixed feelings about these metaphors. On the one hand, I like the way that they direct our attention away from panicked attempts at restorative repair and toward places of openness and possibility. On the other hand, I worry that they narrowly characterize decision making as a strictly cognitive process directed at choosing among structured pre-existing roads. For white selves to fall apart, we need to go "off road," so to speak. We need to make a concerted effort to leave the locations, texts, values, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemologies where we are at ease. We need to work with an understanding of crisis/repair that is transformative rather than merely restorative.

I'm attracted to borderland theory in general, and to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones in particular, because these scholars/activists offer a conceptual vocabulary that foregrounds the transformative sense of repair. In her later work, Anzaldúa uses the Náhuatl word '*nepantla*' to describe an *unstructured* liminal space that facilitates transformation. It is a psychic, spiritual, epistemic, and sometimes geographic space characterized by intense confusion, anxiety, and loss of control. It describes a moment or span of time when our beliefs, worldviews, and self-identities crumble. *Nepantla* is messy, confusing, painful, and chaotic; it signals unexpected, uncontrollable shifts, transitions, and changes. This is something you feel with your heart and body. It's a precognitive response to the fear of losing your ontological bearings that slowly works its way up into your head. Eventually you surrender. The old worldviews, beliefs, perspectives, and ontologies that once grounded you are but memories, and you find yourself working on a new epistemic home terrain.

In *nepantla*, we shift and a resistant self emerges; that is, a self that now can "see through" the old social order and resists reconstruction along the old lines of that order. Consider the shift that happens for most LGBTQ people during the coming-out process, or during religious conversions, or when someone comes to have a class consciousness or feminist consciousness. You can't go back because you've seen through the fictions of heteronormativity, a godless life, white supremacy, capitalism, or patriarchy.

**G. Y.:** Yes, you and I agree here about crisis. I mean not only the sense of losing one's footing, of *losing one's way*, or a process of disorientation, but also the etymological sense of the word crisis (from Greek *krisis*, that is, decision). Crisis, as I am using the term, is a species of *metanoia*, a kind of perceptual breakdown. It isn't about an immediate repair, but involves tarrying within that space of breakdown. It is within that space that there is a powerful sense of loss; in fact, there is a process of *kenosis* or emptying, even if the emptying can't be complete and so must be repeated. So, the idea that I have of crisis is not about recovery vis-à-vis the familiar, but something radically new. Crisis is a site of dispossession. So, the concept of *deciding* denotes a life of commitment to "undo," to "trouble," over and over again, the complex psychic and socio-ontological ways in which one is embedded in whiteness. The decision is one that is made over and over again perhaps even for the rest of one's life. And, yes, crisis, this process of *metanoia* and *kenosis*, is perplexing, painful, and chaotic. It must be, because it involves facing an unfamiliar psychic terrain. You know, though, my fear here is that some well-meaning whites might believe that they can *willfully* "fall apart" and that this involves some *voluntary act* when in fact whiteness involves such a deep resistant historical embeddedness.

**A. B.:** Exactly. Your account of crisis resonates deeply with most of the elements present in *nepantla*—the disorientation, the perceptual breakdown, and the pain. I very much like your image of losing one's footing; borderlands are indeed rough terrain.

I also share your concern about white folks' desire to force a crisis through voluntary acts. Our desire to be good drives this, but it ends up looking like ontological white flight—I picture well-meaning white selves actively driving around in search of a new neighborhood in which to reconstruct ourselves more favorably. We can't think our way out of whiteness. White fragility and the desire for metaphysical comfort, however, mean that we are constantly drawn to spaces where our identities are secure. So, resistance requires a good amount of volition on our part. For white folks to shift, we need to leave those spaces, philosophies, texts, geographies, politics, aesthetics, and worlds that keep us whole.

So, in both *nepantla* and your definition of crisis, the shift in self comes from choosing to remain in uncomfortable places. Buddhists, such as Pema Chödrön, describe this as walking into "the places that scare you."<sup>3</sup> You describe this as "tarrying," a kind of lingering with the truth about white selves, white supremacy, and the how these constructions are part and parcel of the colonial structures that continue to oppress people of color. And María Lugones advocates for the practice of leaving "worlds" (e.g., social spaces where you are at ease because you are fluent in the culture, history, and social practices), and hanging out in "worlds" where you are rendered strange. This travel between and among "worlds" must be animated by loving perception and playfulness of spirit.

The practice of “playful, loving ‘world’ travel” has political, ontological, and epistemic goals. Politically, women of color (and white women) travel to one another’s worlds as a way to learn to love one another and to form friendships and alliances. Ontologically, travel from one world to another is a shift in self, something very similar to a Du Boisian double-consciousness. The aim of this practice is to reduce arrogant perception and to allow what she thinks of as a “plural self” to emerge. In “travel” you have a double-image of yourself because you have a memory of yourself having an attribute in one world and not having that attribute in another world. For example, in ‘worlds’ where I’m at ease I’m seen as an easygoing vibrant person with a great sense of humor, but when I spend time in hostile worlds where I’m not at ease, I’m read as reserved, arrogant, quiet, or humble. Playful, loving, ‘world’ travel makes this plurality visible. I am a humorous-arrogant-humble-easygoing self. Epistemically, this practice teaches us to see ourselves as others see us. At one point, Lugones implores white women to acknowledge that women of color are “faithful mirrors” that show white women as no other mirror can show us.<sup>4</sup> It’s not that they reflect back to us who we really are. They show us some of the many selves that we are. They reflect back our plurality, which she says is something that may in itself be frightening to us. Walking into these fearful reflections brings on crisis.

I think “‘world’ travel” can help facilitate *nepantla* moments. My first glimpse of the plurality of whiteness surfaced when I read John Langston Gwaltney’s *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* and read descriptions of white folks as greedy, hateful, arrogant, cheap, lying, immodest, empty people who should be regarded with suspicion. These words threw me. In your words, they caused me to lose my footing. The tension between the narratives in this collection and the narrative of white goodness that I was raised to believe taught me the importance of understanding white identity as plural. White folks are good-hearted-greedy-well-meaning-ignorant-lying-empty . . . etc. beings.

Now, I want to tie this plurality to your point about historical embeddedness. It’s so important to keep the deep recalcitrant historical embeddedness of whiteness in mind when reflecting on these *nepantla* moments. Let me offer an example that I hope doesn’t sound too forced. In the spring of 1992 I was finishing my graduate degree in Cincinnati and taking a Black feminist thought seminar. The four LA police officers who brutally beat Rodney King had just been acquitted and the LA uprising/riots had just begun. I remember Professor Hill Collins asking the white students in the seminar to make a practice of sitting next to Black and Brown people in public places and to focus on what came up for us. I was surprised by the depth of discomfort and fear that surfaced in me during this assignment. I wondered about the origins of my fear and how it came to inhabit my body so deeply. It was an abiding fear that was awakened in the aftermath of the violence done to King. I came to

understand this fearful presence neither as a character flaw nor lack of vigilance on my part, but as a recalcitrant colonial artifact. My fear had an affective ancestry that was part and parcel of racial formation projects that traded, and continue to trade, on the fear of Black, Brown, and Native bodies. It was embedded deeply in my whiteness.

Making this connection threw me off center. It forced me to address the white fear that was in my body that had escaped my notice. A fear that people of color certainly notice in me, a fear that, if I had to guess, was deeply tied to folks of colors' fear of white bodies. I became hyperaware of how I saw myself and how I imagined some folks of color saw me when I took my seat on the bus: I was at once fearful and feared. I worked to unpack the relationship between these fears with friends of color in the peace movement and in our seminar discussions. As we named these intertwined fears, I came to realize that our fears had very different textures. Nonetheless the fear of white terror and my own fear of Black bodies had deeply common historical roots.

**G. Y.:** You link the fear that people of color noticed in you to a fear that is deeply tied to folks of colors' fear of white bodies. Say more about this. Are you conflating the fears here?

**A. B.:** I don't mean to conflate the fears that were circulating on the bus that afternoon. I have no way of experiencing what it must have felt like to ride the bus as a Black woman or man on that day, but the heaviness of the violence done to King felt very present to me in that space. Emotions are never pure. They are complex and come in clusters. I imagine, but cannot be certain, that the fear that Black Cincinnatians felt after King's arrest and during the trial must have felt complex, perhaps a deeply mournful, grief-laden fear mixed with a righteous anger not just over police violence, but the knowledge that white fear visible in white bodies is the greatest killer of Black bodies. I think the fear I felt that day was a fear of confrontation, revenge, a fear of violence against my own person. I felt white fragility, but I did *not* feel the terror of whiteness. An old colonial script was at play in that space. One that continues to be animated over and over again. So, I want to point out the deep historical relations between these fears without collapsing them.

**G. Y.:** How might we facilitate *nepantla* moments when white police officers approach Black people? And here I'm thinking about Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland. Those police officers in each case didn't risk the importance of "world travel." My guess is that there was no trepidation of losing their ontological bearings.

**A. B.:** You can't. Lugones's conceptual framework cannot be stretched to cover these cases. Her account of "playful, loving, 'world' travel" is offered as a correction to arrogant perception and a means of building alliances across differences for those who are willing to do this work. The travel must be animated by loving perception and playfulness. These conditions don't hold during the

policing of Black, Brown, or Native bodies. Lugones recognizes that most US women of color practice world travelling as a matter of necessity and that much of it is done unwillingly to hostile worlds. The officers who pulled over Sandra Bland and who shot Tamir Rice perceived them with arrogant eyes. The survival of people of color requires learning to navigate hostile worlds safely, skillfully, and creatively. You can't be playful with conquerors when you stumble into and move through their worlds. You have to navigate these worlds with care and an intense amount of awareness.

In fact, your question has me thinking about how impossibly complex it is to navigate hostile worlds. All the creative strategies that you think would work regularly fail. The case of Charles Kinsey, a Black therapist who was shot in the leg by a North Miami police officer while trying to calm an autistic patient is a case in point. He was lying down with his hands up; what more could he have done to communicate that he was unarmed and not a threat?

**G. Y.:** Of course the idea of 'world' travel has to be respectful. So, how do white people even begin to engage Black spaces and people of color spaces without the latter feeling imposed upon?

**A. B.:** This is a very important point. 'World' travel is not a form of tourism. It's also not about making people into spectacles for your education, entertainment, and consumption. It's a loving way of being and living. The question of how white people should engage spaces of color is a challenging one, because it depends upon whether we are talking about neighborhoods, the Howard university campus, the women of color caucus at a conference, or an event at a local mosque. Public spaces are the most challenging because white folks often treat so-called ethnic neighborhoods as cultural playgrounds. Of course white folks should be respectful when walking through so-called non-white spaces, but in my experience most of us are not. 'World' travel, however, is not just about going into those spaces to look around. It requires that we interact and hang out with folks in those spaces. So, it's easier for me to think about your question in terms of community efforts to facilitate world travel as a means of inoculating the larger community against violence. I'm thinking about what happened in my own community in response to the June 12, 2016 mass shooting of LGBTQ people at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Communities of faith, queer organizations, and our local Not in Our Town chapter coordinated a series of open houses at local churches, mosques, and synagogues, so that all members of the community could come hang out and get to know members of the Muslim, Jewish, Queer Unitarian, and other Christian communities. It was an invitation to 'world' travel and to interact with members of the community that was respectful.

**G. Y.:** White resistance to 'world' traveling is linked to maintaining the fiction of white "wholeness." There is a kind of ontology of self-sufficiency and even

purity. For those of us who teach courses where white students think of themselves as atomic, neoliberal subjects, how might we get them to see that they are far more relational and, as you might say, multiple?

**A. B.:** I've not had much immediate success with this. Getting white students to make sense of white identity relationally takes a long time; semesters are short, and the privilege-evasiveness among most of the white students on our campus is fiercely stubborn. So, I start with their resistance for a few reasons. First, I think you get further working with privilege-evasiveness than you do trying to push back against it. I've made it my short-term goal to get white students to become mindful of the discursive, embodied, and affective habits they deploy to maintain the fiction of whiteness. I want white students to learn to notice how much energy they are putting into holding whiteness together, and to think about what would happen if they took risks and just walked into places that scare them. Next, I think that permitting white students' resistance to circulate as if it were a legitimate form of critical engagement with questions and race is incredibly stressful for students of color in the class.

I also make space for students of colors' resistance (e.g., silence, deciding to be absent, declaring that they don't have the energy for the conversation that day) and we talk about the different textures of their resistance.

Like you, I believe that classrooms are not safe spaces. They are places where ignorance and knowledge circulate with equal vigor. I've recently started to think about what it would look like for philosophers to work with a pedagogy of discomfort; so much of our teaching is geared toward the comforts of rules and certainty. Yet if metaphysical comfort continues to shape how white students engage questions of racial justice, then we need a pedagogy of discomfort. I work to make emotions and somatic expressions of these feelings visible during our discussions. I also work with students to identify what I call "shadow texts" as a way of engaging the privilege-evasive moves we discussed earlier in the interview. Let me give a quick example and then briefly introduce the concept and pedagogy.

Our class is discussing the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the Laquan McDonald shooting by Chicago police. I begin, "What does it mean to say that *Black Lives Matter*?" Eventually a white student predictably adds her opinion that "all lives matter" to the discussion. I don't want to shame her by pointing out that she had not answered my question. This is not the discomfort I'm after here. I don't want to silence her resistance/ignorance. I want to make the logic of white discomfort visible by naming and engaging it. I want the class to understand how these discursive detours and distractions signal epistemic closure; that is, they tell listeners, "I'm not going there. My white comfort zone demands that we neutralize race in this discussion of police violence."



So, I treat “all lives matter” as a shadow text. “Shadow texts” direct our attention to the ways epistemic resistance circulates during classroom discussions. The word ‘shadow’ is intended to call to mind the image of something walking closely alongside another thing without engaging it, which is what these responses do. They stalk the question in an attempt to reframe it along more comfortable lines. Shadows are regions of epistemic opacity. They function as obstacles that block access to pursuing further certain questions, problems, and curiosities that threaten dominant worldviews. They offer no epistemic friction. Shadow texts are certainly *reactions* to course content, but I prefer to think of them as *being called up* by the deeply affective-cognitive responses to the material. So, I get white students to think about the tension between my original question and the shadow text. Where does the reply “No! All lives matter” take us? Why do white students feel more comfortable talking about “all lives” than we do about “Black lives”? What’s going on in their bodies when we focus on “Black lives”? How do members of the class feel when race is drained from the conversation?

White students must come to recognize the whitely habits of repair in themselves and to understand how these habits of invulnerability block vulnerability. I introduce Erinn Gilson’s notion of *vulnerability* as potential, and we talk about the ways in which risk taking moves conversations forward. It’s only at this point that I ask them to get out of their comfort zones by spending time in so-called “nonwhite” spaces and texts. Sometimes I coordinate a short ‘world’ travel exercise on campus, where students attend open meetings of identity-based student organizations.

**G. Y.:** As we engage in this conversation, I recognize that you are a privilege-cognizant white person. I also realize that you should not be (and that you don’t want to be) praised by Black people or people of color for your cognizance. In contrast, how do we engage racist white people like the Klan who don’t give a damn about striving to be privilege-cognizant? After the publication of my article “Dear White America” in the column *The Stone*, in the *New York Times* (2015), I received on my university answering machine, and noticed on some white supremacist websites, some really sick racist responses. I can’t fathom how we might facilitate *nepantla* moments or what I’m calling *metanoia* and *kenosis* with those whites who show little or no desire to transform. Such radical moments wouldn’t even get off the proverbial ground. So, what is to be done with the Klan or even Klan-like whites who may not be card-carrying members of the Klan and yet who hate Black people and people of color?

**A. B.:** I first want to express my compassion for your continued suffering around the “Dear White America” article. It’s very difficult and dangerous to engage these hate groups. It’s also impossible to ignore them. You and I can’t



control another person's criminal behavior. There may be ways in the social world to change or limit the effects of this hatred, but this is a complex empirical question, and I don't know how to really answer it, so I'll offer an anecdotal response, because I remain forever hopeful that people can change.

The work we do takes a great deal of time and emotional energy. We need to be smart about where we focus our attention and how long we sustain it. We also need to be sensible about our expectations. Outside the classroom I practice a form of triage: privilege-cognizant whites are on board, so I organize with them. Privilege-evasive white folks can be brought around. It takes time and patience, but I think that it is time well invested. Think about Lee Mun Wah's film *The Color of Fear*. It took six men of color an entire week to finally get David, the well-meaning but clueless straight white man, to understand that the America he lived in was not the same as the America that people of color lived in. When he accepted this, he shifted.

But, what about the hard-core haters that belong to white identity groups? The logic of triage requires that we ignore these groups, but this creates a dilemma at least for me as a white woman. In the past I've engaged their actions and not their persons. When a Peoria white supremacist group leafleted our neighborhood, we took down the flyers and met with the mayor, but this does not foment change of character.

Some white supremacists have experienced *metanoia* on their own, so the question is, How did that happen? I'm thinking about Arno Michealis, who grew up in an alcoholic household where emotional violence was the norm. He became involved in the white power movement when he was seventeen, founded the largest racist skinhead organization in the world, and became the lead singer in a race-metal band. He eventually left the movement and now runs two antiracist/antihatred projects and works with young people. At some point he started to shift. It happened in moments. The Black woman at McDonalds who saw his swastika tattoo smiled and said, "You're better than that. I know that's not who you are." He began noticing how, time after time, he was "graced with great kindness and forgiveness"<sup>5</sup> by groups of people that he had been openly hostile toward. He now felt shame about harming people who had done nothing to him. He experienced the weight of hate and how it exhausted him. He became a single father. He watched friends die and go to prison. Fissures continued to appear in his world until his skinhead-self crumbled.

Now, I know it will be of little comfort to you as someone who continues to experience backlash from your *New York Times* piece. Michealis's story offers us one instance of what *metanoia* looks like from the perspective of a hard-core hater who somehow transformed himself into a peacemaker.

I don't think there is much we can do to facilitate this, but I do hang on to the hope that hundreds of small interventions can foment long-term change. In the past I've always thought, "What do you say to someone like that? Where

do you begin?” I think of the power behind the remark “You’re better than that. I know that’s not who you are.” I think about the questions I would have asked the young white man working on my roof a few summers back, who, to my surprise, took off his shirt on a hot July morning to reveal a palimpsest of white supremacist tattoos. What if, instead of saying, “I need you to put your shirt back on . . . NOW!” I’d said, “Tell me about your ink? Whose words are on your skin? Do you find that the hate in those words is too heavy to carry at times? I know that’s not who you are.” I wonder if that conversation would have given him some pause. I don’t know. I just don’t know.

## NOTES

1. Alison Bailey, “Strategic Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 77–94.
2. Sara Ahmed, “The Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68; 165.
3. Pema Chödrön, *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2005).
4. María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 67.
5. “Arno Michaelis,” *The Forgiveness Project*, November 7, 2011, <http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/arno-michaels-usa/>.



# John D. Caputo

**George Yancy:** I'd like to begin with an observation—maybe an obvious one—that the task of engaging race or whiteness in philosophy has been taken up almost exclusively by nonwhite philosophers. My sense is that this is partly because whiteness is a site of privilege that makes it invisible to many white philosophers. I also think that some white philosophers would rather avoid thinking about how their own whiteness raises deeper philosophical questions about identity, power, and hegemony, as this raises the question of personal responsibility. I have found that it is often very difficult to convince white philosophers that they should also take up this project in their work—they tend to avoid it, or don't consider it philosophically relevant. Do you agree?

**John D. Caputo:** 'White' is of the utmost relevance to philosophy, and postmodern theory helps us to see why. I was once criticized for using the expression 'true north.' It reflected my Nordo-centrism, my critic said, and my insensitivity to people who live in the Southern Hemisphere. Of course, no such thing had ever crossed my mind, but that points to the problem. We tend to say "we" and to assume who "we" are, which once simply meant "we white male Euro-Christians."

Postmodern theory tries to interrupt that expression at every stop, to put every word in scare quotes, to put our own presuppositions into question, to make us worry about the murderousness of "we," and so to get in the habit of asking, "we, who?" I think that what modern philosophers call "pure" reason—the Cartesian ego cogito and Kant's transcendental consciousness—is a white male Euro-Christian construction.

White is not "neutral." "Pure" reason is lily white, as if white is not a color or is closest to the purity of the sun, and everything else is "colored." Purification is a name for terror and deportation, and "white" is a thick, dense, potent

cultural signifier that is closely linked to rationalism and colonialism. What is not white is not rational. So white is philosophically relevant and needs to be philosophically critiqued—it affects what we mean by “reason”—and “we” white philosophers cannot ignore it.

**G. Y.:** Do you think that this avoidance of race among white philosophers is rooted in fear?

**J. D. C.:** I think that racism arises from a profound fear of the other, and fear is not far from hatred. But my experience is that most philosophers, most academics, are quite progressive in their thinking about race and sexuality and politics generally, and they are often active in progressive causes. My guess is that if they don’t write professionally about racism—I suspect it is often part of their teaching—it is in part because of a certain thoughtlessness, like my “Nordo-centrism.” I am not afraid of the Southern Hemisphere; it just didn’t hit me that this expression assumes “we” all live in the Northern one!

But I also think we have to take account of the professionalization and corporatization of the university, where our livelihood depends upon becoming furiously specialized technicians who publish in very narrow areas. Racism—like sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, religious discrimination, mistreatment of animals, environmental destruction, economic inequality—is a complex problem. All these problems demand to be addressed responsibly, and that requires expertise, a command of the literature, a knowledge of history, and so forth. No one can do all that, especially people trying to find jobs and later on get tenure and promotion, unless it intersects with their specialty in some pertinent way.

It is usually the damage done by religious dogmatism that occupies my attention. So I am at least as guilty as other white philosophers. My own work has always involved theorizing the “other,” the claim made upon us by those who are excluded by the prevailing system, so I am always on the verge of mentioning race and even have race and other powers of exclusion in mind.

My shortcoming is that I lack the expertise to get down in the dirt with most of these problems; the advantage is that my work has a suggestiveness to a lot of people on the front lines in different life situations, who grasp its application and tell me it helps them with their work.

**G. Y.:** Given that you claim above that white philosophers cannot responsibly ignore the subject of race, what do you think must be done to get them—and the ways they understand philosophy—to change?

**J. D. C.:** More often than not I do not analyze race explicitly unless I am asked to; it’s only then I find there are new things for me to say. I guess that means that one solution is to do what you’re doing now—ask us! Interrupt us. Stop us and ask, “To what extent is everything you just said a function of being white?” There’s a fair chance we never asked ourselves that question. And get the courses that do raise this question into the curriculum.

**G. Y.:** You mentioned that most philosophers and most academics are quite progressive, but often slip into a kind of unintentional thoughtlessness. Still, the recipients of such thoughtlessness can suffer deeply. And even “progressives” can continue to perpetuate deep systemic forms of discrimination in problematic ways. Do you think that thoughtlessness can function as an “excuse” for not engaging more rigorously in combating various structures of systemic power?

**J. D. C.:** No doubt. We all learned from Hannah Arendt a long time ago about the long arm of thoughtlessness, which she ventured to say reaches as far as the death camps. Every time I am asked to say something about race—or the environment or sexism or these other issues we’ve mentioned—I feel like Augustine in the *Confessions* praying and weeping over his sins. In these matters I follow Levinas.<sup>1</sup> When he analyzes ethics as an asymmetric relationship to the other—that means the other overtakes us, lays claim to us with or without our consent—he says a good conscience is fraudulent. This means our responsibility never ends and we can never say it has been discharged. It is when we think that things are fine that we are not thinking. It’s just when we say “peace, peace” that the lack of peace descends on us. We coast on the status quo and we need the unrelenting provocation of responsible intellectuals, artists, journalists, and the media to remind us of our complacency about the suffering that is all around us.

**G. Y.:** You’ve argued that true religion or prophetic religion engages the real, involves a process of risk, especially as it demands, as you’ve said, serving those who have been oppressed, marginalized, orphaned. Etymologically, religion comes from *religare*, which means to “bind fast.” I wonder if that process of binding fast is with those who are the strangers, the orphans, the unarmed Black men recently killed by police, women who are sexually objectified, the poor, and others.

**J. D. C.:** Yes, it is, of course. In the Gospels, Luke has Jesus announce his ministry by saying he has come to proclaim good news to the poor and imprisoned and the year of the Jubilee (Luke 4:18), which meant massive economic redistribution every fiftieth year! Can you imagine the Christian Right voting for that? The great scandal of the United States is that it has produced an anti-Gospel, the extremes of appalling wealth and poverty. But instead of playing the prophetic role of Amos denouncing the American Jeroboam, instead of working to close that gap, the policies of the right wing are exacerbating it.

That has been felt in a particularly cruel way among Black men and women and children, where poverty is the most entrenched and life is the most desperate. The popularity of such cruel ideas, their success in the ballot box, is terrifying to me. The trigger-happy practices of the police, not all police, but too many police, on the streets of Black America should alert everyone to how profoundly adrift American democracy has become—attacking the poor as

freeloaders and criminals, a distorted and grotesque ideological exaggeration of freedom over equality. The scandal is that the Christian Right has too often been complicit with a politics of greed and hatred of the other.

To be sure, younger evangelicals are becoming critical of their elders on this point, and I am trying to reach them in my own work, and there are also many examples of prophetic religion, like the Catholic parish in a North Philadelphia ghetto that I wrote about in “What Would Jesus Deconstruct?” The secular Left, on the other hand, won’t touch religion with a stick and abandons the ground of religion to the Right. So both the Left and the Right have a hand around the throat of prophetic religion.

**G. Y.:** You raise a few important issues here. I wonder what it would look like for a white police officer to see an unarmed Black man/boy through the eyes of prophetic religion. On an international stage, I imagine that both Palestinians and Jews would begin to see each other differently, where each would feel the deep ethical weight of the other.

**J. D. C.:** Prophetic does not mean the ability to foretell the future. It means the call for justice for “the widow, the orphan, and the stranger” (Deut. 10:18), the affirmation that the mark of God is on the face of everyone who is down and out, and a prophetic sensibility requires walking a mile in the shoes of the other.

I remember years ago, the president of a local college (in the Quaker tradition) took a year’s leave of absence to work as a trash collector. I think you are hitting on an irreducible element in the phenomenology of “alterity,” the very nub of it: were I there, there would be “here.” That is a simple thought whose depth we never plumb. In my own work I cite it frequently to criticize the idea of “the one true religion.” We have seven grandchildren, and when the last one was born I remember thinking that a little Black child was also being born that day, as dear and innocent as our granddaughter, who was going home to a desperate situation where the odds will be stacked against her. We begin with an originary natal equality and then we crush it. “Switched at birth” stories, like Mark Twain’s *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*, have a deep ethical and political import. Were I there, there would be here. That should transform everything.

**G. Y.:** On June 17, 2015, a white male shot and killed nine people in the historic African-American Emanuel AME Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. There was no apparent capacity on the part of this white male to walk in the shoes of the other, to envision Black life as anything other than disposable.

**J. D. C.:** Exactly. This was a white man declaring these lives not merely worthless but, still worse, a threat to the “natural order”—what form of oppression does not hide behind the “natural order?”—of the supremacy of the so-called white race. There is a qualitative difference here. This was

not the result of a split-second miscalculation or a misunderstanding by a policeman in a tense situation. This was a ruthless execution. Here the other does not overtake me but lies beneath me, contemptible and abject. This is pure hatred of the other.

**G. Y.:** Staying on the theme of walking in the shoes of the other, can you speak to the recent revelation regarding Rachel Dolezal passing as Black? Do you see this as a genuine dwelling with the other or as a form of appropriation?

**J. D. C.:** I can only assume her intentions were good, but I think she was misguided. You can't be an "intentional" victim, adopt it freely, because that means you are always free to walk away from it if the going gets rough, take a few weeks off for a holiday, or just change your mind. So it ends up making a mockery of the oppressed—the biting edge of oppression is that is not of your own choosing! People who try to walk a mile in the shoes of the other, to live among and dedicate their lives to working with the oppressed, are also sensitive to the fact of their own privilege. They know they can never truly identify with them. They understand this paradox, but it doesn't paralyze them. This problem also comes up in Christian theology—God intentionally assumed our mortal condition, but it wasn't an inescapable plight visited upon the divine being without its consent.

**G. Y.:** Is there a version of philosophy that "binds us" philosophers to the real, one that requires risking our necks for the least of these?

**J. D. C.:** That is the attraction of postmodern philosophy to me, which is a philosophy of radical pluralism. It theorizes alterity, calls for unrelenting sensitivity to difference, and teaches us about the danger of our own power, our freedom, our "we." I think that philosophy is not only a work of the mind but also of the heart, and it deals with ultimate matters about which we cannot be disinterested observers. So at a certain point in my career I decided to let my heart have a word, to write in a more heartfelt way, which of course is to push against the protocols of the academy. That is why I advised my graduate students, only half in jest, that it would be too risky for them to write like that, and safer to wait until they were tenured full professors!

Furthermore, we do not merely write; we teach. Teaching means interacting in a fully embodied and engaged way with young people at a very precious moment in their life—when they are most ready to hear something different. Here philosophy professors brush up against what I consider the religious and prophetic quality of their work, even if they resist those words. Our work is a vocation before it is a form of employment.

Of course, this is possible in any philosophical style or tradition, but this is the special attraction of "continental" philosophy for me. This style of thinking irrupted in the nineteenth century with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who wrote with their blood, as we say, and the young Marx, and stretched from phenomenology to poststructuralism in the twentieth century, and came to



a head under the name of postmodernism, the affirmation of difference and plurality in a dizzying digitalized world. This tradition speaks from the heart, speaks to the heart.

I came to philosophy through religion and theology, and as a result philosophy has always had a salvific and prophetic quality for me. It has always been a way to save myself, even as in antiquity philosophy did not mean an academic specialty but a way of living wisely. This is all threatened today by the professionalization of the university, of our teaching and our writing.

**G. Y.:** The twentieth-century French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard claimed that postmodernism involved a resistance toward and critical questioning of metanarratives—“big stories” like the Enlightenment, the march of scientific progress, or the supremacy of the West, that legitimate nations or cultures. I think postmodernism has tremendous value in terms of critically engaging racism. Yet, metanarratives are also powerful, and resistant to being undone. Besides encouraging white people to become more thoughtful, how do we do the deeper ethical work of *dwelling near* each other, recognizing our shared humanity?

**J. D. C.:** “Emancipation” is a prophetic call that never stops calling. If we take it as a metanarrative, then we run the danger of being lulled into a myth of progress, and we have seen how successful the Right has been in reversing progress in civil rights and fair elections. But if I am dubious about metanarratives, I am not dubious about prophetic action, which lies in singular sustained acts of resistance.

I have several times used the example of Rosa Parks. She did not one day, out of the blue, refuse to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus, nor was she even the first one to do that. What she did that day was another in a long line of acts of resistance, but this one worked. This one “linked,” as Lyotard would put it.<sup>2</sup> It set off a city-wide bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, which was led by a young pastor no one ever heard of who ran a local church, a fellow named Martin Luther King Jr. The rest is history—a history the Right would like to undo. So Rosa Parks did the right thing at the right time in the right place. She set off the “perfect storm”—for racists!

I have a hope against hope not in metanarratives but in singular actions like that. Singular, but consistent and resolute.

**G. Y.:** Lastly, do you think that we need more prophetic voices in the world? What sort of *Bildung* or educational cultivation might help to generate more prophetic voices as opposed to those voices that appear to be seduced by power and narrow thinking?

**J. D. C.:** The prophetic voices are often the voices of obscure people who have no idea they’re prophets, who produce changes they never dreamed possible. So massive changes, structural changes, tend to be a function of mini-changes, singular deeds of singular people. We require a massive change in a culture of

greed and selfishness, where the concept of the “common good” is moribund, never even mentioned.

One place this change should be focused is the children, investing in the schools, lifting up a generation of desperately disadvantaged children in the ghettos, which I think is the best shot we have to break the cycle of poverty. There is no better place to experience the prophetic call of the other than in the face of a child in need, no better way to “dwell near” the other, as you put it.

Right now, with electoral districts gerrymandered against the poor, and with the unchecked flow of right-wing wealth into political campaigns, the electoral process that is supposed to address these problems has been profoundly distorted and corrupted. Right now, I fear it will take a generation to correct that. But the whole idea of prophetic action is that it is precisely when we are sure that things can never be changed that a woman refuses to sit in the back of the bus and the whole world changes. I also have hope in contemporary systems of communication. If we can keep them open, otherwise invisible individual acts of resistance—and oppression—become visible. That will keep the future open. That is our hope against hope.

## NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking Books, 1963); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
2. Jean-François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, trans. Vlad Gozich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).



# Shannon Sullivan

**George Yancy:** What motivated you to engage “whiteness” in your work as a philosopher?

**Shannon Sullivan:** It was teaching feminist philosophy for the first time or two and trying to figure out how to reach the handful of men in the class—white men, now that I think of it. They tended to be skeptical at best and openly hostile at worst to the feminist ideas we were discussing. They felt attacked and put up a lot of defenses. I was trying to see things from their perspective, not to endorse it (it was often quite sexist!), but to be more effective as a teacher. And so I thought about my whiteness and how I might feel and respond in a class that critically addressed race in ways that implicated me personally. Not that race and gender are the same or can be captured through analogies, but it was a first step toward grappling with my whiteness and trying to use it.

What really strikes me now, as I think about your question, is how old I was—around thirty—before I ever engaged whiteness philosophically, or personally, for that matter. Three decades where that question never came up, and yet the unjust advantages whiteness generally provides white people fully shaped my life, including my philosophical training and work.

**G. Y.:** How did whiteness shape your philosophical training? When I speak to my white graduate philosophy students about this, they have no sense that they are being shaped by the “whiteness” of philosophy. They are under the impression that they are doing philosophy, pure and simple, which is probably a function of the power of whiteness.

**S. S.:** I think I’m only just discovering this and probably am only aware of the tip of the iceberg. Here is some of what I’ve learned, thanks to the work of Charles Mills, Linda Martín Alcoff, Kathryn Gines, Tommy Curry, and many other philosophers of color: It’s not just that in grad school I didn’t read many

philosophers outside a white, Eurocentric canon (or maybe *any*—wow, I’m thinking hard here, but the answer might be zero). It’s also that as a result of that training, my philosophical habits of thinking, of where to go in the literature and the history of philosophy for help ruminating on a philosophical topic—even that of race—predisposed me toward white philosophers. Rebuilding different philosophical habits can be done, but it’s a slow and frustrating process. It would have been better to develop different philosophical habits from the get-go.

My professional identity and whether I count as a full person in the discipline is bound up with my middle-class whiteness, even as my being a woman jeopardizes that identity somewhat. Whiteness has colonized “doing philosophy, pure and simple,” which has a significant bearing on what it means to be a “real” philosopher. Graduate students tend to be deeply anxious about whether they are or will eventually count as real philosophers, and whiteness functions through that anxiety even as that anxiety can seem to be totally unrelated to race (to white people anyway—I’m not sure it seems that unrelated to graduate students of color).

**G. Y.:** For many whites, the question of their whiteness never comes up or only comes up when they are much older, as it did in your case. And yet, as you say, there is the accrual of unjust white advantages. What are some reasons that white people fail to come to terms with the fact that they benefit from whiteness?

**S. S.:** That’s a tough one, and there probably are lots of reasons, including beliefs in boot-strap individualism, meritocracy, and the like. Another answer, I think, has to do with class differences among white people. A lot of poor white people haven’t benefitted as much from whiteness as middle- and upper-class white people have. Poor white people’s “failure” to come to terms with the benefits of their whiteness isn’t as obvious, I guess I’d say. I’m not talking about a kind of utilitarian calculus where we can add up and compare quantities of white advantage, but there are differences.

I’m thinking here of an article I just read in the *Charlotte Observer* that my new home state of North Carolina is the first one to financially compensate victims of an aggressive program of forced sterilization, one that ran from the Great Depression all the way through the Nixon presidency. (A headline on an editorial in the *Observer* called the state’s payouts “eugenics checks.”) The so-called feeble-minded who were targeted included poor and other vulnerable people of all races, even as sterilization rates apparently increased in areas of North Carolina as those areas’ Black populations increased. My point is that eugenics programs in the United States often patrolled the borders of proper whiteness by regulating the bodies and lives of the white “failures” who were allegedly too poor, stupid, and uneducated to do whiteness right.

Even though psychological wages of whiteness do exist for poor white people, those wages pay pennies on the dollar compared to those for financially comfortable white people. So coming to terms with whiteness's benefits can mean really different things, as can failing to do so. I think focusing the target on middle-class white people's failure is important. Which might just bring me right back to your question!

**G. Y.:** And yet for so many poor people of color there is not only the fact that the wages pay less than pennies, as it were, but that Black life continues to be valued as less. Is there a history of that racial differential wage between poor whites and poor Blacks or people of color?

**S. S.:** Yes, definitely. Class and poverty are real factors here, but they don't erase the effects of race and racism, at least not in the United States and not in a lot of other countries with histories (and presents) of white domination. The challenge philosophically and personally is to keep all the relevant factors in play in thinking about these issues. In that complex tangle, you hit the nail on the head when you said that Black life continues to be valued as less. Poor white people's lives aren't valued for much either, but at least in their case it seems that something went wrong, that there was something of potential value that was lost.

Let's put it even more bluntly: America is fundamentally shaped by white domination, and as such it does not care about the lives of Black people, period. It never has, it doesn't now, and it makes me wonder about whether it ever will.

Here is an important question: What would it mean to face up to the fact that the United States doesn't really care much about Black people? I think a lot about Derrick Bell's racial realism nowadays, especially after reading some recent empirical work about the detrimental effects of hope in the lives of Black men—hope, that is, that progress against racial discrimination and injustice is being made. How would strategies for fighting white domination and ensuring the flourishing of people of color change if Black people gave up that hope? If strategies for living and thriving were pegged to the hard truth that white-saturated societies don't and might not ever value Black lives? Except perhaps as instruments for white people's financial, psychological, and other advantages—we have a long history of that, of course.

**G. Y.:** We're all aware of the recent nonindictments of the Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, who killed Michael Brown, and the New York City police officer Daniel Pantaleo, who killed Eric Garner in Staten Island. How do we critically engage people who see this as another blow to Black humanity, another blow to hope?

**S. S.:** It is another blow to Black humanity. I don't see any way around that. And also another blow to hope. But that doesn't mean that despair is the

only alternative. I admit it's hard to see beyond that dichotomy—hope or despair—and I struggle to see beyond it. But maybe it's a false dichotomy, pegged to hopes that the legal system, including civil rights struggles, can get us out of this mess. What if we operated instead from the hypothesis that the legal system cannot do this, at least not at this moment in history? One thing that both Ferguson and the failure to indict in the Eric Garner case tell us is that “we” must come up with other alternatives or else “we” (I have to underscore the question of who the “we” is here) risk driving people to violence. Even when “they” don't necessarily wish to resort to violence, I think that also is important to underscore. I don't think that anyone particularly wants violence in its own right, but what happens when there aren't other options to ensure that Black people are considered full persons?

**G. Y.:** The critique of hope, as you suggest above, appears to be based on the assumption that the system of white supremacy and the devaluation of Black life will not fundamentally change. In this case, Black hope is just spinning its wheels. And yet, President Obama speaks of the audacity of hope. In what way do you square his hope with the pervasive feeling of a lack of hope among Black people when it comes to the end of racial injustice?

**S. S.:** When you talk of Black hope as spinning its wheels, I can't help but think of South Africa, which has just celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the end of apartheid and mourned the death of its first postapartheid president, Nelson Mandela. Its government is predominantly Black, including its current president, Jacob Zuma. It's a remarkable transformation, one that seems to provide the world with hope. But living conditions for most Black South Africans have not changed, and brutal patterns of racial segregation are still firmly in place. In fact, Black poverty and racial inequalities in income have actually increased since the end of legal segregation.

The answer of course is *not* to return to apartheid. I feel like I have to say that, especially as a white person skeptical of Black hope for equality! But liberal hope in racial progress isn't going to cut it. Again, there have to be other options, and then the question becomes whether violent revolution is the only other option.

The potential for racial conflagration is very real, I think, even beyond what we recently have seen in Ferguson. Would it be effective in changing the institutional, national, global, and personal habits that need to be changed to take down white supremacy? I worry that violence is a shortcut that doesn't help remake habits, racial or otherwise, and so it won't solve the long-term problem. At the same time, you and I should be suspicious of that worry. It's very convenient, isn't it, for a white person to have philosophical reservations about the effectiveness of violent Black resistance? I am not endorsing violence. What I'd like to do instead is shift the subject; I think that the issue of violence is something of a red herring. The urgent question in the United

States is not whether violence in response to Ferguson or elsewhere is justified. That question distracts us from the more important issue of how to make sure that Black men aren't perceived as inherently criminal.

As for the audacity of hope promoted by Obama, I worry that in the end it has backfired. I too felt the buoyancy of hope in 2008. But electing the first Black president did not shift the scales of racial justice in the United States very much, if at all. This is not an argument against Obama's election, but one that many of us were naïve in thinking that Black exceptionalism wouldn't rear its ugly head if the "exception" in question was the president himself.

**G. Y.:** If it is true that we live in a white-saturated society, how do you conceptualize your role, especially as a white person who grapples with whiteness philosophically and existentially?

**S. S.:** I think that white people have a small but important role to play in combating white domination. Small, because the idea isn't that white people are going to lead that work; they need to be following the work and leadership of people of color. But important because, given de facto racial segregation, there still are many pockets of whiteness—in neighborhoods, businesses, classrooms, philosophy departments—where you need white people who are going to challenge racism when it pops up. Which it often does.

But I think I have to add that this role is absurd. I mean absurd in the technical existentialist sense that, for example, Kierkegaard and Camus gave it. I don't have a lot of hope that our white-saturated society is ever going to change, and at the same time it is crucial that one struggles for that change. Those two things don't rationally fit together, I realize. It's absurd to struggle for something that you don't think can happen, and yet we (people of all races) should.

It's like Camus's main character in *The Plague*, the doctor who realizes that the plague will never completely go away. It—death, the atrocities of Nazi Germany—always wins in the end, even if one achieves some minor victories against it. We could add white supremacy to Camus's list. It's crucial to fight it even if total victory is impossible, to care for those who suffer because of it. And we all suffer because of it. The plague spares no one even as it hits different groups and individuals in different ways.

**G. Y.:** You know, many white readers will respond to this interview and argue that you desire white people to feel guilt or shame. I would argue that this is *not* your aim at all. Yet, is it an easy tactic for denying the legitimacy of what you've argued?

**S. S.:** You're right that I'm not trying to cultivate white guilt or shame. This will get me in hot water, but I don't think those are emotions that will help white people effectively struggle for racial justice in the long haul. I'm not saying that white people should never feel guilty or ashamed because of their race, and I don't think that not feeling guilty or ashamed is a way to let white



people off the hook. But guilt and shame are toxic just as hatred and greed are, and we sure don't need to increase the toxicity of white people. James Baldwin said it best when he argued that white people will have to learn how to love themselves and each other before they can let go of their need for Black inferiority.

## Craig Irvine

**George Yancy:** How did you become interested in narrative medicine?

**Craig Irvine:** I moved to New York in 1995, a year after completing my doctorate. I loved the city and had long dreamed of living there. Since I didn't yet have a job, it was a good time to make the move. For the first couple of years, I worked as an adjunct at several colleges, while working also as an office temp. Then in 1998 a friend who worked at the Center for Family Medicine at Columbia University told me about an opening for an administrative position. My friend knew that the family physician who was hiring, Vincent Silenzio, was interested in philosophy and thought we might make a good match. The job involved managing accounts, schedules, spreadsheets—the usual sort of thing—but Vince also wanted someone who could teach and write. Shortly after I was hired, Vince and I set to work writing grants to buy me out of my administrative work. One of the first was a Residency Training in Primary Care grant through the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). HRSA was requesting proposals to support ethics training for residents; we proposed developing a narrative ethics curriculum in Columbia's family medicine residency program. That seemed somewhat risky at the time, as narrative ethics would have been relatively unknown in the medical academy. In writing the grant, we worked closely with Rita Charon, an internist with a PhD in literature who had been working in the field broadly designated "humanities and medicine" at Columbia since 1983. The grant received an excellent score from HRSA, and we initiated the curriculum in 2000. That same year, Dr. Charon coined the term 'narrative medicine' as a way to distinguish the work being done at Columbia from humanities training at other medical academies, and in 2003 the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded her a grant to support the further development of this work. By then, I'd been teaching philosophy courses for Dr. Charon's Program in Narrative Medicine

(every medical student is required to take one six-week-long narrative medicine “selective”) for several years. She funded a portion of my salary with the NEH grant, which established an intensive collaborative learning seminar at Columbia. The core seminar group included scholars from diverse disciplines, including psychoanalysis, pediatrics, literary and film studies, internal medicine, fiction writing, and philosophy. For over two years, our group met twice monthly to investigate the fundamental role of storytelling in clinical practice across all healthcare professions. Each of the seminar participants proposed contributions that her or his discipline might make to the theoretical foundations for the application of narrative to healthcare practices. Together we explored the relationality inherent in the close reading of literature, the power of creative writing to grant access to feelings and reframe experience, the ethics of giving and receiving accounts of self, and the relevance of all of these topics to health, illness, and disability. The core NEH seminar group also developed narrative medicine pedagogy, with a view toward enhancing the narrative skills fundamental to effective clinical practice. In 2006 we began offering narrative medicine workshops for nurses, physicians, social workers, psychologists, chaplains, and other clinicians, as well as academics, writers, artists, and others interested in the intersection of narrative and medicine. In 2009, we developed the Master’s Program in Narrative Medicine, of which I have been the Director since 2010.

**G. Y.:** How would you specifically define narrative medicine and some of its philosophical assumptions?

**C. I.:** Put simply, narrative medicine is medicine practiced with narrative competence, or the skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved to action by stories of illness.

A fundamental philosophical assumption of this field is that stories are the primordial means through which we experience and convey the meaning of our lives. We share Paul Ricoeur’s conviction that our lives are always already “entangled” in stories, challenging the notion that life happens first and stories come after.<sup>1</sup> For Ricoeur, experience is not some sort of bare biological phenomenon onto which stories are grafted from the outside, after the fact, as a retrospective representation. Rather, from the beginning we experience life *in* stories—stories told by our families, nations, cultures, literatures, religions, and more. Their narration drives our constantly evolving process of identity formation. Indeed, Ricoeur contends that life is the process of constructing a narrative identity. Gadamer’s notion of the “fusion of horizons” is helpful here.<sup>2</sup> Visiting your grandparents during a break from college, you ask them to tell you again about the itinerants who came to their door during the Depression, seeking work or just a meal and a place to rest. Your grandparents were Dustbowl farmers, barely scraping by, but they had more than the folks on the road, and they always shared what they could. You hear this story *inside*

another story: the parable of the Samaritan, which you first heard on a Sunday morning before your earliest memory. In high school you read *The Grapes of Wrath*, and this story now nests inside your grandparent's story nested inside the Good Samaritan's. Each of these stories is a world opening before you a horizon of possible experience. Leaving your grandparent's house, you live inside all of these worlds, following paths extending to the edge of their fused horizons. You are the living embodiment of national, cultural, familial, religious, literary narratives, their forms the very shape of your identity.

Taking up this notion of narrative identity, we challenge the hegemony of a reductionist medicine for which alleviating suffering seems to require silencing the voices of those who suffer. I am particularly inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, who brings attention to the responsibility to answer the call of the suffering Other. Medical science developed as a response to this call. Descartes writes in his *Discourse on Method* that the entire focus of his work—the principal goal for developing a unified science—is to acquire knowledge of nature that would allow for the development of more reliable rules for medicine.<sup>3</sup> Mission accomplished! Medicine has certainly done more than any other human endeavor to address human suffering. Yet medical science, like all forms of conceptualization, naturally tends toward closure: it is allergic to alterity, hostile to whatever falls outside its totalizing gaze. For Cartesian medical science, the body is a complicated machine, an “extended thing” fundamentally separate from the self, which is an essentially *thinking* substance. Medicine therefore abstracts its treatment of the body, or of the fractured systems and organs of the body, from the *selfhood* of the person who is suffering. The patient is not a unique person, but an instance of a generic dysfunction: “the diabetic in Room 237.” Who among us has not experienced the effects of this objectification, this alienation from our own bodies, under the clinical gaze?

Narrative medicine draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty to help medicine rethink the Cartesian separation of self from body. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is essentially embodied. I do not experience my body as an object alongside other objects in objective space, like a rock, a chair, or even a very complicated machine. My body is my very consciousness, my self. Merleau-Ponty makes the abstractions of science secondary to the primary, prereflective, prescientific, embodied experience of consciousness. He encourages us to *describe* rather than to *explain* this experience. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's work, contemporary phenomenologists like Havi Carel, Richard Zaner, and S. Kay Toombs help us to recognize that, for the sufferer, illness and disability are not experienced as a disruption of an objective body separate from the self, but as a disruption of the *lived body* that threatens my very identity. If the heart of who I am lives in stories—Ricoeur's narrative identity—then one cannot hope to respond to the lifeworld-altering aspects of illness without

close attention not only to the “objective” conclusions of the differential diagnosis but to the singular, specific stories of each patient.

**G. Y.:** Talk about some of the factors (social, personal) that shaped your consciousness about race.

**C. I.:** I grew up in southern Minnesota, on a small family farm five miles from a town of six hundred souls peacefully slumbering in what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls “the Dream.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, I had no consciousness of race whatsoever throughout my childhood. I knew no people of color, and no one I knew, knew any people of color. I watched a lot of TV without even the vaguest consciousness that the world flickering there in black and white was in truth entirely white. I moved through a world of whiteness, blissfully taking for granted that this was simply the world as such, the “universal” world, the world open and available to one and all.

At the time, southern Minnesota was quite liberal. My father and mother and all their friends were diehard members of the DFL (Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party). My siblings and I and all our friends shared our parents’ sympathies. Our hero was Hubert Humphrey, the man responsible for adding the first proposal to end racial segregation to the national platform of the Democratic party (in 1948, ten years before I was born) and lead author of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Everyone in our rural, white bubble would have assured you we were not racist. We believed all humans were created equal, that everyone had the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We loved Sidney Poitier! (We fully supported his right to marry that nice, rich, liberal white girl who invited him to dinner.) We deplored the rhetoric of George Wallace, were outraged by the reports of lynchings, wept over the images of church bombings. Racism was an evil that flourished far from the enlightened North, perpetrated by backward Southerners—cowards who raped and brutalized and murdered under cover of sheets or mobs or Jim Crow laws. We believed we were on the side of the angels.

We weren’t racist, but it never occurred to us to imagine that all of those angels hovering around a white Jesus enthroned beside His white Father were anything but white. On the authority of our *Children’s Illustrated Bible*, from which mom read to us every night, Black angels were devils.

We weren’t racist, but *Gone with the Wind* was our family’s favorite movie. Our parents first took us when I was nine years old. It was 1967, and it was still the most popular movie in history, white people lining up around the block to see it. The theater was packed, so we had to split up: I was the youngest, so my next-oldest sister and I sat on either side of my mother in the front row. The movie was deeply imprinted on my psyche; I still recall the title card that scrolls down the screen at the opening: “There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South. Here on this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair,

of Master and of Slave. Look for it in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. A civilization gone with the wind.” It only gets worse from there, but hearing the film’s grand opening strains still brings me to tears.

We weren’t racist, but whenever we had to choose someone to be “it” in tag, we’d chant,

Eeeny, meeny, miny, moe,  
Catch a nigger by the toe,  
If he hollers, let him go,  
Eeny, meeny, miny, moe.

I was so unconscious about the racist meaning of that chant that I was well into my twenties before the shock of realizing what we’d been chanting finally registered.

*All in the Family* debuted in 1971. Like most of America, we congratulated ourselves for feeling superior to Archie, while experiencing a frisson of titillation at his overt racism. (We cheered when Sammy Davis Jr. kissed him.) While the show certainly broke ground, and all due respect to Norman Lear, we, and much of liberal white America, ignorant of our own racism, laughed at the ignorance of an obviously racist character, thus reinforcing the dominant narrative of liberal white progress that only further fortified our own ignorance. When the Jeffersons moved to the East Side, we didn’t wake from our dream—we just spun them into our story and continued to sleep like babies.

I went to an overwhelmingly white college, and after I graduated in 1980 I spent four years in an overwhelmingly white monastery. When I came out of the closet as a gay man and left the monastic community, I moved to a predominantly white neighborhood in Minneapolis and worked at an all-white group home (staff and residents) for developmentally disabled adults. A couple years later I went to graduate school at Penn State; there were no students of color matriculating in the graduate philosophy program at the time, and the faculty was entirely white. During all of this time, I had no Black friends. And yet I carried with me, through all of these experiences, the conviction that I was not racist.

The only significant experience around race I can recall during all of those years occurred in 1981, when I was still in the monastery. I traveled to New York (monks are allowed to take vacations) to visit my friend Michael. Michael had a Black friend, Sherman, who lived in a brownstone in Crown Heights. On a particularly hot August day, Sherman took us on a driving tour of Brooklyn; while we were cruising through Bedford-Stuyvesant, he asked me if I’d like to get a soda. I was thirsty, so he pulled over and pointed to a bodega on the other side of the street. I panicked. This was a “bad” neighborhood: I hadn’t seen a white person in block after block. I started to tell Sherman that I’d changed my mind, that I wasn’t thirsty after all, but then

I felt foolish and weak, so I opened the door and stepped out of the car. I can still vividly recall the flush of fear, my heart hammering, palms wet. I felt as if eyes were following me from every direction. Danger on all sides. I passed a group of men hanging outside the bodega; I kept my eyes forward, feeling dizzy, trying not to stumble. I grabbed the first soda I saw, even though the can had one of those big bulges on the bottom that made it tilt sidewise in the cooler, paid without looking up, and walked back to the car as quickly as I could, forcing myself not to break into a run. For years afterward, when I told this story, I would always add that what I'd experienced that day "must be what Black people feel like most of the time."

I know now that this is not the case. Thanks to your work, George, and that of other whiteness theorists, which I began reading just a few short years ago, I know that I carried my whiteness into Bed-Stuy. I know that I continued to move through a white world, even in a space predominantly occupied by Black bodies. I know that I could not then and cannot now step over to the "other side," because my whiteness is transcendental—the norm that defines itself in dialectical *opposition* to the "other side" (good angels are not-Black; the ones who choose are not-Black; safe neighborhoods are not-Black). And I know that knowing this is not enough to free me from the whiteness of my being-in-the-world, or what you've aptly called "whitely-being-in-the-world." Knowing this does not mean that I cease to live and perpetuate the privileges of whiteness. Knowing this does not mean that my whiteness no longer perpetuates violence against Black lives. Knowing this does not mean that I am free from ignorance, that I no longer live in a dream. What would it mean to wake? As a white man, I am a phantom being living in a phantom world. This isn't the Matrix—there is no "real world" to wake into when someone pulls the plug. To face this means, as you have stressed, to live without hope.

**G. Y.:** That's powerful, Craig. So, how does race, especially the subject of whiteness, relate to narrative medicine?

**C. I.:** The United States healthcare system is broken. Even that isn't strong enough, because "broken" implies that it was once whole. It is undeniable that those who suffer most from the inequities, abuses, and dehumanization of our profit-driven healthcare system are people of color. Tuskegee was not an aberration. Studies consistently show deep health disparities based on race, despite decades of efforts to address them. African-Americans suffer the lowest life expectancy, highest infant mortality, highest rates of disability and preventable diseases, and highest rates of death from cancer, heart disease, asthma complications, and diabetes among all groups. These disparities exist even when such factors as age, severity of conditions, insurance status, and income are comparable. There is no question that bias, stereotyping, and prejudice contribute greatly to racial and ethnic disparities in healthcare. When polled, however, the overwhelming majority of physicians (75 percent of

whom are white, non-Hispanic, and only 5 percent Black) report that they are not biased and that they treat all their patients the same, regardless of race. How can bias be so pervasive yet remain almost completely unacknowledged by its perpetrators despite decades of efforts to introduce “cultural competency” training into health professions curricula? And if it lives in all these good, liberal doctors, how might racism live in me, in the life I live, in all of my relationships, in the work to which I’ve dedicated myself professionally? It was facing these questions that moved me to begin to study race and whiteness theory.

That’s how I discovered your work, George. I had been teaching Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists in a course called *Bodies, Illness, and Care* for several years. This seemed the ideal context to begin exploring how racism thrives as an embodied phenomenon despite or perhaps even because of the liberal ideology of those who perpetuate it. I asked a philosopher friend if she might recommend something, and she pointed me to *Black Bodies, White Gazes*. I found there much more than I’d bargained for. Your work asked me to recognize my *own* whiteness as the normative, relationally lived phenomenon that sustains all racist practices, including those perpetuated by the healthcare system narrative medicine seeks to reform. As a philosopher, I am quite comfortable living in my head, even when teaching phenomenology. Your work brought me into my body in an entirely new way. To challenge racism and the role whiteness plays in perpetuating racist practices requires more, as you stress, than a cognitive shift. It requires work on the somatic level. It doesn’t matter how many lectures are delivered or articles published by well-meaning healthcare reformers about the evils of racial disparities; until white researchers, clinicians, and the reformers themselves begin to engage in a continuous effort to perform our bodies’ racialized interactions with the world differently, meaningful healthcare reform will never take place.

In your work, you explicitly address the role white racist narrative plays in sustaining whitely-being-in-the-world. This is, of course, of particular importance to narrative medicine. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, you write about narrative’s power to communicate the lived and imaginative dimensions of experience, beyond abstract reflection. This is a central conviction of our work in narrative medicine. You teach us how to apply this conviction to the interrogation of the racist distal narratives—familial, national, religious, literary, and more—that shape the meaning of the Black body under healthcare’s white gaze, perpetuating its racist practices. You guide us in reading literature—like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*—that imaginatively communicates the lived experience of the dehumanizing, brutalizing power of the white gaze. Your work is required reading in our core masters curriculum, and your Narrative Medicine Grand Rounds lecture at Columbia last year (2015) is a seminal event in the evolution of our program.



**G. Y.:** By integrating critical analyses of whiteness into the work that you do, have you found that white students are receptive or defensive or perhaps a bit of both? Speak to this.

**C. I.:** More than a bit of both, I'd say. Whether working with undergraduates, masters students, medical students, residents, or experienced clinicians, I experience a broad range of responses from white students, from assertions that they "don't see race, everyone is equal, racism would disappear if we just stopped talking about it" to honest, critical analyses of the ways their everyday interactions in and with the world constitute and perpetuate the normative hegemony of whiteness. Not surprisingly, I've found that the most effective means of moving white students out of the former position—to encourage them to begin to see the unseen—is to talk about my own experience, elaborating on what I've discussed above, regarding the formation of my identity as a white. Even then, of course, I don't bring everyone along. There are white students who are anxious to distance themselves from me, insisting that their own backgrounds are very different from mine: "I grew up in New York City"; "My brother was adopted from Ethiopia"; "My parents would never have let us use 'that word.'" Other white students seek to undermine the interpretations of critical race theory by offering "opposing" interpretations: "I cross a dark street because the person approaching me is a man, not because he is Black," or "My Black friend doesn't agree with Yancy." I certainly understand these attempts to evade, to cling to faith in one's enlightenment, to maintain one's exceptionality. I understand, because I struggle daily—hourly—to peel the scales from my own eyes. At least once every day I feel a satisfying rush of angry indignation as I excoriate Trump's supporters. Blaming the "bad whites," as you write, is an effective strategy for refusing to recognize my own center of power. There will be no end to my struggle to see, and thus to find ways to teach, the unseen contingency of my whiteness when every moment of every waking hour my ignorance is so richly rewarded.

**G. Y.:** So, how would you speak to a latent skepticism from students of color that a white male is able to speak in honest and transgressive ways to white power?

**C. I.:** I would never challenge the skepticism from students of color that a white male is able to speak in honest and transgressive ways to white power. Any judgments they might make regarding my honesty or dishonesty, my collusion or transgression, are based on a lived experience of racism—including acute observations of the performance of whiteness—to which I only have access by listening to the stories that inform their judgments. I still struggle to find effective ways to facilitate the telling of these stories, whether in the auditorium, the clinic, the classroom, or the hospital. It is my race and gender that have placed me in the position of facilitator. If I'm being honest, then I have to admit that the scope and acuity of my honesty and the range and

effectiveness of my transgression are limited by the all-embracing, structural operations of whiteness from which I continue to benefit, whether visible to me or not. Students of color understand this; to pretend otherwise only further compromises trust.

**G. Y.:** If you were able to speak to white America and the narratives that so many of them live by, what would you say?

**C. I.:** Most of the narratives we live by as white Americans support the normativity of whiteness. This normativity brutalizes, marginalizes, impoverishes, rapes, subjugates, imprisons, and traumatizes people of color. As antiracist theorist Tim Wise has argued, it is also bad for the majority of whites, because it supports structures of power that enrich those at the top while feeding those on the bottom a myth of superiority that suppresses their sense of injustice. This myth is narrated in the histories of our families, in the primers that teach us to read, in the sagas of our country's founding, and the lyrics of our popular songs. It is narrated in the great majority of television shows and movies, fictional and documentary. It is narrated in morning and evening news reports—in the coverage of politics, disasters, celebrity gossip, and sports. Some of the media may be new, but the narratives themselves are very old. We've been telling them for centuries—monstrous children, infantilized by our own fairy tales, oblivious to the suffering we cause. So much suffering for so long. This isn't inevitable. It does not have to continue. It is time to practice what my colleague Sayantani DasGupta has termed “narrative humility.”<sup>5</sup> Time to open ourselves to the stories of those we continue to hurt, while engaging in the difficult work of narrative self-evaluation, self-critique. If we are to stop hurting others, we must be completely unmade. It is time to be split wide open—time for a narrative identity crisis.

## NOTES

1. Paul Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 20–33.
2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum International, 2004).
3. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 44.
4. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Random House, 2015).
5. Sayantani DasGupta, “Narrative Humility,” *Lancet* 371, no. 9617 (2008): 980–81.



# Joe Feagin

**George Yancy:** To what extent does your work as a sociologist overlap or pertain to what we might concern ourselves with as philosophers?

**Joe Feagin:** I have been deeply concerned with issues of social and moral philosophy since college. I majored in philosophy as an undergraduate and then went to Harvard Divinity School, where I worked with philosopher-theologians in social ethics, European theology, and comparative religions. I studied with James Luther Adams, Paul Tillich, Richard R. Niebuhr, Arthur Darby Nock, and others. When I switched to doctoral work in sociology at Harvard, I studied with the theoreticians Talcott Parsons, George Homans, Robert Bellah, Charles Tilly, and Gordon Allport. Allport and his young colleague Tom Pettigrew got me seriously interested in studying racial-ethnic theory in social science as well as the empirical reality of racism in the United States. During this decade (the 1960s) I was also greatly influenced by major African American social analysts of racism, like W. E. B. Du Bois, Stokely Carmichael, and Charles Hamilton. More recently, my work has been used by philosophers of race, including Lewis Gordon, Charles Mills, Linda Alcoff, Tommy Curry—and yourself.

**G. Y.:** In your book *The White Racial Frame*, you argue for a new paradigm that will help to explain the nature of racism. What is that new paradigm, and what does it reveal about race in America?

**J. F.:** To understand well the realities of North American racism, one must adopt an analytical perspective focused on the what, why, and who of the systemic white racism that is central and foundational to this society. Most mainstream social scientists dealing with racism issues have relied heavily on inadequate analytical concepts like prejudice, bias, animus, stereotyping, and intolerance. Such concepts are often useful, but were long ago crafted by white social scientists focusing on individual racial and ethnic issues, not on

society's systemic racism. To fully understand (white) racism in the United States, one has to go to the centuries-old counter-system tradition of African American analysts and other analysts of color who have done the most sustained and penetrating analyses of institutional and systemic racism.

**G. Y.:** So, are you suggesting that racial prejudices are only half the story? Does the question of the systemic nature of racism make white people complicit regardless of racial prejudices?

**J. F.:** Prejudice is much less than half the story. Because prejudice is only one part of the larger white racial frame that is central to rationalizing and maintaining systemic racism, one can be less racially prejudiced and still operate out of many other aspects of that dominant frame. That white racial frame includes not only racist prejudices and stereotypes of conventional analyses, but also racist ideologies, narratives, images, and emotions, as well as individual and small-group inclinations to discriminate shaped by the other features. Additionally, all whites, no matter what their racial prejudices and other racial framings entail, benefit from many racial privileges routinely granted by this country's major institutions to whites.

**G. Y.:** The NAACP called the murder of nine African Americans in the historic Emanuel AME Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, an "act of racial terrorism"? Do you think that definition is correct?

**J. F.:** According to media reports, the convicted murderer Dylann Roof has aggressively expressed numerous ideas, narratives, symbols, and emotions from an openly white supremacist version of that old white racial frame. The NAACP terminology is justified, given that the oldest terrorist group still active on the planet is the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan. We must also emphasize the larger societal context of recurring white supremacist actions, which implicates white Americans more generally. Mainstream media commentators and politicians have mostly missed the critical point that much of the serious anti-Black and prowhite framing proclaimed by supremacist groups is still shared, publicly or privately, by many other whites. The latter include many whites horrified at what these white terrorist groups have recently done.

**G. Y.:** I realize that this question would take more space than we have here, but what specific insights about race can you share after five decades of research?

**J. F.:** Let me mention just two. First, I have learned much about how this country's racial oppression became well-institutionalized and thoroughly systemic over many generations, including how it has been rationalized and maintained for centuries by the broad white racist framing just mentioned. Another key insight is about how long this country's timeline of racial oppression, and resistance to that oppression by Americans of color, actually is. Most whites, and many others, do not understand that about 80 percent of this country's four centuries have involved extreme racialized slavery and extreme Jim Crow legal segregation.

As a result, major racial inequalities have been deeply institutionalized over about twenty generations. One key feature of systemic racism is how it has been socially reproduced by individuals, groups, and institutions for many generations. Most whites think racial inequalities reflect differences they see as real—superior work ethic, greater intelligence, or other meritorious abilities of whites. Social science research is clear that white-Black inequalities today are substantially the result of a majority of whites socially inheriting unjust enrichments (money, land, home equities, social capital, etc.) from numerous previous white generations—the majority of whom benefited from the racialized slavery system and/or the *de jure* (Jim Crow) and *de facto* overt racial oppression that followed slavery for nearly a century, indeed until the late 1960s.

**G. Y.:** What then are we to make of the concept of American meritocracy and the Horatio Alger narrative—the rags-to-riches narrative?

**J. F.:** These are often just convenient social fictions, not societal realities. For centuries they have been circulated to justify why whites as a group have superior socioeconomic and power positions in American society. In the white frame's pro-white subframe, whites are said to be the hardest working and most meritorious group. Yet the sociologist Nancy DiTomaso has found in many interviews with whites that a substantial majority have used networks of white acquaintances, friends, and family to find most jobs over their lifetimes. They have mostly avoided real market competition and secured good jobs using racially segregated networks, not just on their "merit." Not one interviewee openly saw anything wrong with their use of this widespread system of white favoritism, which involves "social capital" passed along numerous white generations.

**G. Y.:** Can we talk about race in America without inevitably talking about racism?

**J. F.:** No, we cannot. In its modern racialized sense, the term 'race' was created by white American and European analysts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in order to explain how they, as "good Christians," could so extensively and brutally oppress, initially, indigenous and African Americans. There was no well-developed American hierarchy of "races," a key feature of systemic racism, before white Europeans and white Americans made that the societal reality in the Americas by means of the Atlantic slave trade and the genocidal theft of indigenous peoples' lands. Whites were soon framed as the virtuous and "superior race," while those oppressed were dehumanized as the "inferior races."

**G. Y.:** There are some who argue that slavery existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans. Assuming that this is true, was it different or similar to forms of slavery in the Americas?

**J. E.:** Many white analysts, and some analysts of color operating out of the white frame, like to immediately bring up this subject of slavery somewhere else when US slavery should be at issue. In such cases, it is usually an argument designed to avoid dealing forthrightly with the subject of this country's economic and political foundation on one of the worst types of slavery systems ever created in any society.

My answer is this: Let us first fully confront and understand the horrific reality of two-plus centuries of our extreme enslavement system, its great immorality, and its many horrific legacies persisting through the Jim Crow era and still operative in the present day, and then we can deal with the issue of comparative slavery systems. By no means have we as scholars and citizens accomplished this first and far more important task. Indeed, relatively few whites today know or care about the terrible legacies of our slavery and Jim Crow systems, including the fact that we still live under an undemocratic constitution undemocratically made, and early implemented, by leading white slaveholders.

**G. Y.:** What implications does the white racial frame have for Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and those from the Middle East, in our contemporary moment?

**J. E.:** There are many implications. Consider that the white frame is made up of two key types of subframes: The most noted and most researched are those negatively targeting people of color. In addition, the most central subframe, often the hardest to "see," especially by whites, is that reinforcing the idea of white virtuousness in a myriad ways, including superior white values and institutions, the white work ethic, and white intelligence. This white-virtue framing is so strong that it affects the thinking not only of whites, but also of many people of color here and overseas. Good examples are the dominant American culture's standard of "female beauty," and the attempts of many people of color to look, speak, or act as "white" as they can so as to do better in our white-dominated institutions.

**G. Y.:** In your book *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* (coauthored with Debra Van Ausdale), there is a section on children and how they learn about race and racism, and examples of children exhibiting explicitly racist behavior at very young ages. What did you learn about how young children learn ways of racial framing?

**J. E.:** One major discovery from nearly a year of field observations that Debra did in that multiracial daycare center was that white children learn major elements of the dominant white racial frame at an earlier age than many previous and influential researchers had recognized. This is now backed up by much other social science research. We know that many white children as young as two to four years old have already learned and used key features of the white racist frame. Our research shows that these children have learned not only elements of the anti-others subframes, but also the strong white-virtue subframe.

One example of this latter subframe involved a white child confronting an Asian child who was starting to pull a school wagon. She put her hands on her hips and arrogantly made the assertion that “only white Americans can pull this wagon.” In these field observations, we also found that young children of all backgrounds gain knowledge of racial framing from peers in classrooms and play settings, not just from relatives in home settings. Moreover, in everyday interactions they frequently did much more than imitate what they had heard or seen from others. They regularly acted on their racist framing in their own creative ways.

**G. Y.:** You’ve mentioned images and emotions and how they are linked to the racial frame. There have been studies that demonstrate a strong relationship between ape images of Black people that are emotion laden for those who project such images. Say a bit about these findings.

**J. E.:** That commonplace ape framing involves vicious stereotyping, narratives, and emotion-laden imagery. That complexity is why we need a broader white racial frame concept. Only a little research and theorizing have been done on the emotions of that white frame, but in my research they clearly include at least white anger, hostility, disgust, fear, envy, and greed. There is research linking ape imagery to white reactions to Black faces and white attributions of Black criminality. For more than two centuries that Blacks-as-apes imagery has been part of the dehumanizing process enabling whites, who see themselves as “good people,” to engage in extensive racial oppression. Our most famous white “founder,” Thomas Jefferson, in his major book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, even suggested that Africans had sex with apes.

**G. Y.:** Has there been similar research that shows racist images that are emotion laden when it comes to images of Asian Americans, Latinos, and others?

**J. E.:** Much research on Asian Americans, Latinos, and other groups shows there are numerous racist images of these groups as well, although the white racist emotions that are unmistakably attached to them have again been little studied. One good example of this emotionally laden framing that has some research is the extraordinarily racist sexualization that white men often direct at Asian women, Asian American women, and US and other Latinas, such as on the internet websites exoticizing these women for white male sexual and related purposes.

**G. Y.:** Has research revealed that Black people also have such racist images and value-laden frames when it comes to their perception of white people?

**J. E.:** The research explicitly on such Black framing of whites is less extensive, but the substantial research interviewing of Black Americans that my colleagues and I have done over recent decades strongly suggests that Black framing of whites is usually different and generally more direct-experience-related. There are very few generic jokes stereotyping whites in our hundreds



of interviews with Blacks, and what pained joking there is, is mostly about the actual discrimination that the Black interviewees have experienced from whites.

Analyzing white and Black college student diaries about racial events in everyday life, my talented colleague Leslie Houts Picca and I found that the white students mostly described racist conversations and other racist actions of white acquaintances, friends, and relatives that targeted people of color, such as whites telling N-word jokes or racially taunting Black people in public settings. In significant contrast, most Black and other student-of-color diaries from students at these same colleges recorded white racist actions targeting the diarists themselves or acquaintances and relatives. Black understandings of whites are typically based on much negative and discriminatory experience with whites. The reverse rarely seems to be the case in our extensive field interviewing.

**G. Y.:** Briefly distinguish between what you call backstage racism and frontstage racism. What does backstage racism tell us about the insidious nature of racism?

**J. E.:** The in-depth data my colleagues and I have collected over the last few decades strongly indicate that the anti-Black and prowhite framing of most whites has changed much less than is often asserted, including by researchers depending on brief attitudinal measures and opinion polls. The appearance of major change in white racist framing is created by the fact that many whites have learned to suppress a frontstage expression of some or much of their overtly racist framing—such as in public settings where there are people present who are unknown to them. However, data such as that noted previously for white college students reveal that a great many whites still assert and perform a blatantly racist framing of people of color in backstage settings—that is, where only whites such as friends and relatives are present.

**G. Y.:** Given your emphasis upon racial frames, in what ways can people begin to undo those racial frames?

**J. E.:** That is the difficult question for the social health and democratic future of this country. We have a modest research literature dealing with successful deframing and reframing of people's racist views, one much smaller than that measuring racial stereotyping and prejudice. One reason is that we have been handicapped by the narrow and individualistic concepts of stereotyping and prejudice, and few researchers have adopted a perspective problematizing a broader and dominant white racial framing. Getting rid of a few racial stereotypes is hard enough, and there has been some success at that, but when they are connected to hundreds of other "bits" of racist stereotyping, ideology, imagery, emotions, and narratives of that white racial frame, it is even harder to begin a successful process of substantial deframing and reframing toward

an authentic liberty-and-justice framing. Such reframing takes great effort and a long period of time in my experience. Nonetheless, some social science research is encouraging in regard to changing at least limited aspects of that dominant white frame.

**G. Y.:** Lastly, what does social science have to teach philosophers when it comes to thinking about the reality of race and racism?

**J. F.:** We all have a lot to learn from the best social science dealing empirically and theoretically with the centuries-old reality of this country's white racism, especially that revealing well its systemic and foundational character and how it has been routinely reproduced over twenty generations. Also, in my view, the best philosophers on such white racism matters, among them you and my talented young colleague Tommy Curry, are ahead of most social scientists on such critical societal issues. So, social scientists, indeed all of us, have much to learn from the best philosophical analysts as well!

## PART II DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Joe Feagin draws on the concept of white racist framing in his work. What is entailed in the "white racial frame" that *all* white people seem to share, and how might it inform the mode of address that *all* white people take up? How might the frame of the white supremacist differ from the well-meaning and privilege-cognizant white person, and how would the two translate into different modes of address, if any?
2. There appear to be two theaters for research concerning race. One is the intimate, personal space of phenomenological work and narrative. Historical and statistical records of racist acts or structures and their effects characterize the other. Both seem necessary, so how can the two best be reconciled to provide a discursive space for lived experience without sacrificing the need for more broad, impersonal, structural analysis?
3. Anti-Black racism, Craig Irvine claims, "thrives . . . despite or perhaps because of the liberal ideology of those who perpetrate it." Whiteness is often characterized by self-ignorance. This ignorance and its privilege-evasive responses, including white fragility, shadow texts, and the unwillingness and/or inability to experience *nepantla* or "world" travel, resemble one of the oldest images in Western philosophy: Plato's cave. Discuss the ways in which white privilege keeps its possessors in a cave of ignorance, the difficulties of ascending out of ignorance, and also the difficulties of returning to the cave, this time as one who has, as Alison Bailey puts it, "seen through the fictions of heteronormativity, a godless life, white supremacy, capitalism, or patriarchy." How can white people best prepare to make this journey?

4. The elusive “perception of a threat” that Judith Butler discusses in her interview is a tool that white people use to justify violence done to Black bodies in “self-defense,” real or perceived. It poses a special challenge insofar as it is “*becoming more ‘reasonable’ all the time,*” gaining momentum with every acquittal that legitimates the “perception of a threat.” Can an education in whiteness rely on reason, if whiteness possesses an exceptional ability to use reason to cover its own tracks?

PART III

*Race, Pedagogy, and the Domain of  
the Cultural*



## Lawrence Blum

**George Yancy:** Larry, explain how you became interested in issues regarding race and philosophy. What were some of the specific influences?

**Lawrence Blum:** I got into race relatively late, I am not proud to admit. I was one of those philosophers who didn't quite get how race could be dealt with within philosophy, though I had always been somewhat interested in race as a social issue, and I participated in a small way in the Civil Rights Movement. For a time I definitely had that "it's not philosophy" attitude. When Howard McGary, Laurence Thomas, Anita Allen, Leonard Harris, Bernard Boxill, Bill Lawson, Lucius Outlaw, Adrian Piper, and other African-American philosophers started writing in the 1980s I started to see, albeit still too slowly, how race could be a philosophical topic. In the late '80s I was talking with my African-American departmental colleague, the Hobbes scholar Tommy Lott, and he asked me if I had heard of Olaudah Equiano. I had never heard of him. Tommy told me who he was, and for some reason that was an "Aha" moment for me. I realized that there was something wrong with my education and outlook for not knowing about this important slave narrative and that I should and wanted to engage professionally with work on race and philosophy. That was a turning point.

**G. Y.:** What were some of the explicit and implicit assumptions about your understanding of philosophy such that you were one of those philosophers who didn't quite get how race could be dealt with within philosophy?

**L. B.:** It's hard to reconstruct that, George. It probably had to do with the alleged universality and timelessness of philosophical concerns, and perhaps connected with something about philosophical "methodology" as that was understood (and maybe still is by some people).

I do want to add that I see "philosophical race studies" as deeply informed by other disciplines. I don't think a "pure philosophy" approach can take us

very far in the race area. Philosophers of race need to know something about history, sociology, political science. Certainly “applied ethics” recognizes the need to have substantial knowledge of nonphilosophy domains. But as Charles Mills has emphasized, race work is not just “applied philosophy.” It involves shifting the way we think about the big picture of society and the world. In recent years many philosophers have seen value in psychology, social psychology, and cognitive science. Race work requires engagement with an even broader range of social sciences.

**G. Y.:** That’s an excellent point, Larry. This is why I really admire and respect the work of sociologist Joe Feagin. He is a sociologist who does theory and empirical research on race. He engages that broader range of social sciences. Back to questions of identity, though, you came to the question of the philosophical significance of race late. Did you also come late to the question of how identity, more generally, impacts our philosophical intuitions and focus? For example, did your Jewish identity impact how you thought about philosophy and its aims? Of course, this question, generally speaking, is consistent with the assumptions behind standpoint epistemology.

**L. B.:** I came even later to issues about identity, and even then I was more interested in the social and political issues dealt with in multicultural theory than the epistemic ones in standpoint theory. I don’t think my identity as Jewish really had any explicit influence or interest to me within philosophy, especially at that time. Now I am much more interested in all these issues.

**G. Y.:** In our contemporary moment, there has only been a modicum of growth in the professional field of philosophy regarding the philosophical significance of race. When you began to think about and write about race philosophically, did you ever encounter resistance from the profession?

**L. B.:** Not really, and I’m sure there is an element of white privilege in that. I was already an established moral philosopher. Maybe some people thought I was deserting “philosophy” in moving into the race area but I never really suffered for it. I think I benefited from teaching at a nonelite institution without a graduate program, in a very pluralistic department where a lot of people worked, and still work, in nonstandard areas and where we were encouraged to “follow our muse” and not to worry about where our department stands in the rankings.

**G. Y.:** Say more about how you understand the element of white privilege within that context.

**L. B.:** I was thinking that being white probably protected my professional standing from being diminished by working in what were then very marginal areas (of race).

**G. Y.:** Who were some of your philosophical allies at that time?

**L. B.:** By the early '90s I had gotten to know Anthony Appiah and was in a discussion group with him. I attended the tiny number of APA sessions on race in that period and started to get to know some of the African-American philosophers I mentioned earlier. And in 1993–1994 Jorge Garcia and I were fellows together in a professional ethics program, and our many wonderful conversations about philosophical racial issues really helped me get more deeply into the field.

**G. Y.:** In what ways do you see the profession of philosophy changing in its openness to questions of race?

**L. B.:** Well, we've made a bit of progress in the past twenty years or so. There are certainly more sessions on race at our professional organizations. The California Roundtable on Philosophy and Race meets every year and has nurtured and supported younger scholars of color and work on race. The journal *Critical Philosophy of Race* is an important new presence. Graduate students have been organizing Minorities and Philosophy (MAP) groups. The recent APA leadership has included some important race scholars, and the APA is taking serious and focused steps to diversify the profession. More departments are looking to offer courses in race and philosophy. Often they are more interested in enrollments than in acknowledging race studies as an important philosophical field; but it still helps move us forward.

Still, there is very little work on race in the very top journals—*Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *Ethics*—and the field still seems pretty marginalized. The number of people whose primary scholarly specialty is race seems pretty small. We've got a long way to go.

**G. Y.:** Despite this relative progress, I think that you are correct. We still have long way to go. What do you see as necessary for making the concept of race more philosophically relevant?

**L. B.:** Well, one thing is bringing people into philosophy who find these racial issues interesting and intellectually exciting. And another is challenging the “color-blind” way some gatekeepers still think about philosophy. I think the relatively recent PIKSI (“Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute”) programs (and Howard McGary’s longer-standing Rutgers summer program) are tremendously valuable in that regard. (My university is very involved in the new Boston-area PIKSI.) These programs nurture, encourage, and mentor undergraduates of color to envision going on in philosophy. Although by no means do all of them want to do work on race, many do, and a larger number recognize racial issues as important. Hopefully bringing more students of all racial groups who are interested in race into the profession will help spread the word, as well as challenging the profession to see the intellectual necessity of dealing with race.

A related point is that more philosophers are able to see their specific sub-disciplines as entrées to work on race. Initially almost all race philosophy was



done by social and political philosophers (as I am), but now you find philosophers of biology, and of science more generally, and philosophers of language and even metaphysicians weighing in. This is a positive development in getting more people to see race as an intellectually engaging and significant subject.

**G. Y.:** Since the publication of your important book, *"I'm Not a Racist, But . . .,"* have you come to rethink your understanding of the meaning of racism?

**L. B.:** I am much less involved in the issue of the meaning of the term "racism" than I was in that book. I do still agree with the more general point I tried to make in that discussion—that the overuse of the single term 'racism' inhibits our ability to clarify the manifold types of wrong involved in race-related systems, practices, actions, statements, and thoughts. We need a richer and more varied moral vocabulary to do that work.

**G. Y.:** I see. I also think that there is a way in which 'racism' can be deployed to denude the term of its vitriol. Yet, isn't it also important that we don't define how those who are the recipients of white prejudice, especially Black people, understand racism, given their multiple experiences of pain and suffering? There are some who would argue that to do otherwise would be to define their reality.

**L. B.:** That's a really important point, and I don't think I can do it justice in the context of this interview. I certainly think white people working in the race area need to be aware of how Black people are experiencing racial prejudice and injustice, and how they talk about that experience. I don't think my analysis of racism takes anything away from the pain and suffering Black people experience from racial mistreatment by whites or other non-Blacks. But the issue of how people conceptualize their own experience, and where they are getting the concepts they use for doing so, is very complicated. Experience is never "pure" and unconceptualized. Philosophers try to explore, clarify, and systematize concepts that may then inform how people think about, and even experience, their experiences. This is the spirit of what I was trying to do in my book on "racism."

**G. Y.:** I've integrated work on whiteness and pedagogy in my scholarship that has proven important to scholars in the area of critical pedagogy. With the publication of your book *High Schools, Race, and America's Future*, you've managed to provide a template, as it were, for those of us who desire to engage race critically and engagingly with our students. Talk about what motivated this important book and your desire to teach a classroom course entitled *Race and Racism*.

**L. B.:** The book is based on a high-school course that I taught at my local high school, which is also the school my three children attended. I had been working in the area of education a bit at my university and was teaching one course in which my students were mostly in-service and preservice teachers. I was feeling a bit fraudulent because I had never spent any time teaching in

a precollege classroom. I wasn't sure what to do about that, but one day I was talking to the social studies coordinator at the high school and asked her if I could run an after-school discussion group on race with a racially and ethnically mixed group of students. She proposed instead that I teach a whole course on Race and Racism. After the first offering of that course, I was invited back to teach it three more times. (I give my university credit for seeing that teaching a high-school course was worthy of support and one course release.) It was a really astonishing experience. I learned a tremendous amount from my students.

I was able to arrange with the high school for the racial demographics of my class to roughly mirror the school's—at that time about 40 percent Black, 33 percent white, 15 percent Latino, 8 percent Asian, and various others (including racially mixed students). Each time I was assisted by a UMass undergraduate or graduate student of color interested in going into teaching. The course was an advanced-level course but did not have the “official status” of an Advanced Placement course, known for being helpful for admission to selective colleges. I tried to get the guidance counselors to send me students who were “reaching for college” but were not necessarily from families where it would be totally taken for granted that they would go to college. Since the counselors had only partial influence in who actually signed up for the course, I always ended up with a class whose aspirations, previous attainments, and educational backgrounds were all over the map. There were always a few students who did not end up going to college after graduation, and a few who went to quite selective colleges, even though I did not seek out the latter type of student.

I built the course around very intellectually challenging material. A main text was Audrey Smedley's *Race in North America*, but I also used Ira Berlin's history of slavery, *Many Thousands Gone*. (Smedley is a Black woman, who writes in an academic voice not revealing of her racial identity, and this became a focus of attention and surprise in the class.) We explored the history of slavery both in itself and in connection with the developing idea of race over the course of several centuries. We read the slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, one of the first female slave narratives, and one (unlike Frederick Douglass's) I could assume the students would not have encountered. We read portions of David Walker's *Appeal*, a searing critique of slavery, and an influential, partly philosophical, and altogether fascinating Abolitionist tract from 1829. We also looked at the scientific critique of race—very difficult material. (The book provides the whole syllabus.)

I wanted to give a course that could introduce largely Black and Latino students to college-level work; Black and Latino students are not provided with anything like the same opportunities for intellectual challenge in secondary school as are whites and Asians. Like many schools with mixed populations, the classes designated as advanced were dominated by white (mostly) and

Asian students. I wanted the Black and Latino students to have an experience of an advanced class in which they were the majority. But I also wanted the full racial mix of the school inside my class, because I wanted to work on their communicating with each other about racial issues across that racial divide.

The school had other courses on racial topics—African-American history, African-American literature, Caribbean literature, and I'm sure others, occasionally taught by white faculty but usually not. But none of the students in my classes had taken a whole course on race as a subject of academic inquiry. I wanted them to see the topic of race as intellectually engaging, exciting, and challenging, and also as a pathway to help them understand their own experiences and the society they lived in.

The conversations in class did not always stay “on topic” and sometimes drifted onto more current racial experiences and issues, which were also the subject of some contemporary readings. But I also kept the intellectual focus of the course front and center. I reproduce some of the fascinating conversations among the students, both about the specific course material and the other topics, in the book.

**G. Y.:** One student, Antonine, says to you, “I thought that you’d be a Black guy, Professor.” You know, I get something similar. Because I teach undergraduate and graduate courses on race, there is an assumption that I *must* be Black. So, there is a kind of stereotyping operating here. How were you able to work through this? That is, what are some of interpersonal issues at stake here? Because as you put it, there is that question of “credibility” as a white person teaching students of color about race.

**L. B.:** I think the identity connection is more important to high-school than college students. The high school did not have enough teachers of color when I was teaching there, but the few who were there played very important mentoring and role-modeling functions for the students of their specific racial group. I could not duplicate that. But at the same time the students did not think that only people of color could teach about race. Perhaps especially because the course was historical, and had science in it, they more readily accepted me as a legitimate “expert.” I’m sure it also helped that I was a college professor. But I also worked very hard to establish individual relations with each student (the class was capped at around twenty). Remember that high-school courses have more than twice as many contact hours per week as college courses. I worked especially hard to show that I believed the students of color when they spoke in class, outside of class, or in their journals about racial mistreatment. High-school students also care more about their relationship with their teachers than college students do; and research shows that Black students are more concerned about that than are whites. While race never stopped affecting my relationships with the class and with particular students, I think they basically accepted my authority in the class and with

respect to the material, and knew that I cared about them and their learning. Having said that, I can think of a few students, all Black and female, of the eighty or so students I taught over the four years, with whom I was never able to establish a real connection.

**G. Y.:** One question that I'm often asked is how to get students to actually talk about such a sensitive and potentially explosive topic as race, especially within the context of a diverse classroom, which is what you faced. Any advice?

**L. B.:** In one respect this is more of an issue in high school than college because the students are less mature. But they are also less inhibited and are sometimes more able to roll with expressed insensitivity on the part of their classmates. But I want to make three points here. First, the emphasis on academic study, with the implication (that I made explicit) that they all had something important to learn and that they were not likely to know it beforehand, helped with the dynamic. It would have been different if we were doing material that drew first and foremost on their current racialized experiences. Second, we had some discussions about "rules of engagement," recognizing that the material is very charged and trying to come up with rules or guidelines to keep things constructive. Students suggested things like "Don't say anything that may hurt someone's feelings" or "Don't say anything racist." Others replied that you don't always know beforehand what will hurt someone's feelings or is racist, and that is one of the things we were learning about in the class. So some said we couldn't put any constraints on what people said. Although we couldn't come up with any definite rules, having the conversation was very helpful in raising everyone's consciousness about how what they say might be heard or experienced by others. I also had a periodic "open journal" assignment where they could write about anything at all, that related in some way to the course. This allowed them to express irritation, anger, or outrage at something one of their classmates said.

A third general guideline or goal I aimed for was a balance between having everyone feel that we were a learning community where all had to be able to speak and be treated with respect by others, and that whites especially (but really everyone) had areas of ignorance and misunderstanding that they could help to correct through the learning and discussions in the class.

**G. Y.:** I'm often accused of being stuck in the Black/white binary. While I can defend my position, I do think that it is important to raise the issue of how the dynamics of race transcends that binary. How did you manage to transcend that binary in the classroom?

**L. B.:** I was concerned about this issue because I had students from all groups, not only whites and Blacks. However, I wanted them to recognize that the course was not an "equal time for every group" course, in a multicultural mode. If you are dealing with race historically, especially with a primary focus on the US, there is no way to avoid the fact that slavery and the expulsion and

genocide of indigenous peoples on the part of whites form the foundation for that history. It isn't really intellectually responsible to deny that framework. I insisted that the students needed to understand US history and that all were in the same boat about that.

At the same time, I did a unit comparing the slave systems of the US and of Latin America (including the Spanish, though also Anglophone, Caribbean); and we looked at the different notions of race that emerged from the different settlement patterns and forms of slavery. And I did a unit on the Supreme Court cases Ian Haney-Lopez discusses in his book *White by Law*, in the 1910–1920 period, in which Japanese and Indian immigrants tried to naturalize as “white” as their only option (besides being Black) for gaining citizenship under the 1790 Naturalization Act. In those ways I tried to bring historical Asian and Latino experience into the course. Also, many of the “spillover” conversations raised issues outside of the Black/white binary. In addition, we discussed ethnic and national origin differences within the US Black population, which was reflected in the class composition also, which contained a significant number of Haitian Americans and a very small number of Africans, in addition to African-Americans.

**G. Y.:** In the book you make it clear that after reading the book, you hope that other teachers, including college professors, will desire to teach such a course. As a Black philosopher who teaches such courses, there is an added weight, especially when teaching within predominantly white academic institutions as I do. There is the weight of so much denial by white students that racism is real. There is also the pressure of being the only Black body in that white space talking to white students about their race privileges, which they also deny. So, while I agree with you that there needs to be more of us teachers engaging race within the classroom, I think that it is important to mark the difference encountered by Black teachers and teachers of color when they teach such courses. Any thoughts on this?

**L. B.:** The demographics of the classes really make a lot of difference. And so does the race of the instructor. What you say is entirely right about that. When I have talked about teaching this course to different audiences, especially those working in K–12 settings, I acknowledge that it is completely different for a white teacher to teach classes with a minority of white students than ones with, say, 90 percent white students. As you say, a Black teacher with the latter demographic, or even worse, with 100 percent white students, would face a very different situation. My focus is on encouraging white teachers to teach about race, to help develop the racial literacy all high-school graduates need to face the society they live in. My own (nonelite) university is quite diverse, though not of course as much as the high school. My classes on race seldom have fewer than 40 percent students of color, and I realize this is a much more favorable teaching environment.

I want to clarify that what I encouraged in the book was not so much professors teaching courses on race at their colleges but specifically at the high-school level. (As you note, I also aimed this message to high-school teachers.) I don't think it would ever occur to most college instructors to even consider doing that. In general, high schools are more racially diverse, and in particular less white, than are US colleges. I hope the book conveys how rewarding, challenging, and exciting it is to teach about race and racism to high-school students.

**G. Y.:** Given the dynamic nature of these conversations, I thought it necessary to ask one additional question, especially with respect to your pedagogy regarding race. As you know, two Black men were recently killed, one in Baton Rouge and another in St. Paul. There were also five police officers killed in Dallas. Of course, this has again energized the Black Lives Matter Movement. I have had Black students in the past say to me, "Racism will never end in the US. So, why are we discussing it?" Pedagogically, how might you negotiate such a question, in such a way that you honor those real feelings of hopelessness and yet encourage a sense of hope?

**L. B.:** Certainly the killings of Sperling and Castile, on top of the police killings of the past few years, can lead anyone including our students to think, "Not again! This is never going to end." But as their teachers, we can inject a historical and social-movement perspective that puts current horrors in a larger context. The system of legally mandated Segregation seemed impregnable through much of its history. There was certainly as much or more reason to feel hopeless about that as there is now about police violence. But courageous Black people in various eras fought against it, struggled and sacrificed, and finally brought it down. Black Lives Matter is an extremely hopeful movement for our times. In shining a light on Black lives lost as a result of police violence, it has very much helped to raise the consciousness of white Americans about police mistreatment of Blacks, and of racial justice more generally. I read that according to a late 2015 Pew survey, white Americans who agreed with the statement "Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites"<sup>1</sup> went from 39 percent to 53 percent in one year. And in fact more than a few police departments have put various programs and policies in place that are intended to reduce disparities in treatment of Blacks and whites.

There is always a "half full/half empty" dimension here, and we need to help our students do justice to both perspectives. It is disheartening that only 53 percent of whites signed on to that statement; but it is still a tremendous improvement. Another example: the Black high-school graduation rate in 2013 was 71 percent, up four points from two years before, and the highest it has ever been, and increasing at a higher rate than the white graduation rate; but the gap between white and Black is still large—15 percent. Half full, half

empty. Measured by an “end of racism” standard, yes, we will never make that standard, any more than we will make an “end of terrorism,” or “end of evil” standard. But would students think we shouldn’t discuss terrorism or evil?

Of course, hopelessness cannot be assessed according to a strictly rational criterion, and I agree that we have to listen to our students’ feelings of hopelessness and take them seriously. But I also hope we can help students recognize the sources and signs of change, historically and in the present.

## NOTE

1. “Across Racial Lines, More Say Nation Needs to Make Changes to Achieve Racial Equality,” *PewResearchCenter*, April 5, 2015, <http://www.people-press.org/2015/08/05/across-racial-lines-more-say-nation-needs-to-make-changes-to-achieve-racial-equality/>.

## Dan Flory

**George Yancy:** At what point in your philosophical growth did you become interested in philosophy of film?

**Dan Flory:** It was a drawn-out process rather than any sort of discreet moment. During the 1980s I avidly read film theory and criticism with a combination of attraction and ambivalence. I was a graduate student at the time and had had a long-standing interest in movies that I wanted to develop philosophically but couldn't figure out how to do it in a way that I liked. I appreciated the way that what was then contemporary film theory could derive fascinating results that I often agreed with politically. But I was dubious of its reliance on Lacan and psychoanalysis, which I felt were based in antiquated, nineteenth-century theories of mind. I also read Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed* (1979), George Wilson's *Narration in Light* (1986), and Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema I and II* (1986, 1989). But I couldn't envision then how I might continue on in terms of philosophy of film from what these thinkers had written. Cavell's book is a wonderful philosophical memoir about going to the movies that was a difficult act to follow in terms of how one might theorize about film, and that I didn't fully understand until years after I first read it. Deleuze basically reimagines how to theorize about film to the point when he was writing, partly as a result of thoughts and experiences similar to Cavell's, but I didn't fully grasp what he was doing until years later, either. Wilson's book is an engaging series of film interpretations that never quite develops a full-blown film theory (which he did later in *Seeing Fictions in Film* [2012]), so I was unsure at the time how I might build on the foundation he offered as well. In addition, philosophy of film was then predominantly looked at as not quite "real" or reputable philosophy, so I wasn't exactly encouraged to pursue it. No one taught or even talked about philosophy of film at the University of Minnesota in those days, where I was doing my graduate work.



When Noël Carroll published *The Philosophy of Horror* in 1990, however, what it did for me was offer a philosophical film theory to which I could envision myself contributing. His later work, as well as that of others, continued to elaborate this framework in a way I could embrace. By the early 1990s I also discovered the Society for the Philosophic Study of the Contemporary Visual Arts, which had been founded by philosophers who wanted to write about film but were frustrated by the lack of outlets in the discipline. I began presenting papers at their group sessions during APA meetings and publishing in their journal, *Film and Philosophy*. By the late 1990s I realized that I had developed a specialty in the philosophy of film, but getting to that point took nearly two decades of gradual development that was entirely on the side from what I had been taking courses in and writing about as a graduate student, as well as what I had been encouraged to do as a newly minted professional philosopher.

**G. Y.:** At what point did you begin to think critically about philosophy of film vis-à-vis race?

**D. E.:** After I turned in my dissertation in November 1995 (I took a long time to finish), I felt an overwhelming desire to write an essay about a series of African-American films that had stunned me over the previous few years. Movies like *Deep Cover* (1992), *One False Move* (1992), *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), and *Clockers* (1995) fascinated me by the way they used film noir tropes and techniques to articulate problems of race, and I wanted to analyze philosophically how they had done it. At the time I thought it would require no more than a standard-length article, but deciding to write that essay turned out to be pivotal for me professionally. Very few people were analyzing race in the philosophy of film at the time, and even then mostly in asides or passing references. In a way, I just kept researching because the way race could be articulated through film noir interested me. Another reason I kept researching race in film is that I had also been exploring the role of race in philosophy. A fellow graduate student, Jim Glassman, told me in the early 1980s about Richard Popkin's and Harry Bracken's articles from a few years earlier concerning Hume's and Locke's racism, which I tracked down and read.<sup>1</sup> I was, of course, shocked and appalled that I'd never been told or given opportunities to discuss these aspects of their work before. Weren't we in graduate school to study and analyze these sorts of problems? Over the years I dug more and more deeply on my own into the ways in which race had deformed and distorted the Western philosophical canon. For the most part, I had to explore this topic from outside philosophy itself because so few people in the field were exploring it, and even those explorations were hard to get (this was years before the Internet). I read Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Martin Bernal's *Black Athena I and II* (1987, 1991), and other materials, and thought about the ways in which what was argued in these works applied to philosophy. Eventually I found that my interest in critical race theory dovetailed with my

interest in philosophy of film to form what I've mainly been interested in and researched since.

Almost none of this, of course, was encouraged by the vast majority of my peers. Most of them felt that it was deeply inappropriate to explore these parts of philosophy, and publishing on race was like airing the discipline's dirty laundry in public. But with the encouragement of a few scholars doing critical race theory, like Charles Mills and Leonard Harris, and Tom Wartenberg in philosophy of film, I kept at it because it seemed worthwhile to do, even if it was marginalized from the mainstream of philosophy.

**G. Y.:** What are some of the complications in using the critical lens of philosophy to examine film when Western philosophy is itself so racially saturated?

**D. F.:** One complication is the circumstance I just mentioned: marginalization. With regard to race, that marginalization is typically cashed out by being shunned by one's peers. As some recent studies have underscored, professional philosophers remain deeply reluctant to explore the implications of race for philosophy itself, opting instead for what they see as the "high road" of ignoring remarks by figures like Hume, Kant, or Hegel about race and idealizing those thinkers' theories in ways that make the ideas seem as if they applied universally, rather than exclusively to white men—something these philosophers themselves were quite explicit about. It's the same "dirty laundry" problem that I encountered while in graduate school. Partly this reluctance is a result of the fact that even in 2016 more than 85 percent of the American Philosophical Association is white, so philosophers in the US generally feel that any critique of the whiteness of philosophy is also a critique of them (and they are not completely wrong to feel that way!). But that means when as a scholar you present about race in philosophy, you are often met with silence, avoidance, or sullen hostility. No one tells you to your face anymore that they wish you weren't doing this, but a lot of them make you feel that way. They avoid your talks, change the subject when race comes up, ask *sotto voce* whether it's really appropriate to be doing what you're doing, argue that they are exceptions to everything you've just said, or snub you after they hear racial criticisms that sting their sense of having a white self.

I've always been sort of an outsider, so I think it took me longer than perhaps it should have to grasp what was happening. But eventually I realized that the way a lot of people resisted, skipped over, or avoided the role of race in philosophy was the result of the depth of their discomfort with the topic. It's been an uphill battle over the last thirty years to get other philosophers to pay attention to the problem and really listen, but it finally seems that the realization is dawning on a significant number of members in the discipline that race is a topic they can no longer duck. I'm hopeful that that means a lot more progress can be made regarding race in philosophy than has been typical previously.

**G. Y.:** In your introduction to *Race, Philosophy, and Film*, you write about imagining how Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy (2005–2012) would not have been the same had a Black or African-American actor played the role of Batman. How do you think a mainstream audience would respond?

**D. E.:** Well, I think immediately there would be questions in viewers' minds about where Bruce Wayne got his wealth and why he was acting as a vigilante. Mainstream audiences have no problem imagining that a white man—especially someone who can be perceived as a WASP such as actors Christian Bale or Michael Keaton—might be filthy rich and had inherited his wealth from his family. Northern European whites still most paradigmatically represent the universal human in cinema in terms of physiognomy, so WASPish-appearing actors remain much more able to represent a wide variety of human traits, such as being incredibly rich and seeking justice through vigilantism. But the normalcy of those presumptions is much harder for mainstream audiences to accept when it comes to Blacks and African-Americans. Typically, I think, there would be questions or suspicions on the part of many audience members that perhaps Bruce Wayne's money had been obtained illicitly if Batman were Black. Mainstream audiences are used to thinking of African-Americans as stereotypically poor or disadvantaged, so how a Black man could be so rich that he could become a playboy would have to be addressed in some way in order to allay those suspicions. (Was he or his father a drug dealer who cashed out? Is he an ex-rapper whose shady past contributed to his success? How can he live so large?) Either that or Bruce Wayne couldn't be rich. His origins story would have to be different; for example, that he arose from a neighborhood of grinding poverty and gained his loathing for crime from something other than seeing his rich parents gunned down by a thug might strike mainstream audiences as plausible. (This, by the way, is how Marvel comics introduces the new Black teenage girl who takes over the Iron Man character.) Perhaps as well—although it might remain a stretch for a lot of white viewers—he could be depicted as having arisen from a solidly middle-class family that had somehow been laid low by a thief who couldn't be prosecuted. But making such a backstory plausible to viewers who initially did not share that presumption as a likely possibility for Blacks would take a lot of exposition that might well not make the final cut of a film, given how blockbuster series like *Batman* have to immediately grab and hold your interest. In a way, it's a narrative shortcut to simply make the Black superhero an African prince like Black Panther in the most recent *Captain America* movie, or rely on other stereotypical scenarios instead of building a narrative character bit by bit from the ground up.

A different set of presumptions arises when thinking about a Black man being a vigilante for justice. Because of widespread presumptions that associate Black men with criminality, the use of violence by a Black Avenger

would perhaps not be a stretch for mainstream audiences, but using it for the general public good probably would require additional narrative exposition. Blacks can readily be seen, I think, as plausibly using violence for personal or race-based ends, but it would be much harder to induce viewers to presume and accept that a Black man was using the appropriate amount of violence at the right time, at the right place, and regarding the right people to fight corruption and achieve universal, impartial justice. Again, to make Batman a Black vigilante superhero, its plausibility would have to be addressed and elaborated in the narrative (as it was in *Hancock* [2008] by making him an Ancient lesser god—and even then Hancock started out as a Black stereotype!), or Batman would have to be more of a criminal—more thuggish and prone to excess—to make him fit with mainstream racial sensibilities.

These problems of mainstream audience response have to do with what are now being explored as implicit racial biases. American culture, as you yourself have documented, is saturated with presumptions about what Black men are like: propensities to criminality, the myth of the Black rapist, and so on. However, these presumptions aren't explicit and haven't been for a long time. Instead, they've become submerged into behaviors that most of us are trained to follow from before the time we can talk, and they result in embodied predispositions like you've written about as the "elevator effect," where whites tense up and clutch their purses or briefcases when they find themselves in confined spaces with Black men, even when those Black men are immaculately dressed in three-piece suits and carry briefcases themselves!

Those sorts of embodied predispositions arise in most mainstream movie viewers as well. If Batman were Black, those presumptions would have to be addressed in order to make the story plausible for mainstream audience members, and even then many of them would probably resist or reject imagining anything that conflicted with their embodied presumptions. In order to make any divergences narratively plausible, those presumptions would have to be carefully addressed in the story, more for some than for others, so it would be a difficult balancing act trying to come up with the right amount of narrative exposition in order to overcome the imaginative resistance that most mainstream audience members have regarding Black men as potentially having the sorts of positive moral traits that Batman had in the Christopher Nolan trilogy.

**G. Y.:** Within the context of my previous question, I think about how, in the entire *James Bond* series, 007 is played by a white British male. My students have said to me that they would think that Black actor Idris Elba might change all of this. I'm skeptical. After all, imagine a Black male (on the big screen) seducing white women, and blending into the British Secret Service. As white, Bond can fit into any situation. As Black, he would already appear conspicuous.

Also, in a believable scenario where Bond is Black, his enemies would have to call him a “nigger.” All of a sudden, Bond would be marked racially. Any thoughts?

**D. F.:** I think that I’m somewhere between you and your students regarding such a casting choice. I think it is possible to work out how James Bond might be played by a Black actor, but it would be difficult to do so successfully and, for the present, very unlikely. Like your students, I was intrigued last summer (2015) when those internet rumors made the rounds suggesting that Elba would be a great James Bond. Personally I loved the idea because I thought it would completely upend nearly all the presumptions we had about Bond as a character and the way the Bond series has maintained a subtly racist Cold War ideology since it began in the early 1960s, even if filmmakers have had to update or disguise that ideology over the years. Nearly everything would have to be reconfigured in the standard Bond narrative to accommodate a Black Bond, and I liked the prospect of those changes. It would be aesthetically, cinematically, and politically refreshing if it could be done in the right way, and the proposed casting of Elba, with his past roles as Stringer Bell in *The Wire* (2002–2008) and John Luther in the BBC series (2010–2015), as well as his gravitas and acting range, made a certain sort of sense to me, especially in the wake of Daniel Craig’s casting as a rougher, more working-class Bond.

But portraying Bond as Black could also easily have the implications that you note. Seducing white women would look very different to mainstream viewers if Bond were Black and no other narrative changes were made, as would his relationships with other members of the British Secret Service like M or Q. Inevitably, I think it would be an almost irresistible temptation on the part of the screenwriters to have his enemies use the n-word to refer to him, if for no better reason than to see them as utterly evil so that Bond could beat them up, vanquish, and/or kill them without the audience feeling guilty about cheering Bond on while he pulverizes them.

But again, if the filmmakers were willing to build a sufficiently elaborate backstory that spelled out why a Black Bond made sense (something that I think unlikely at this time and for the immediate future), they might be able to assuage the default presumptions that most mainstream audience members have about Black men. His seduction of white women would have to be grounded and played out very differently from the way Bond typically seduces women, or he’d look like Max Julien in *The Mack* (1973). Similarly, his working relationships with MI6 members would need to be depicted in ways that either dealt with potential racial tensions, stereotypical presumptions of Black incompetence (except, perhaps, with respect to violence), questions of loyalty to the British Crown, or instilled a sense of workplace equality, none of which is so imperative to deal with when Bond is played by a white British male, who can be presumed, as you say, to “fit in” with his white British Secret

Intelligence Service peers, even if there may be a few minor bumps along the way, as were depicted when Daniel Craig took over the Bond role.

Moreover, the backstory would have to work against implicit racial biases that exist not only in the US and Great Britain, but also the world, because Hollywood, its standard narrational strategies, and the presumptions that go with them have worked their way into the perceiving habits of viewers across the globe, inclining people to see at least partly according to the “white gaze,” as Fanon called it, even when it is not in their best interests. Presumptions about Blacks such as we typically have in the US may vary in strength, and they may be far stronger and more prevalent in America and Europe than elsewhere, but they are not absent because viewers across the globe have learned to see Hollywood-style movies at least to some extent from a white point of view. Some viewers may resist or reject this viewing stance (bell hooks and Tommy Lott have described this sort of phenomenon), but others have taken it on and do not even realize that they are perceiving from the perspective of the white gaze. You can see this in, for example, the “Darkie” toothpaste that was sold for decades in China and other parts of Asia. This toothpaste has more recently undergone a minor name change to “Darlie” or “Black person” toothpaste, but still uses a vaguely minstrel logo to advertise its product. Moreover, at the time that the name was changed, commercials and advertisements assured Asian consumers that it remained the same toothpaste, allegedly providing the same white teeth that blackface minstrelsy stereotypically represents. We’ve globally exported our implicit racial biases along with our entertainments, and a Black Bond would have to confront that fact as well—which makes it all the more unlikely, for the time being, that the producers who own the rights to the *James Bond* series would choose to fill that role with anyone but a white British male actor. It wouldn’t be in their economic interests because it would not guarantee the prospect of huge profits in the way that casting a white British male actor currently does. For now, a white female Bond would seem more a possibility than a Black male Bond because there would be fewer implicit biases to overcome. But even that would be an uphill battle to depict without raising hackles on many mainstream viewers around the world.

But let me also note that embodied presumptions regarding race seem to be eroding. Generationally, our students represent a cohort that is much more at ease with people of different races interacting and mixing, so there may come a point in the future when a Black Bond makes sense to them in terms of their default presumptions about race and character in movies. If and when their implicit racial biases reach a point where they are sufficiently eroded, then a Black James Bond would make sense as a possibility because the target audience—which is, after all, young people who happily go out and buy tickets in movie theaters, not aging, stay-at-home baby boomers like you and me—would be ready to accept it. The James Bond series could even be at the



forefront of effecting such a change if its producers wanted it to be. For example, I think of Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* (2013) and the recent Broadway hit *Hamilton* (2015) as representing small steps in that direction because they treat race in ways that encourage us (albeit in modest ways) to think about and overcome our current implicit biases. But taking a similar step in the Bond series would represent a major change in direction that for the present seems pretty unlikely.

**G. Y.:** A Black female Bond might be beyond the pale of our default presumptions. In personal conversations with the literary figure and philosopher Charles Johnson, we talked about how Black people have a kind of double narrative intelligence. We are not only invited to imagine the fictional worlds of whites, but of Blacks as well. Yet, white folk are not necessarily challenged at this level of critically engaging these multiple ways of seeing. I'm very skeptical about the eradication of the white gaze. How can film be used as a venue through which to, as you've written, *de-activate* various behavioral dispositions and affective white propensities?

**D. F.:** I agree with you and Charles Johnson that Black people typically have a double narrative intelligence and that white people generally don't. Black people are not only invited, but in many ways compelled, to imagine the many worlds of whites, both fictional and real, if for no better reason than to have improved opportunities for survival and flourishing. Being able to imagine white social worlds helps Blacks to get by better in white-dominated societies because they often have no choice but to negotiate situations filled or controlled by whites. Moreover, that double narrative intelligence can be applied to mass art like movies. So we see Black directors, for example, doing creditable jobs portraying fictional worlds dominated by whites, such as Carl Franklin with *One True Thing* (1998) or F. Gary Gray with *The Italian Job* (2003). By contrast, whites in the US and most of Europe are rarely required to step out of their comfort zones and negotiate nonwhite worlds, or even imagine what it might be like to exist as a nonwhite human being. Often, on the rare occasions that they do, they can't manage it in a full-bodied way because their imaginative skills regarding race are so poorly developed. They can't envision how the world might work differently outside the white bubble that is their primary locus of experience. That's one of the perks of white privilege, as Peggy McIntosh pointed out decades ago.

But the very fact that Black people can develop a double narrative intelligence and frequently do with tremendous richness means that it is a *human* capacity, so whites are capable of doing it, too. But the fact of the matter is that, if whites live in a white-dominated society like the US or Europe, they get very few opportunities to practice the sorts of skills that would enable them to actualize that capacity with respect to race—and often have at their disposal powerful ways to distort or interfere with developing it. If you are a

white viewer watching a film about nonwhites, I think it's often very tempting to interpret it through the usual white racial lens, rather than make any effort to see it in a new way, even when the film encourages it. Instead, one indulges in a form of cognitive laziness that arguably has its roots in evolutionary theory: we generally don't develop alternative interpretive frameworks unless we are forced to by a realization that the old ones aren't working.

Yet this possibility is where I see film as offering a venue for deactivating white behavioral tendencies and affective propensities and generating new ones. Movies are by no means a panacea, but allowing one to imaginatively enter into a world different from one's own and see the people in it in a different way is one of the possibilities that movies can take up best. We get to enter into fictional worlds we've never experienced before and find out something of what the characters in them and their social relations are like through vivid cinematic portrayals. And it's much like Aristotle said with regard to Greek tragedy: the portrayal of that world does not have to be literal history, but it has to depict circumstances that are possible according to our standards of probability and necessity, depicting events that we understand *could* occur, so the filmmakers can't lose us in the differences and contrasts they depict, but must offer cognitive links and connections so that we can find our way around and build bridges in order to understand how that world is different.

However, the existence of this possibility doesn't mean that it will be done well or that viewers will take it up. They as well as filmmakers themselves can easily slip into cognitive laziness and simply perceive or depict these fictional worlds through the white gaze. In addition, some movies that challenge the viewer's ability to complacently see through the white gaze, such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989), end up just pissing a lot of white people off because of the frustrations they experience at trying to see it through a white lens. At the same time, one of the reasons that I think some other whites have seen that movie as transformative for them regarding race is that it deftly resists interpretations that cast it according to the white gaze and encourages us to figure out how to see it in a new, more coherent way. That may frustrate or anger some people who don't want to make the effort, but for others it provides opportunities for reflecting on the white gaze itself and constructing ways to overcome it. One of the reasons I wanted to write about the African-American films noirs that I mentioned earlier is that I thought they were similar to *Do the Right Thing* in the sense that they resisted efforts to be interpreted according to the same old white gaze I had been using to watch movies and encouraged me, but also viewers in general, to contemplate some of the racial ways through which we saw movies and build new cognitive frameworks in order to make sense of the stories that these Black noirs told. There's an invitation extended by many Black noirs to enter into a world of being African-American about which most whites know little or nothing and learn how it is different. And that sort of invitation has modestly expanded to international films, like



*City of God* (2002) and *Children of Men* (2006), as I've argued elsewhere. Films like these can help white viewers to discover that nonwhites are just like them but suffer egregious forms of racial injustice, sometimes on an everyday basis. That's a good thing, I think, because it begins to encourage whites to question their default presumptions regarding how they see movies, including their affective propensities and behavioral dispositions regarding people of color, and find new ways to see. And those propensities and dispositions are ones they typically use in the real world as well, so their coming to question them in their experience of movies and construct new ways of seeing will typically spill over into their day-to-day lives as well.

Will such imaginative opportunities eradicate the white gaze? Well, the white gaze is pretty powerfully entrenched, so I'm not going to predict its imminent demise. But I am modestly hopeful, if for no better reason than that it's less powerful now than it was fifty, eighty, or one hundred years ago. For example, mainstream audiences see *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) very differently from the way they did when it was first released and they cheered the Klan's victory at the end. Similarly, the old Johnny Weismuller *Tarzan* movies can be pretty hard to watch these days for most whites, and these modest changes in perception make me modestly hopeful that the white gaze will continue to weaken. At the very least, these historical changes show that, logically speaking, the dominant white gaze *can* change for the better. Still, continuing that trend will never be a walk in the park: it's always going to be contested because it's so firmly entrenched, and the possibility that it could get worse is ever present as well, because sometimes in the past the white gaze has gotten worse, as in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when portrayals of the Black characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stage performances got worse and worse and white mainstream audiences ate it up.

But I will say that I think that cinematic opportunities for whites to enter into nonwhite worlds and begin to develop the skills required to have a double narrative intelligence—something I see as a dimension of what Linda Martín Alcoff calls developing a white double consciousness—can help to make the white gaze a lot less pernicious, so movies have a role in deactivating implicit racial biases and reducing the power of the white gaze. But getting white audiences to see those sorts of movies willingly, rather than watch them as some sort of medicine they have to take because they are sick in their racialized thinking (which they are, but most don't know it), is a difficult trick. There's a tendency to not want to do all the work required to construct an alternative affective and cognitive framework regarding race. Some (me, I suppose) do it willingly, but others flat-out refuse, and others still avoid it as too much effort and will do so only when they feel compelled to do so; and still another category of whites won't even realize they need to make the effort. These other categories are the more difficult cases that need to be addressed artistically in ways that get viewers to think about how they see in racially white ways and

need to construct new ways of seeing the world as ones that include nonwhites as full partners rather than as subordinates, without these viewers realizing that they are being induced to do so. And movies can help do that, especially when artists accept that challenge, as many nonwhite artists working in film have done.

**G. Y.:** When I think about the deaths of unarmed Black men by the state, and the ways in which those Black bodies are perceived as “bestial,” “criminal,” sites of “disgust,” it is hard for me to imagine how the medium of film might militate against such perceptions, and how the Black body can be treated as having full humanity. After all, we’re talking about centuries of white perceptual practices. You’ve also noted how Fox News journalist Megyn Kelly proclaimed Santa Claus “just is white” and so was Jesus.<sup>2</sup> There is something deeply insidious going on here. So, how is it that you are optimistic about the possibilities of film to disrupt white perceptual practices?

**D. F.:** I’m cautiously optimistic because even though I agree that there’s something deeply insidious about the centuries-long, entrenched white habits of perceiving Black people, there are still movies like *Fruitvale Station* (2013), *Selma* (2014), *Dear White People* (2014), and even *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) that manage to get made, even as they aim specifically at disrupting white perceptual practices. In addition, these films have broken into public consciousness in terms of their popularity and generated discussion of the critical racial points that they raise. In particular, a significant number of white people end up talking about them, even if it’s to dismiss them with excuses that many I think are also beginning to sense are wearing thin. Plus, the “Oscars So White” and the “Black Lives Matter” movements have created amazing and immediate pushback on social media against business-as-usual white ignorance in ways that couldn’t have happened a few years ago, and the former movement seems to have recently yielded some modest successes. Even Megyn Kelly took a lot of heat for her ridiculous Santa Claus comment, which not so long ago would have gone unremarked except in outraged op-ed pieces in Black or left-wing newspapers. Now it’s all over the Internet almost instantly and gets picked up as a problematic claim in Twitter feeds and news analyses. (Why does Santa Claus have to be white anyway? He’s based on a fourth-century Christian saint who lived in present-day Turkey and would probably at best now be considered merely “borderline” white. And why are his helpers in Belgium and the Netherlands “*Zwarte Pieten*” [Black Peters], who are decked out like blackface minstrels?) It doesn’t take much digging to realize that “Santa Claus” is a social construction; and the same is true of the standard Western iconography of a white Jesus.

There’s also been some noticeable influence on movies by critical race theory and Black studies courses: students who took those classes are now beginning to be green-lighted to make movies and TV shows, and in the process are

showing what they have learned through the narratives they create. The injustice of racial profiling has even made its way into Disney animation: *Zootopia* (2016) metaphorically takes up police stereotypes about criminals by critically viewing the “normalized” assumptions against predators in its fictional world and showing how they distort perceptions of lion, fox, and weasel characters in the story. It strikes me as a major step forward once prejudices about bestiality, crime, and race make their way into movies aimed at children. As always, there’s tons more to do, but milestones like these shouldn’t go unremarked.

Here I think it’s important to note as well that movies are only part of the overall picture, but that talking about them can give us insight into other powerful media. Television, for example, has moved much faster than movies in looking more critically at race, probably because production costs are lower and TV shows can aim at smaller target audiences and still be economically viable. Now we have programs like *Black-ish*, *Underground*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and *Fresh Off the Boat* that deal directly with confronting and disrupting white perceptual practices and encouraging viewers to construct alternatives to seeing nonwhites in the usual way. Moreover, a number of these series have sufficient quality that they have become hard to ignore, especially for white viewers. Critics praise these shows in ways that make them difficult to avoid, and one of the things they confront white viewers with is thinking about how they are different from the standard fare of moving images that unexceptionally presume a white gaze.

In general, I think that surrounding ourselves with better images will be crucial to disrupting standard white perceptual practices and encouraging viewers to construct new ones, so not only film but also television, advertising, video games, and other moving image media need to disrupt white perceptual practices as well. And those media have gotten modestly better in the past few decades. Of course, none of these advances mean we are home free, because there is constant pushback against them, from the many clever strategies for upholding the white gaze to our tendency to not want to put in the effort to change our ways of thinking and perceiving, but we should at least recognize the modest positive advances that have been made because they mean we’ve gotten somewhere.

**G. Y.:** How do we nurture a robust form of imagination that might counter what you’ve called forms of “racialized imaginative resistance”?

**D. F.:** I feel that I can only speak for the part of the “we” who are white because that’s what I’ve thought about the most. In general, whites should begin by cultivating a willingness to learn new things about race, a sense of openness to self-criticism, and a moral humility when it comes to race. A lot of whites resist the possibility that nonwhites might be able to tell them something about race that differs from what they already know. This amounts to a kind of racial arrogance, which is a hangover from explicit white supremacy but continues

on in present-day white privilege. So opening one's self to the possibility that one could be wrong about one's understanding of race, and that nonwhites could tell you something useful about it, requires these three initial steps. Then, whites would have to seek out things that challenged their white senses of self, in order to see whether that sense stood up to the challenge and subsequent scrutiny. Here, certain movies, TV shows, and other moving-image media would fit in as "test cases" for where one's white sense of self stood.

For those who are nonwhite, it's a different story, and one that I only partly understand. I defer to others to best describe how nonwhites might best cultivate robust forms of imagination in terms of race.

**G. Y.:** For those philosophers who engage race critically, especially whiteness, provide the titles of a select few films that you think help to explicate the complexities of whiteness and briefly explain why.

**D. F.:** As someone who knows best American popular movies, as opposed to art film or European cinema, I can only give recommendations that cover a limited part of the field. But that said, I'd recommend the best of Spike Lee's oeuvre. As the late Roger Ebert pointed out decades ago, Lee has tremendous empathy for all his characters, but it's especially important to remember that he has it for his white characters, whose shortcomings, excuses, and ignorance he presents with a gimlet eye even as he treats them compassionately. I've already mentioned some of the reasons to watch *Do the Right Thing*, but I'll also note how *Summer of Sam* (1999) analyses xenophobia and how it can be generated in whites, including how it overlaps with race. In addition, *Bamboozled* (2000) forcefully depicts the power of blackface minstrelsy and how it has permeated American entertainment. I'd also recommend some of the Black noirs that I've mentioned above. *One False Move* perceptively explores good-old-boy Southern whiteness in haunting, complicated ways, and the other Black noirs mentioned challenge the white gaze regarding racial profiling, the color line, and differences between white and Black perceptions of white dominance. Steve McQueen's European art film set in antebellum America, *12 Years a Slave* (2013), is worth watching because of its focus on how Blacks were forced to live under different oppressive regimes of whiteness. For those whose tastes run more to comedy, I've had luck showing Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair* (2009) to my students as a critique of white standards of beauty, and *Dear White People* openly appeals to millennials by updating many of the insights earlier African-American films explored. I'll also add that 2016 was a banner year for documentaries about race—*O.J.: Made in America*, *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro*—as well as offering us some good to amazing fiction films about race, such as *Moonlight*, *Hidden Figures*, *Fences*, *Queen of Katwe*, *Free State of Jones*, *Loving*, and *Embrace of the Serpent*.

Again, key to viewing these films is seeing how they not only challenge old white ways of seeing, but also provide clues to constructing a new perception

of race. However, these films don't do all the work for us. It's still up to us to rebuild our own affective and cognitive frameworks in ways that are more equitable and less interlaced with our implicit racial biases. These films provide us with opportunities to think, reflect, and untangle the intricate ways we continue to see the world through a racial lens—one that is as much a racial construction as Megyn Kelly's ideas regarding Santa Claus or Jesus.

## NOTES

1. Richard Popkin, "Hume's Racism," *The Philosophical Forum* 9, no. 2–3 (1977–1978): 211–26; Richard Popkin, "The Philosophical Bases of Modern Racism" (1974), reprinted in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, ed. Richard A. Watson and James E. Force (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 79–102; Harry M. Bracken, "Essence, Accident, and Race," *Hermathena* 116 (1973): 81–96; and Harry M. Bracken, "Philosophy and Racism," *Philosophia* 8 (1978): 241–60.
2. Dan Flory, "Imaginative Resistance, Racialized Disgust, and African-American Cinema," paper presented at the American Philosophical Association-Central Division Conference, Chicago, IL, February 27, 2014. (The reference is to a December 12, 2013 discussion on the Fox News program *The Kelly File* regarding Santa's race, during which Megyn Kelly flatly asserted the racial whiteness of both Santa Claus and Jesus.)

# David Theo Goldberg

**George Yancy:** I only recently learned that you began your own music-video production company. Did this interest in music-video production precede your important work on race?

**David Theo Goldberg:** Actually it was a small film production and distribution company, Metafilms. When I arrived in New York in 1978 to do a PhD in Philosophy, my oldest friend from childhood in Cape Town, Michael Oblowitz, was already at film school in the city. We started making independent films together, including an internationally award-winning film on Robben Island as a metaphor for South Africa under apartheid. We were basically on the ground floor when music videos began airing on television. Michael Jackson threatened to withhold the video of “Thriller” from MTV in 1983 unless they played more videos by Black artists. MTV was receiving heat also from the likes of David Bowie, to his credit too. We happened to have just completed the music video for Polygram of Kurtis Blow’s “Basketball,” his paeon to the greats of the game. Our assistant cameraman’s mother was the lover of J. J. Jackson, the only African-American among the original MTV VJs. They needed material badly, the song was relatively innocuous by the standards of the day, with a cameo appearance by The Fat Boys, no less. The first rap video to air on MTV. The marriage of networking and luck, how the industry still functions.

The film and video production emerged more or less coterminously with my earliest work on race. I was writing my dissertation on “the philosophical foundations of racism.” Gerry Cohen, the analytic Marxist philosopher, asked me in the early 1980s if racism had any. I guess analytic Marxism suffered the same veil of ignorance as classic liberalism at the time. While I had been thinking about race and racism for a good while already—any modestly thinking person growing up in South Africa could hardly avoid it—outlining a theory began around the time the music-video production work took off.

Just prior to this, I met Howard McGary and Bill Lawson, young faculty members at Rutgers and Delaware respectively then, at a regional philosophy conference in New Jersey, it must have been February 1982. Instead of attending the next boring session, we sat for three hours in Bill's little car in the pouring rain discussing race and racism in the context of moral and political theory, engine running to keep us from freezing. The contrast with Gerry Cohen couldn't be more palpable. They generously introduced me to the New York Society for the Study of Black Philosophy, run by Al Prettyman out of his apartment on Broadway on the Upper West Side. It was there I would meet Cornel West, Lucius Outlaw, Tommy Lee Lott, Leonard Harris, among others. We read and discussed each other's work, and it was from and through them I would learn enormously in ways unavailable from my PhD program faculty. The Society folk were incredibly welcoming but also uncompromisingly committed to the critical discussion of the ideas and conditions central to Black Philosophy and thought more generally. I was moved as a consequence—even forced, just to keep up!—to read the invisible canon living in the shadows of the conventional philosophical one. It would open me to ways of thinking, to a critical understanding of race, its structures and experiences, that has profoundly underpinned and shaped my subsequent work. And this was occurring precisely as rap was taking hold in the city, in the air, and as a subject of philosophical reflection. A double shaping, interwoven with each other, to be sure.

**G. Y.:** Did you have an interest in rap music and hip-hop culture in light of working with Kurtis Blow?

**D. T. G.:** We were already listening to the music, on the airwaves, in the Mudd Club, but in a sense rap was “invading” Manhattan from the outer boroughs (“Freaks come out at night”!). The independent film scene was deeply embedded with the Soho art scene, both residentially and recreationally. We were listening to the likes of Grandmaster Flash, Run-DMC, The Fat Boys, Chuck D and Public Enemy, Ice T. It was a big deal when Flavor Flav showed up at the Gaghsian Art Gallery in Soho for an opening, in something like 1981. Avant-garde and politically insurgent art forms were playing off each other. Something dynamic was at play, where the likes of Julian Schnabel's expressionism and the political and commercial critique of Barbara Kruger were beginning to dance with the radical critique from rap. William Burroughs was in conversation with The Last Poets, Kathy Acker and Jean-Marie Basquiat were emerging from intersecting cauldrons, the play of high theory with underground culture represented at the time in the pages of Sylvère Lotringer's *Semiotexte*. Heady times.

Our work with Kurtis Blow emerged out of rather than led to this engagement. We were two young white guys from South Africa hustling academically, intellectually, culturally, cinematically in the big bad world of downtown



Manhattan. The presence of Black folk in the Soho cultural scene, both in terms of artistic and cinematic production at the time, was minimal. The hip musical developments, as always, were being forged by Black artists. Cinema generally and independent filmmaking in particular was overwhelmingly white, the Hudlin's notwithstanding. Spike Lee burst onto the scene with his first feature in the mid-1980s. (I actually curated a film exhibition as part of an art show on race at Hunter College Art Gallery put together with Maurice Berger and Johnetta Cole around this time, and included *The Answer*, his compelling student remake of *The Birth of a Nation*.) We just happened to be at the intersection of these creative trends in 1983, having already made our film about the politics of South Africa. It was cut to the beat of driving South African jazz as its musical soundtrack. We perhaps fit the Polygram image of a cheap but creative date for Kurtis Blow, a bit less weighed down as we all were by American racial history.

**G. Y.:** In what ways do you understand the relationship between race and music videos, their production, their content, marketing, and so on?

**D. T. G.:** There are some obvious lines of racial demarcation. Music-video production was seen by the recording industry at the outset of the 1980s as a medium mainly to promote contemporary rock music. There's a longer history of filmic representation of musical expression, dating to the 1920s. And in the 1960s and 1970s, experimentation with image accompaniment to music increased. D. A. Pennebaker and Godard were working with the likes of Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. Music animation also took off: recall The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*.

This is a shorthand way of saying that the recording, advertising, and film industries have long been controlled by white men (think *Mad Men*). And we know the long history of the music industry's exploitation of great Black artists across all genres of popular and experimental musics. Many a charge of theft has been expressed and more often than not borne out. A former graduate student of mine, Dimitri Bogazianos, who himself had had some limited success as a rap recording artist, writes of the fight to control artistic production and profitability between "the suites" and "the streets." One could extend the analysis to music-video production. MTV initially favored the music of white youth, rock, as the standard bearer for music videos, a fact they then used to rationalize why there were almost no initial videos of Black musical talent aired before Michael Jackson threatened to strike. So built into the very formation of the existing industries and their interplay is the structure of racial arrangement and exclusion already fashioning the output.

This structure is further cemented by the fact that musics are racially marketed, the videos reproducing and reinforcing racial expectation and by extension racial response. Music videos have tended to reflect this rather crass understanding both of the musics and their marketability, reinforcing



them. This is in part a product of the parochialism of the industry functionaries and in part an instrumentalizing calculation to maximize profitability. Black, white, Latino, or for that matter Jewish musics, however, are hardly untouched by the environments out of which they emerge, in which they flourish. Musical tastes are not necessarily bounded by racial identification. Tastes travel, reflecting much more complicated histories of formation: think of the blues, jazz, rap, but also rock, opera, classical music. But think too of that whitest of genres, country music, in the counterform of Dom Flemons and the Carolina Chocolate Drops. Far from sacred, the boundaries of race are there to be profanely transgressed!

Just as rock before it, rap has expressed in evolving fashion the sensibilities of a time, of our youth culture over the past three-plus decades now. Implicit in much of the best of political rap, and the slam-poetry movement to which hip-hop culture gave rise, is a racial critique. They fashion a political commentary, an extended rejection of the forces of racially structured capital and the violence of its norm-enforcement that undercuts the all-too-easy dismissal by conventional forces that youth today are apolitical. Take just one small example: Too Short is an artist better known for his cruder lyrics about sex and women. Nevertheless, “The Ghetto” (1990) offers a searing reading over a Gil Scott-Heron chorus line of ghettoization and its modes of destructive containment that capitalism reproduces. The longer version includes lines from The Last Poets’ “Die Nigga.” Race, music-making, video production, and expressive culture come together in the form of critique and not just capital reproduction.

**G. Y.:** What are some of the influences, both academic and nonacademic, that shaped your critical engagement with race theory?

**D. T. G.:** I grew up in Cape Town, South Africa, from the early 1950s and the formative years of formal apartheid through the youth-led uprisings in Soweto and other cities in 1976, before leaving in late 1977. So my experiences from childhood “innocence” through teenage and student political consciousness were forged really by discovering the racial order of the city and society, coming into critical self-consciousness, as Hegel might say, as I came of age. In trying to make sense of the relation between antiapartheid and anti-colonial struggles, we were already reading Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* as undergraduates, *A Dying Colonialism*, and *Towards an African Revolution*, and only secondarily *Black Skin, White Masks*. We were also engaged with formative anticolonial intellectuals like Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In the early 1970s, there was a raging race-class debate for understanding the dynamics of apartheid. White Marxists who prevailed in the social sciences and humanities argued for the epiphenomenality of race. We were reading Sartre, especially *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Memmi, and Arendt as counters to the reductionism. Jeremy Cronin, who after 1994 would become Secretary

General of the South African Communist Party, returned in the mid-1970s from studying with Althusser to teach us before being arrested. He had written a really interesting Althusserian analysis of “Afrikaner Nationalist ideology” as structuring the “ideological state apparatuses” in the country and offered a more sophisticated understanding of both race and class.<sup>1</sup> Black consciousness and Biko’s work especially provided important critical comprehension regarding race around the time he was killed in 1977. When I arrived in New York in late 1978, both *Black Skin, White Masks* and Althusser were just starting to circulate seriously. Said’s *Orientalism* appeared around that time, offering a very different way of approaching the conceptual complications concerning race.

There was still pitifully little on race and racism from analytic philosophers. Kantians like Kurt Baier and Rawlsians still viewed race as a morally irrelevant category. Chomsky and Bracken misleadingly dismissed empiricism and by implication utilitarianism as more conducive to racism than rationalism. The folks around the New York Society were far more important to my development. It was through them I started reading seriously the likes of Du Bois, Alain Locke, writers from Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston to Richard Wright and Baldwin. Later I would have long discussions with Laurence Thomas on slavery and the Holocaust, and Tommy Lott on race and relatedly on jazz, which have stuck with me since. Angela Davis’s *Women, Race and Class*, appearing in 1981 too, insisted on reading race, gender, and class together. Over the following decades, Angela would become a very dear friend who has continued to push my thinking throughout.

I discovered Stuart Hall just as I started formulating my dissertation at the beginning of the 1980s, first the work on the state and articulation (his own break with reductionist Marxism) and then fairly quickly his theorizing of Thatcherism and neoliberalism as well as the earlier work on policing. In the second half of the 1980s, the frame widened further. I was in conversation with Anthony Appiah and Skip Gates, not least regarding the cultural articulations of the racial. I started corresponding with Balibar on race and nation. All along I was reading Foucault closely, a generative influence, and in conversation with Ann Stoler. I’ve been characterized as a racial Foucauldian, though this is much too reductive, needing to reduce thinkers to a prevailing or singular influence. Obviously, that’s just not me.

On a trip to London, in 1988, I met Paul Gilroy, who had just published *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*. We have remained in conversation since. In the US, critical race theory emerged in the late 1980s. Kim Crenshaw exemplified what it takes to analyze intersectionally; Patricia Williams and Mari Matsuda enabled creative thinking about racial formations at the complex intersections of law with the sociological and political. A little later, Cheryl Harris offered the hugely insightful analysis of whiteness as property as a more complicated critical account than emergent whiteness studies at the time. There

have obviously been many more recent interlocutors, but in the past decade and a half, two have had ongoing generative impact on my thinking about race and much else: Achille Mbembe, my dear friend, and my extraordinary partner, Philomena Essed.

So, never narrowly philosophical, my thinking about the racial was quite complexly formed, always at the interfaces of political economy, law, philosophy, political theory, sociology, anthropology, and culture. I am perhaps a “macrohumanist,” to coin a phrase prompted by economics and sociology.

**G. Y.:** That is a very impactful intellectual trajectory. What critical tools do you think are needed for understanding the recent killings of so many unarmed Black men, even boys, in the US, by the state or proxies of the state?

**D. T. G.:** This may come as a surprise, not least for humanists. First, the necessity of critically reading data. It is especially imperative given the proliferation of data sources floating around the web, some obviously far less reliable than others. There’s a real necessity to recognize the reliability of the source, the assumptions on which the data were collected, how the data were compiled and composed, what implications are being drawn.

The latter suggests the associated need to develop the capacity to recognize arguments and the assorted fallacies so often embedded or resorted to. There’s a critical urgency to discern the often unarticulated and untested assumptions—the presumptions—on which arguments are based, from which they jump off. For example, counterclaims have begun to proliferate that there is no evidence of police discriminating against Blacks in America. But the only reason there is no such evidence is that there is a complete paucity of data in this regard, and any argument suggesting no police racial discrimination is built on quicksand.

So there is a need also to recognize relationalities. Not just comparisons but the critical revealing of connections without which trajectories and trends go undetected. This includes being able to discern the connections between the contemporary and historical, to identify the “remainders of race,” as Ash Amin characterizes it.<sup>2</sup> And so to understand the legacy, the ongoing impact, that these “remains” have on people’s lives, we need to understand how such persistent inheritance positions people as more vulnerable to social forces, including policing, in ways that, as Ruthie Gilmore puts it in defining racism, foreshortens Black life.<sup>3</sup>

Third, the Internet has proliferated visual resources, in many ways privileging them over the written and textual. This entails the necessity to be schooled in reading—in critically comprehending—what is being conveyed in seemingly competing recordings of a deadly event like a police shooting. There is the first-order need to read from the sequence of two-dimensional representations of moving events what in fact has transpired in their three-dimensional actualization. So camera angles, representational details and

their significance, and voiced exchanges become imperative in the reading of the moving image.

Consider Eyal Weizman's compelling methodology of critical forensics—he calls it “forensic architecture”<sup>4</sup>—that involves how to read the causal conditions of deadly events in and from the materialities in which they are embedded. This includes the contextual landscape or seascape, the built infrastructure, historical and contemporary, as it impacts people's bodies, racially defined. Critical forensics concerns reading the conditions against the grain of authoritative representations. To understand how many seconds have elapsed between being stopped by a police officer and the culpability involved in the fatal shots going off. Who was where and what actions were transpiring, what was said or not, where the person was shot and from what angle, where the bullet(s) pierced and exited and became embedded, the lapse between being shot and treated, shot and handcuffed, shooting and calling in to report. A critical forensics is a “weapon of the weak” (this from James Scott) made powerful.

All this, in short, can be summarized under the rubric of *how*, not what, to think today conceptually, analytically, visually, interpretatively, indeed critically. Not least in a more and more complicated ecology of thinking itself.

**G. Y.:** Part of the problem of course is due to the lack of trust between white police officers and Black communities and communities of color. Yet, this “mutual” lack of trust, it seems to me, flattens out the ways in which Black people justifiably experience a lack of trust because of the systemic nature of white supremacy. So, how do we engage in a conversation that helps to create some level of mutual trust while making it clear that white supremacy is the problem, not Black people in their “moral failure” to trust?

**D. T. G.:** As you suggest, George, this erosion of trust is not just dispositional or attitudinal. The trust deficit is linked to underlying socio-material conditions of experience. The cliché, “just the facts, please,” is implicated in the flattening. First, it overridingly individualizes the facts to the conditions of the particular case being adjudicated. “Black man, stopped by the police, reaches for his pocket where there is a bulge looking like a gun. Fearing for his safety, officer shot suspect four times.” Or “police failed to buckle arrestee into back of police car because fearing for their safety from gathering mob.” So there's a ready script, designed to establish bureaucratic inculpability. No need to alter the script when it works every time! When civil suits brought by the families of the deceased invariably get settled in the favor of the police, it exacerbates the mistrust. It reduces responsibility to the bureaucracy—usually the city council in question—letting the individual police completely off the hook. So police officers face almost no consequences likely to alter conduct.

The first thing to establish for police and publics is the deep constitutive relation between being Black and brown in America, the disposability to

official and public suspiciousness historically sedimented, the increased likelihood of being apprehended for no or little good reason, the implication of police training, sentiment, and practice in the (re)production of this disposability and its actualization in events.

The evident need for a shift in policing practices requires addressing what and who policing is for. Communally anchored and engaged policing would structure training very differently while also involving rigorous investigations of wrongdoing and agency oversight. The less adversarial this relationship, the more mutually engaged and transformative, the more driven by the imperatives of communal dignity, the more likely it will enable the building—one can't even call it “re-building”—of trust. It would help to give this an appealing moniker, to contrast it with “law and order” policing. “Community policing” is the usual characterization, but this still suggests police work is to keep the community in line. Perhaps “safe policing” captures the doubling of the reach: a policing structured to ensure safety of all, and a policing that in its actualization and effects is safe for all, police included.

The police force is, among many things, a bureaucracy. Bureaucracies organizationally tend to act for the purposes of self-protection, self-perpetuation, and self-reproduction. More money, more “cops,” better equipment, more protective gear, body-cams. This, of course, becomes especially poignant for a profession literally risking life and limb round the clock. It behooves us all to have the police feel and be safer. And it behooves the police to ensure the public—those they serve—to be and feel more at ease both in their daily lives and interacting with their local police.

A key implication here, both as instrumentalization and evidence of change, would be to reduce the radically disproportionate stops by police of Black people. Black folk are stopped far more readily than whites. If police stopped whites at the rate of Blacks, white incidence of crime would be significantly higher too. Tim Rice, the only Black Republican US Senator, said he has been stopped seven times this past year by police, including in the halls of Congress. I haven't been stopped seven times in the nearly forty years I have lived in America. I am not saying I should be stopped at the rate Rice has been; he should be stopped, for cause, no more than me.

Police are sometimes, but far from always, understandably impatient. A police stop is fraught, for the apprehended and for the apprehending police. Both parties grow taut, the apprehended sometimes to the point of freezing up, police occasionally to the point of acting violently. Police are characteristically suspicious, the more so of Black people because both of the misdirected (not to mention racist) media rhetoric about Black criminality and supposed disposition to violence, and relatedly the long history of surveillance and suspicion to which Black people have been subjected. Consider, here, Simone Brown's compelling book on the subject, *Dark Matters*. Hence the imperative of a call for patience, and against unnecessary use of force.

Police have a special responsibility to defuse the build-up of tension. In a routine stop like a traffic violation, things start off calmly enough. But the accusatory tone and the suspicion that immediately accompanies having to show identification heightens nervousness. Police need to be trained and practiced in maintaining an even keel, talking people down from their nervousness, not to take nervousness necessarily as a sign of wrongdoing. When the Black therapist of an autistic patient was shot in the leg, without provocation, by a policeman in the street in North Miami, he asked the policeman why he had shot. The response: "I don't know." Really?

Philando Castille, a dreadlocked Black man, was with his girlfriend and her four-year-old daughter, both also African-American, when he was stopped for an apparently broken taillight in suburban Minneapolis. It was, staggeringly, his fifty-second traffic stop in recent years. When the policeman asked for his identification, Castille quietly mentioned he was licensed to carry a gun, which was in his pocket, and politely asked if he could reach into his back pocket to get his wallet. Tension rose, the officer pulled out his gun, barking orders to see Castille's identification. Castille reached back to oblige, and the officer immediately shot him in the arm four times, leaving him in the wake to bleed to death as his girlfriend and her daughter distressingly looked on. No racial provocation? The shooting officer, himself Latino, is reported to have stopped Castille not for a broken taillight but because a robbery suspect in the area had "a broad nose" and Castille was the first person he came across who might fit the all-too-generically-coded description for a Black man.

What might have been done differently? For one, not being stopped at all for the crime of having a generic nose. But, once stopped, there was a second officer. The first could easily have said, "Look, with a gun things are more tense. So, sir, keep your hands on the wheel where I can see them. My partner will come around the other side and have the young lady and child exit the car. I'm sure all will be fine, but let's all be careful. My partner will then reach into your pocket to get the gun just so we can defuse the tension. If all is above board, we will return the gun to you in due course. Okay?" The outcome would have been vastly different than a decent young man losing his life completely unnecessarily before the desperate eyes of his girlfriend and her daughter, unable to do anything.

A few days after this I was stopped by a young Latino policeman near my home in university housing in California. I had not fully stopped at a stop sign. The exchange was very courteous, even friendly. It helped that he, a university police officer, recognized my name (not sure that's necessarily a good thing). After showing my ID and papers, we had a brief exchange about vacation time (it was summer, I was returning from an early morning surf, board in car), and he left me, reasonably, with a warning. But would it have been different had I been a younger, dreadlocked, Black faculty person, or an undocumented Latino doing home renovation in the area?



So the need is to redirect training and generalize a sense of civility and reasonable response to all. Far less impatience for protestors, even those of policing excesses. A no-tolerance policy for any police person who engages, publicly or privately, in racist expression, on the job or on social media, whether generally intended or directed at a fellow policeman or private citizen. Racist expression or behavior should suffice to cost perpetrators their jobs.

We cannot expect police to fix their own practices. It requires recognition also by lawmakers and courts that negligent, reckless, and discriminatory policing violence requires being addressed, individually and institutionally. “Fear for one’s life” loses its credibility if trumping all reasonable counterconsideration, every time.

**G. Y.:** Are there similarities between antiapartheid and anticolonial struggles and the sort of protests that we’ve been witnessing, especially in terms of the Black Lives Matter Movement? Speak to this.

**D. T. G.:** #BLM represents the leading edge of the third historical antiracist movement in the country. The first, abolition through Reconstruction, straddled much of the nineteenth century. The pushback from the standing forces of racist power was segregation, ordering American life from the 1880s into the 1950s. The Civil Rights Movement both resisted this renewed extension of racism and crafted a vision and a politics at once nonracial and antiracist. Like the anticolonial and antiapartheid struggles, it was Black-led yet significantly cross-racially coalitional. All three of these overlapping movements had important international support and impact. They all premised their respective struggles on the insistence on equality and the dignity of all, notably on racial grounds. They each linked socioeconomic, political, and cultural considerations with legal transformation. And they saw the reinforcing impacts for their respective struggles from both the challenges and successes of the other two.

#BLM is no different on each of these indices, indeed, building on the legacies and lessons of these historical antecedents. It exactly seeks to complete the institutionalization of the reach for racial equality and dignity on which the historical antiracist movements were predicated. And it has linked these local struggles to codirectional commitments wherever they are occurring, from Brazil to South Africa, Europe to Palestine.

There is one significant distinction represented by #BLM that speaks to our contemporary moment. Each of the historical movements were led by groups of notable, recognizable figures, strong personalities and visionary leaders (though invariably men). They were also often deeply interactive with each other. #BLM’s disavowal of leading personalities, even if there is some deference to the founding trio of three young women, is democratically principled and a major challenge to consistent application of principles, movement growth, and sustainability. This organizational diffusion and radical

decentralization nevertheless challenge the movement's sustaining an uncompromising commitment to its core principles and their modes of activation.

**G. Y.:** I continue to be hit with the rhetoric that we are a color-blind US, and that racism, if it exists at all, is a mere aberration. I get this mainly from white students (occasionally, from students of color). How might you respond to this way of thinking that we have achieved a color-blind society?

**D. T. G.:** The core data regarding every index of social well-being and life condition evidence that, structurally, the US is far from a color-blind society, conventionally understood: income and wealth inequality, housing and mortgage access, cost of car loans, schooling quality, discriminatory employment, reliable health care, police stops, incarceration rates, life span all bear this out. And the rhetoric of major politicians as well as the proliferation of racist nastiness on the web are broad indications of the wide distribution of racist venom circulating. Google "Obama, racism, images" to get a quick sense of how explicit racist ugliness continues to proliferate.

The history of the term "color-blind" is at best mixed. It first appears in the late nineteenth century as both an aspiration to social justice and a rationalization of the racial status quo. Justice Harlan captures something of the latter in his famous dissent to the constitutional affirmation of "separate but equal" in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that legally underpinned segregation for the next half century. Harlan writes (I paraphrase) that in so far as whites are and will always remain so far advanced over Black folk in intelligence and skill, they have nothing competitively to fear from the imperative to advance color-blindness. Racism remains embedded historically within the formulation of the concept. Insisting aspirationally on institutionalizing color-blindness oblivious nevertheless to the society's racially founded and inscribed inequality serves only to cement racial inequity and iniquity more deeply in place. And it simultaneously makes the identification of those enduring inequalities, as Charles Tilly once put it, increasingly obscure by erasing the critical terms by which to identify those inequities.

This, as I have elaborated extensively elsewhere, is exactly how the logics of "postraciality" operate today: The complete erasure of the terms for identifying racial inequity and perniciousness; the dehistoricization of racially inscribed events thus radically individuating them, rendering them mere social anomalies; state protection (in the name of free speech) of all private racist expression; the denial of any racist intentionality and the denial of that denial when confronted about it; racial reversibilities in the sense that prejudice against whites is now being pushed as racism's most egregious expression; and the blaming of the victims of racism for bringing it on themselves. We are indeed all postracial already not in any affirming aspirational sense but because this mode of postraciality has become the driving logic and expression of raciality for our time. Postraciality is the defining modality of contemporary racism.



**G. Y.:** Do you see an important role that universities/colleges, especially philosophy departments, might play in effectively getting white students to understand the importance of how race and racism function in their lives? From my own experience, especially as I teach at predominantly white institutions, white students are ill-equipped to engage critically questions about white privilege, complicity, institutional racism, and so on.

**D. T. G.:** We have come to think of the university as somehow separate, even protected from society, the “real world,” when in fact it is both very much reflective of and impacted by the social in which it is embedded. Universities have a mixed record on diversity, and philosophy programs often fare even worse. Those colleges that have done reasonably well on diversifying the student body nevertheless suffer the funnel effect through faculty ranks and upper administrative personnel. So the driving need is to ensure a welcoming environment for more faculty who can speak to the impacts and workings of racism in nontrivial ways. That faculty will very likely end up being more heterogeneous. There are examples of programs and institutions having a much more effective diversifying strategy without a formal “affirmative action program” in place precisely by opening up the admissions process from a narrow focus on grades, testing scores, and racially networked references to a broader array of qualifying considerations like work and life experience, capacity to contribute to the student body and university experience, and likelihood of making compelling social contributions.

I am not a fan of mandated courses on such subject matter. For one, the mandating can cause resentment; and the success of such a course, as with courses generally, will depend on who is teaching them and how they are taught. The point would be to have terrifically appealing critical courses on racial matters students will want to take.

That said, there are two related contributions philosophy might make to embedding critical address of race and racism within and across curricula components. First, as indicated earlier, philosophy has a special role in training students how to think critically. It would help to reinvent the model popular in the 1970s and 1980s requiring every undergraduate to take a course in critical thinking or practical reasoning. Today, this would involve ensuring a significant course focus on racism, gender discrimination, and so on. But to think more creatively about the content of such courses by including interesting cultural contributions from a diverse array of literary and visual culture to music and politics.

Second, there is a great tradition of philosophers speaking compellingly to driving social issues, not least race and racism, from Du Bois, Alain Locke, Fanon, Arendt, and Sartre to Angela Davis, Anthony Appiah, Judith Butler, Cornel West, and Achille Mbembe, among others. The range and depth of this legacy offer a rich archive on which to draw, one with the

potential to fascinate a broad range of students. Giving an account of the extraordinary history of Pan-African congresses across the first half of the twentieth century will prove of interest not just to African and African-American students but equally to students of Asian- and Latin-American backgrounds when it is revealed to them that anticolonial leaders from those backgrounds attended the Congresses and engaged in common struggles at home. Nor would students of European background feel left out when understanding why those meetings were taking place in Manchester, Brussels, Paris, and the like.

This is quite different from the more scholastic focus on whether race is “biologically real” or a “social construction” that dominated professional philosophical debates on race from the later 1980s until recently. So there is a responsibility as much for us as for students to rise to the challenge in crafting learning programs and environments that are diversely attractive while drawing also on the multimedia resources and capacities our students today find compelling.

## NOTES

1. This article was written in the mid-1970s. The piece was never actually published—it circulated underground in South Africa at the time and was banned, especially after Cronin himself was imprisoned.
2. Ash Amin, “The Reminders of Race,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 27, no. 1 (2010): 1–23.
3. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
4. Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture, Notes from Fields and Forums: 100 Notes, 100 Thoughts: Documenta Series 062* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

## PART III DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. David Theo Goldberg points out that music production is in many ways determined by what are considered likely consumer trends by those who already control the industry. In film, Dan Flory explains that products that can be marketed and consumed with great profit are prioritized over other, more challenging ones. To what extent is the production of cultural media a self-regulating hegemonic machine that perpetuates whiteness in the domain of music and film, particularly given that the influence of Hollywood-style movies has effectively deployed the white gaze to operate across the globe? How concerned should we be that such modes of cultural expression are necessarily a part of education from a young age, and that they seem inescapable?

2. One of the difficult and problematic features of whiteness is its capacity to preserve itself through self-regulating hegemonic mechanisms. Discuss the extent to which these mechanisms are present in our cultural surroundings with respect to Goldberg's discussion of music production, Flory's discussion of film, and institutions of education and policing in Blum's discussion.
3. Lawrence Blum engages his students in a discussion of possible "rules of engagement" to enhance "everyone's consciousness about how what they say might be heard or experienced by others" in his courses about race. The awareness of how one is perceived by others is also present in Charles Johnson's concept of "double narrative intelligence," as is made clear in Dan Flory's interview, in which Black people already (must) navigate a world dominated by the white gaze. How might the "rules" by which we are most aware of ourselves operating in the world make it possible or perhaps make it easier to develop multiple narratives?

PART IV

*Race, History, Capitalism, Ethics,  
and Neoliberalism*



# Noam Chomsky

**George Yancy:** When I think about the title of your book *On Western Terrorism*, I'm reminded of the fact that many Black people in the United States have had a long history of being terrorized by white racism, from random beatings to the lynching of more than three thousand Black people (including women) between 1882 and 1968. This is why in 2003, when I read about the dehumanizing acts committed at Abu Ghraib prison, I wasn't surprised. I recall that after the photos appeared, President George W. Bush said "This is not the America I know." But isn't this the America Black people have always known?

**Noam Chomsky:** The America that "Black people have always known" is not an attractive one. The first Black slaves were brought to the colonies four hundred years ago. We cannot allow ourselves to forget that during this long period there have been only a few decades when African-Americans, apart from a few, had some limited possibilities for entering the mainstream of American society.

We also cannot allow ourselves to forget that the hideous slave labor camps of the new "empire of liberty" were a primary source for the wealth and privilege of American society, as well as England and the continent. The industrial revolution was based on cotton, produced primarily in the slave labor camps of the United States.

As is now known, they were highly efficient. Productivity increased even faster than in industry, thanks to the technology of the bullwhip and pistol, and the efficient practice of brutal torture, as Edward Baptist demonstrates in his recent study, *The Half Has Never Been Told*.<sup>1</sup> The achievement includes not only the great wealth of the planter aristocracy but also American and British manufacturing, commerce and the financial institutions of modern state capitalism.

It is, or should be, well known that the United States developed by flatly rejecting the principles of “sound economics” preached to it by the leading economists of the day, and familiar in today’s sober instructions to latecomers in development. Instead, the newly liberated colonies followed the model of England with radical state intervention in the economy, including high tariffs to protect infant industry, first textiles, later steel and others.

There was also another “virtual tariff.” In 1807, President Jefferson signed a bill banning the importation of slaves from abroad. His state of Virginia was the richest and most powerful of the states, and had exhausted its need for slaves. Rather, it was beginning to produce this valuable commodity for the expanding slave territories of the South. Banning import of these cotton-picking machines was thus a considerable boost to the Virginia economy. That was understood. Speaking for the slave importers, Charles Pinckney charged that “Virginia will gain by stopping the importations. Her slaves will rise in value, and she has more than she wants.” And Virginia indeed became a major exporter of slaves to the expanding slave society.

Some of the slave-owners, like Jefferson, appreciated the moral turpitude on which the economy relied. But he feared the liberation of slaves, who have “ten thousand recollections”<sup>2</sup> of the crimes to which they were subjected. Fears that the victims might rise up and take revenge are deeply rooted in American culture, with reverberations to the present.

The Thirteenth Amendment formally ended slavery, but a decade later “slavery by another name,” the title of an important study by Douglas A. Blackmon, was introduced. Black life was criminalized by overly harsh Black codes that targeted Black people. Soon an even more valuable form of slavery was available for agribusiness, mining, steel—more valuable because the state, not the capitalist, was responsible for sustaining the enslaved labor force, meaning that Blacks were arrested without real cause and prisoners were put to work for these business interests. The system provided a major contribution to the rapid industrial development from the late nineteenth century.

That system remained pretty much in place until World War II led to a need for free labor for the war industry. Then followed a few decades of rapid and relatively egalitarian growth, with the state playing an even more critical role in economic development than before. A Black man might get a decent job in a unionized factory, buy a house, send his children to college, along with other opportunities. The Civil Rights Movement opened other doors, though in limited ways. One illustration was the fate of Martin Luther King’s efforts to confront Northern racism and develop a movement of the poor, which was effectively blocked.

The neoliberal reaction that set in from the late ’70s, escalating under Reagan and his successors, hit the poorest and most oppressed sectors of the society even more than the large majority, who have suffered relative stagnation or decline while wealth accumulates in very few hands. Reagan’s drug war,

deeply racist in conception and execution, initiated a new Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander's apt term for the revived criminalization of Black life, evident in the shocking incarceration rates and the devastating impact on Black society.

Reality is of course more complex than any simple recapitulation, but this is, unfortunately, a reasonably accurate first approximation to one of the two founding crimes of American society, alongside of the expulsion or extermination of the indigenous nations and destruction of their complex and rich civilizations.

**G. Y.:** While Jefferson may have understood the moral turpitude upon which slavery was based, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he says that Black people are dull in imagination, inferior in reasoning to whites, and that the male orangutans even prefer Black women over their own. These myths, along with the Black codes following the Civil War, functioned to continue to oppress and police Black people. What would you say are the contemporary myths and codes that are enacted to continue to oppress and police Black people today?

**N. C.:** Unfortunately, Jefferson was far from alone. No need to review the shocking racism in otherwise enlightened circles until all too recently. On "contemporary myths and codes," I would rather defer to the many eloquent voices of those who observe and often experience these bitter residues of a disgraceful past.

Perhaps the most appalling contemporary myth is that none of this happened. The title of Baptist's book is all too apt, and the aftermath is much too little known and understood.

There is also a common variant of what has sometimes been called "intentional ignorance" of what it is inconvenient to know: "Yes, bad things happened in the past, but let us put all of that behind us and march on to a glorious future, all sharing equally in the rights and opportunities of citizenry." The appalling statistics of today's circumstances of African-American life can be confronted by other bitter residues of a shameful past, laments about Black cultural inferiority, or worse, forgetting how our wealth and privilege was created in no small part by the centuries of torture and degradation of which we are the beneficiaries and they remain the victims. As for the very partial and hopelessly inadequate compensation that decency would require—that lies somewhere between the memory hole and anathema.

Jefferson, to his credit, at least recognized that the slavery in which he participated was "the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other."<sup>3</sup> And the Jefferson Memorial in Washington displays his words that "indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever."<sup>4</sup> Words that should stand in our consciousness alongside of John Quincy Adams's reflections on the parallel founding crime over centuries, the fate of "that hapless race of native Americans, which we are exterminating with such merciless and perfidious



cruelty . . . among the heinous sins of this nation, for which I believe God will one day bring [it] to judgment.”<sup>5</sup>

What matters is our judgment, too long and too deeply suppressed, and the just reaction to it that is as yet barely contemplated.

**G. Y.:** This “intentional ignorance” regarding inconvenient truths about the suffering of African-Americans can also be used to frame the genocide of Native Americans. It was eighteenth-century Swedish taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus who argued that Native Americans were governed by traits such as being “prone to anger,” a convenient myth for justifying the need for Native Americans to be “civilized” by whites. So, there are myths here as well. How does North America’s “amnesia” contribute to forms of racism directed uniquely toward Native Americans in our present moment and to their continual genocide?

**N. C.:** The useful myths began early on, and continue to the present. One of the first myths was formally established right after the King of England granted a Charter to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, declaring that conversion of the Indians to Christianity is “the principle end of this plantation.” The colonists at once created the Great Seal of the Colony, which depicts an Indian holding a spear pointing downward in a sign of peace, with a scroll coming from his mouth pleading with the colonists to “Come over and help us.” This may have been the first case of “humanitarian intervention”—and, curiously, it turned out like so many others.

Years later, Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story mused about “the wisdom of Providence” that caused the natives to disappear like “the withered leaves of autumn” even though the colonists had “constantly respected” them.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, the colonists who did not choose “intentional ignorance” knew much better, and the most knowledgeable described “the utter extirpation of all the Indians in most populous parts of the Union [by means] more destructive to the Indian natives than the conduct of the conquerors of Mexico and Peru.”<sup>7</sup>

Knox went on to warn that “a future historian may mark the causes of this destruction of the human race in sable colors.”<sup>8</sup> There were a few—very few—who did so, like the heroic Helen Jackson, who in 1880 provided a detailed account of that “sad revelation of broken faith, of violated treaties, and of inhuman acts of violence [that] will bring a flush of shame to the cheeks of those who love their country.”<sup>9</sup> Jackson’s important book barely sold. She was neglected and dismissed in favor of the version presented by Theodore Roosevelt, who explained that “The expansion of the peoples of white, or European, blood during the past four centuries . . . has been fraught with lasting benefit to most of the peoples already dwelling in the lands over which the expansion took place,” notably those who had been “extirpated” or expelled to destitution and misery.<sup>10</sup>

The national poet Walt Whitman captured the general understanding when he wrote that “the nigger, like the Injun, will be eliminated; it is the law of the races, history. . . . A superior grade of rats come and then all the minor rats are cleared out.”<sup>11</sup> It wasn’t until the 1960s that the scale of the atrocities and their character began to enter even scholarship, and to some extent popular consciousness, though there is a long way to go.

That’s only a bare beginning of the shocking record of the Anglosphere and its settler-colonial version of imperialism, a form of imperialism that leads quite naturally to the “utter extirpation” of the indigenous population—and to “intentional ignorance” on the part of beneficiaries of the crimes.

**G. Y.:** Your response raises the issue of colonization as a form of occupation. James Baldwin, in his 1966 essay, “A Report from Occupied Territory,” wrote, “Harlem is policed like occupied territory.”<sup>12</sup> This quote made me think of Ferguson, Missouri. Some of the protesters in Ferguson even compared what they were seeing to the Gaza Strip. Can you speak to this comparative discourse of occupation?

**N. C.:** All kinds of comparisons are possible. When I went to the Gaza Strip a few years ago, what came to mind very quickly was the experience of being in jail (for civil disobedience, many times): the feeling, very strange to people who have had privileged lives, that you are totally under the control of some external authority, arbitrary and if it so chooses, cruel. But the differences between the two cases are, of course, vast.

More generally, I’m somewhat skeptical about the value of comparisons of the kind mentioned. There will of course be features common to the many diverse kinds of illegitimate authority, repression, and violence. Sometimes they can be illuminating; for example, Michelle Alexander’s analogy of a new Jim Crow, mentioned earlier. Often they may efface crucial distinctions. I don’t frankly see anything general to say of much value. Each comparison has to be evaluated on its own.

**G. Y.:** These differences are vast, and I certainly don’t want to conflate them. Post-9/11 seems to have ushered in an important space for making some comparisons. Some seem to think that Muslims of Arab descent have replaced African Americans as the pariah in the United States. What are your views on this?

**N. C.:** Anti-Arab/Muslim racism has a long history, and there’s been a fair amount of literature about it. Jack Shaheen’s studies of stereotyping in visual media, for example. And there’s no doubt that it’s increased in recent years. To give just one vivid current example, audiences are now flocking in record-breaking numbers to a film, described in *The New York Times* Arts section as “a patriotic, pro-family picture,” about a sniper who claims to hold the championship in killing Iraqis during the United States invasion, and proudly describes his targets as “savagely, despicable, evil, . . . really no other way to describe what

we encountered there.” This was referring specifically to his first kill, a woman holding a grenade when under attack by United States forces.

What’s important is not just the mentality of the sniper, but the reaction to such exploits at home when we invade and destroy a foreign country, hardly distinguishing one “raghead” from another. These attitudes go back to the “merciless Indian savages” of the Declaration of Independence and the savagery and fiendishness of others who have been in the way ever since, particularly when some “racial” element can be invoked—as when Lyndon Johnson lamented that if we let down our guard, we’ll be at the mercy of “every yellow dwarf with a pocket knife.”<sup>13</sup> But within the United States, though there have been deplorable incidents, anti-Arab/Muslim racism among the public has been fairly restrained, I think.

**G. Y.:** Lastly, the reality of racism (whether it’s anti-Black, anti-Arab, anti-Jewish, etc.) is toxic. While there is no single solution to racism, especially in terms of its various manifestations, what do you see as some of the necessary requirements for ending racist hatred?

**N. C.:** It’s easy to rattle off the usual answers: education, exploring and addressing the sources of the malady, joining together in common enterprises—labor struggles have been an important case—and so on. The answers are right, and have achieved a lot. Racism is far from eradicated, but it is not what it was not very long ago, thanks to such efforts. It’s a long hard road. No magic wand, as far as I know.

## NOTES

1. Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).
2. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), 145.
3. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIII, Manners, 168.
4. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIII, Manners, 169.
5. Cited in William Earl Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington: Kentucky, 1992), 193.
6. Cited in Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
7. General Henry Knox, first US Secretary of War, cited in Reginald Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy* (Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1967).
8. Knox, cited in Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy*.
9. Bishop H. B. Whipple, introduction to Helen Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor* (Echo Library, [1881] 2016).
10. Theodore Roosevelt, Address at the celebration of the African Diamond Jubilee of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Washington, DC, January 18, 1909.

11. Commentary: Disciples, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, 283, <http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/disciples/traubel/WWWiC/2/med.00002.56.html>.
12. James Baldwin, "A Report from Occupied Territory." *Nation* 203, no. 2 (1966): 39–43.
13. Lyndon B. Johnson, speeches on November 1 and 2, 1966. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1966, Book II* (Washington, DC, 1967), 563, 568.



# Nancy Fraser

**George Yancy:** In what way have discussions of race shaped your thinking over the years?

**Nancy Fraser:** Race has shaped my thinking profoundly, and from a fairly young age. As a teenager, I was shaken out of my comfortable and rather boring life in a white middle-class suburb of Baltimore by the eruption of the Civil Rights Movement. Drawn quickly into the struggle for desegregation, I experienced a major existential reorientation. Suddenly, my family's move from the city to the suburbs appeared in a new light, as did my relation to our live-in Black maid, who had to wait in the car while we ate in restaurants on vacation road trips. The encounter changed me forever. The Civil Rights Movement provided my first political engagement, my first taste of solidarity in a community of struggle, and my first experience of the power of critique to dissolve blinders. And it informed the whole of my subsequent development, including my gravitation to the radical, anti-imperialist, and antiracist wing of the anti-Vietnam War movement, to a Marxian strand of Students for a Democratic Society, to socialist and antiracist currents of feminism, and eventually to Critical Theory as a genre of intellectual work aimed at disclosing the systemic bases of oppression and the prospects for overcoming it through social struggle.

**G. Y.:** In what ways have you come to specifically rethink the fact that you had a live-in Black maid? I ask this because there are ways in which when we acquire a critical consciousness things take on a different meaning, especially the past.

**N. F.:** Yes, that is exactly what I wanted to suggest. I was caught up in a nexus of racial oppression literally from birth, long before I could name it and subject it to critical assessment. That we were "white" and in a position to be *served* by a Black woman was simply the way things were. That she lived most

of the week with us, in close proximity and engaged with the most intimate aspects of our daily lives (preparing our food, cleaning our dirt), and yet was not a member of our family and did not eat with us—indeed, was someone we held at a *distance*—all that too belonged to the taken-for-granted reality of my childhood. As I grew up, I absorbed but did not grasp the meaning of these everyday experiences: that she was pretty much the only person I knew who rode the public bus, that everyone I saw waiting to be picked up at the bus stop was Black, that she came to our house on a long bus ride from another part of the city, where she had a home and a family, a whole other life, about which I knew next to nothing. I did, as a young child, question certain things—above all, that she couldn't eat with us in restaurants on road trips; and I stored away for future use my parents' reply that this was the law but it was wrong. In retrospect I can see that I was storing up a lot of information until the time arrived when I could decode it. And as I said before, that time began with the Civil Rights Movement. I now believe that my whole upbringing primed me to jump into the struggle. On the one hand, I was living up close and personal with institutionalized racism. But on the other hand, I was hearing from my parents—solid FDR liberals, who nevertheless went along with the Jim Crow system—that it was wrong. My early antiracist activism was informed not only by a passion for justice, but also by adolescent rage at my parents' hypocrisy, their willingness to tolerate social arrangements they disapproved.

So yes, you are right, there is (if we are lucky!) an understanding that arrives late, like Hegel's Owl of Minerva, to provide a retroactive rereading of what we have lived. I think it is largely a process of self-decentering, of stepping back from lived experience and trying to grasp one's reality from the outside, by locating oneself in a social system, a system, if truth be told, of domination. When that happens, one's whole sense of who one is gets radically altered.

The most powerful account I know of this is Christa Wolf's "fictional autobiography," *Patterns of Childhood*.<sup>1</sup> In this extraordinary book, the adult narrator struggles to reconstruct what it was like to be a young German girl growing up in a "normal Nazi family," and eventually to own that experience, to integrate her childhood and adult selves, which at first are split off from one another, marked in the text by two different pronouns, "I" and "she." Another book that deals brilliantly with related issues is Marlene Van Niekerk's novel *Agaat*, which reads the whole forty-plus-year history of South African apartheid through the intimate and almost unbearably painful relation between Milla, an Afrikaner farmwife, and Agaat, her Black housekeeper. Milla brought Agaat to her farmstead and treated her as a substitute for the child she couldn't have, only to convert her into a servant a few years later when Milla became pregnant. In the novel's present, the Afrikaner woman lies dying from ALS. Unable to speak and immersed in her memories, she has no choice but to listen as Agaat reads aloud from her (Milla's) youthful diaries. Hearing her own words, pregnant with evasion and loss, Milla is hit by the full force of what

she has done, of her love for Agaath, and of the way this most enduring and important relation of her life has been irredeemably twisted.<sup>2</sup> These are two of the deepest books I've ever read. In both cases, the authors are grappling with their own implication in brutal oppression as members of the perpetrator groups. Both of them explore the dynamics of retroactive self-understanding and responsibility. And both enact that decentering of subjectivity that is, in my view, the necessary starting point for critique.

**G. Y.:** How has race specifically shaped your philosophical work?

**N. F.:** I am widely viewed as a feminist and critical theorist—and rightly so. Nevertheless, my philosophical work has often attended to racism in one way or another. As I reflect on that now, it occurs to me that I have dealt with issues of race in four different ways. I have treated race, first, as a pervasive dimension of capitalist society, which informs every aspect of it and must be reckoned with in every social inquiry. When writing in this mode, I have sought to reveal the footprint of racialization in matters that could, at first glance, seem far removed from it. Thus, one aim of my early work on the welfare state was to disclose the racial subtext of social programs, along with the gender subtext. An example is my 1994 essay, coauthored with Linda Gordon, on then-fashionable criticisms of “welfare dependency.” In that essay, Gordon and I exhumed racialized strands of dependency discourse, examined their imbrication with class-oriented and gendered strands, and situated them in terms of two major historical shifts—first, from preindustrial society to industrial capitalism, and then to postindustrial (or neoliberal) capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

But I have also approached race in a second, almost opposite, way—namely, as a feature of “common sense” that can suck up all the oxygen and occlude other forms of domination. In work of this sort, I have analyzed the use of racializing discourse to screen out gender and class, an approach that is especially revelatory with respect to class, which is so often occulted and disavowed in US politics. An example is my 1992 essay on the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill confrontation, which drew on Habermas’s theory of the public sphere to clarify the power dynamics behind Thomas’s notorious claim that he was the victim of a “high-tech lynching.”<sup>4</sup>

Then too, I have approached race in a third way, as a “case” that can disclose general features of social oppression. In writings of this type, I have examined racial injustice in order to illuminate injustice more broadly and to concretize my analysis of it. An example is my work on recognition and redistribution, which parsed race as a “two-dimensional” power asymmetry, forged from both culture and political economy, and combining features of both status and class. My aim there was twofold: to understand race for its own sake and to bring home the general point that struggles for recognition are not by themselves sufficient to overcome structural injustice.<sup>5</sup>



Finally, I have approached race in a head-on way, as a primary focus of investigation. In work of this type, I have lifted racial dynamics out from their larger social matrix and moved them to center stage. An example is my 1998 essay on Alain Locke's early effort to develop a critical race theory *avant la lettre*. There I sought to excavate Locke's largely forgotten but still unsurpassed insights, especially his brilliant disaggregation of the concept of "race" into three subconcepts: biological, political, and social.<sup>6</sup> Also in this category is a recent (2016) paper in which I try to explain why capitalist society has always been entangled with racial oppression. Proposing a systemic explanation, I argue that capitalism's official, foreground dynamic of exploitation depends on an equally central but disavowed background process of "expropriation," and that the distinction between those two "exes" corresponds to the color line.<sup>7</sup> In these cases, I have sought to contribute directly to critical race theory—generally by replacing conventional identitarian framings with a focus on historicized capitalism.

**G. Y.:** There is the argument that class trumps race. Some who have argued this position assume some variation of Marxism. Yet, racism involves more than exploitation, yes? Please elaborate on how you understand the difference between the terms "exploitation" and "expropriation" and how the latter term outstrips an analysis of oppression based upon class alone.

**N. F.:** Racism definitely involves more than exploitation. It is no mere "secondary contradiction" of capitalism and cannot be reduced to class oppression. But to reject those vulgar, orthodox views is not necessarily to abandon Marxism. To the contrary, I have proposed an account of racial oppression that belongs to the Marxist tradition, or perhaps I should say, to its "Black Marxist" current, which includes such towering thinkers as C. L. R. James, W. E. B. Du Bois, Eric Williams, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Stuart Hall, Walter Rodney, Angela Davis, Manning Marable, Barbara Fields, Cedric Robinson, David Roediger, Adolph Reed, and Cornel West.<sup>8</sup> This strand of Marxism takes us far beyond conventional economic, class-essentialist, and color-blind orthodoxy, but without throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

My contribution turns on the distinction between capitalism's foreground economy and the latter's background conditions of possibility. According to the official Marxian view, capital is accumulated via the exploitation of "workers": free but propertyless "producers" contract to exchange their "labor power" for wages, while the "surplus value" their labor produces accrues to the capitalist. This view accurately depicts a central process of capitalism. But it gives us only the system's "front-story" while leaving unexamined its equally fundamental "back-story." If, as I said, the front-story is about exploitation, then the back-story concerns *expropriation*; and the distinction between those two "exes" is vital for understanding racial oppression. Whereas exploitation transfers value to capital under the guise of a free contractual exchange,

expropriation dispenses with all such niceties in favor of brute confiscation—of labor, to be sure, but also of land, animals, tools, mineral and energy deposits, and even of human beings, their sexual and reproductive capacities, their children and bodily organs. Moreover, whereas exploited workers are accorded the status of rights-bearing individuals and citizens who enjoy state protection and can freely dispose of their own labor power, those subject to expropriation are constituted as unfree, dependent beings who are stripped of political protection and rendered defenseless—as, for example, in the cases of chattel slaves, colonized subjects, “natives,” debt peons, “illegals,” and convicted felons. Thus, the distinction between the two “exes” is at once “economic” and “political.” It has to do not only with two different *mechanisms of accumulation* but also with two different *modes of subjectivation*, which fabricate two distinct categories of persons, one suitable for “mere” exploitation, the other destined for brute expropriation.

So I am claiming that expropriation is a built-in feature of capitalism, as constitutive of it as exploitation—and that it correlates strongly with racial oppression. The link is clear in practices widely associated with capitalism’s early history but still ongoing, such as territorial conquest, land annexation, enslavement, coerced labor, child labor, child abduction, and rape. But expropriation also assumes more “modern” forms—such as prison labor, transnational sex trafficking, corporate land grabs, and foreclosures on predatory debt, which are also linked with racial oppression. Finally, expropriation plays a role in the construction of distinctive, explicitly racialized forms of exploitation—as, for example, when a prior history of enslavement casts its shadow on the wage contract, segmenting labor markets and levying a confiscatory premium on exploited proletarians who carry the mark of “race” long after their “emancipation.”

Here, then, is my argument in a nutshell: capitalism harbors a deep structural distinction, at once economic and political, between exploitation and expropriation, a distinction that coincides with “the color line.” I can also state the point in a different way: the racializing dynamics of capitalist society are crystalized in the “mark” that distinguishes *free subjects of exploitation* from *dependent subjects of expropriation*.

**G. Y.:** How do you see the relationship between capitalism and racism? Is racism a byproduct of capitalism or is it something far more integral to the expansionist structure inherent in capitalist circuits of desire?

**N. F.:** I see the connection as integral. The first clue is that racial oppression has always been part and parcel of capitalist society—just as expropriation has always accompanied exploitation in capitalism’s history. We are not talking only about the period of racial slavery and modern colonialism. On the contrary, the relation between the two “exes” persisted throughout the era of Jim Crow and decolonization, when value was confiscated from racialized

populations through sharecropping and debt peonage, through the “super-exploitation” of Black workers in dual labor markets, and through neoimperial “unequal exchange.” And racialized expropriation continues today, despite the appearance of equal citizenship and despite lip service to equal rights. In the Global South it assumes the guise of corporate land grabs and dispossession by debt, while in the Global North it operates through for-profit prisons and prison services and through predatory subprime and payday loans. This ongoing history belies the orthodox interpretation of “primitive accumulation,” which limits expropriation to the initial stockpiling of capital at the system’s beginnings.<sup>9</sup>

But my claim is not simply that racialized expropriation persists throughout capitalism’s history. As I see it, the history reflects a deeper, more structural connection. The link is in part “economic.” A system devoted to the limitless expansion and private appropriation of surplus value gives the owners of capital a deep-seated interest in confiscating labor and means of production from subject populations. Expropriation raises their profits by lowering costs of production, including the wage bill—and it does so in at least two ways: on the one hand, by supplying cheap inputs, such as energy and raw materials; on the other, by providing low-cost means of subsistence, such as food and textiles, which permit them to pay lower wages. Thus, by confiscating resources and capacities from unfree or dependent subjects, capitalists can more profitably exploit “free workers.” And so the two “exes” are deeply intertwined. In the memorable phrase of Jason Moore, “behind Manchester stands Mississippi.”<sup>10</sup>

But not everything can be reduced to economics. Political dynamics play an indispensable role in entrenching racial oppression in capitalist society. Capitalism’s economy has always depended on public, political powers to secure the conditions for accumulation. No one doubts that such powers supply the legal frameworks that guarantee property rights, enforce contracts, and adjudicate disputes, as well as the repressive forces that can be called on to suppress rebellions, maintain order, and manage dissent. But that is not all. Public powers also engage in political subjectivation: they codify the status hierarchies that distinguish citizens from subjects, nationals from aliens, freemen from slaves, “Europeans” from “natives,” “whites” from “Blacks,” entitled workers from dependent scroungers. Forged politically, such status hierarchies are essential for accumulation, as they mark off groups subject to brute expropriation from those destined for “mere” exploitation. And so that distinction is as much “political” as it is “economic.”

What all of this entails, finally, is that expropriation and exploitation are not simply separate, parallel processes. Rather, the two “exes” are systemically imbricated—they are deeply intertwined and mutually calibrated engines of a single capitalist world system. The conclusion I draw is that the *racialized subjection* of those whom capital *expropriates* is a hidden condition of possibility for the *freedom* of those whom it *exploits*. And that tells us that racial

oppression stands in a systemic, nonaccidental relation to capitalist society, that the connection between them is inherent.

**G. Y.:** In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon argues that “Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.”<sup>11</sup> For you, how does the Black body suffer in ways that the wage-earning white proletariat doesn’t?

**N. F.:** Well, I would start by unpacking the phrase “to suffer in one’s body.” One obvious meaning is to be subject to physical violence, and there is no question that that condition afflicts people of color (both women and men!) disproportionately. Members of racialized groups are far more likely than “whites” to be murdered, assaulted, harassed, and raped; and the violence they suffer is far more likely to go unpunished. Worse still, those who are supposed to prevent and punish violence are, in the case of Black Americans, too often the perpetrators of it. And that fact compounds the violence. It sends the message that Black lives *don’t* matter, that they can be maimed and extinguished with impunity, that there is no protection and no recourse, that attempts at self-defense will be branded as criminal and crushed by still more violence. All of this has recently erupted into full view in the United States; and the Black Lives Matter movement deserves enormous credit for insisting that we face it squarely, without averting our gaze. But none of it is new. The vulnerability of racialized people to *socially tolerated* violence is at least as old as this country. Everyone knows that it was an enduring feature of slavery and that it persisted (for example, in the form of lynching) long after abolition. But we should not forget that it has also been a constant for native peoples and for “illegals” and immigrants of color, as well as for LGBT people. Nor should we forget that susceptibility to socially tolerated violence is gendered—a fact that Fanon appreciated in the case of Black men, but obfuscated in the case of Black women.<sup>12</sup> To correct his blind spot, we need only mention the systematic rape of enslaved women, including the instrumentalization of their childbearing capacity for breeding, and the targeting of women of color for forced sterilization, transnational sex trafficking, sexual harassment, and sexual assault (both domestic and otherwise). No less than that directed against racialized men, this violence too has been socially tolerated in the United States—indeed throughout the capitalist world system.

We hear far too much of the word ‘terrorism’ today, but I can’t resist using it here. To be susceptible to socially tolerated violence is precisely to be terrorized, to be constantly bracing oneself in expectation of a blow, without knowing when or whence it will come. This internal tension borne of anticipated violence is itself a form of “suffering in one’s body,” even apart from, or in the absence of, any blow. Simultaneously psychical and physical, it is a suffering that explodes the mind-body distinction. But the same is true of other historic forms of institutionalized racism: disfranchisement, segregation, exclusion,

rejection, coerced labor—these also wound body and soul in ways that testify to their ultimate unity. Thus, we should take an expansive view of Fanon's phrase. What is sometimes called symbolic or cultural violence is not without its effects on racialized bodies. This was Fanon's great insight: that racialization imprisons people of color in their bodies; "race" itself is a form of bodily harm and bodily suffering.

But that is not all. People of color also disproportionately suffer in their bodies from what Rob Nixon has called "slow violence."<sup>13</sup> That phrase is meant to signal the long-term effects of the ordinary, everyday living conditions of impoverished racialized people: mal- or poor nutrition, lack of or poor health care, unsanitary water, unsafe housing or homelessness, exposure to pollution and other environmental hazards, dangerous and toxic work. The effects of these conditions unfold very slowly in many cases, but they are nevertheless lethal. So this is "slow violence," akin to "environmental racism." And it is also a form of suffering in one's body. Working gradually and imperceptibly, it stunts the growth, impairs the health, and shortens the lives of people of color across the globe.

When I try to put all of this together, I can't help but return to the idea of expropriation. Part of what I mean by that term, in contradistinction from exploitation, is exposure, the inability to set limits to what others can do to you, the incapacity to draw boundaries and invoke protections. The condition of *expropriability*, of being defenseless and subject to violation, seems to me to lie at the core of racialization and racial oppression. And that is why I said earlier that "race" is the mark that distinguishes free subjects of exploitation from dependent subjects of expropriation in capitalist society.

**G. Y.:** You argued earlier that capitalist society has always been entangled with racial oppression. Attacking racist ideological assumptions, while necessary, will not be sufficient to effectively eliminate racism, assuming that it will ever be eliminated. To engage in something far more radical, in what specific ways must capitalism, because it is always already linked to racism, be restructured? If racism must go, then what does this mean for capitalism?

**N. F.:** Well, that's just about the hardest question you could possibly ask me! And I can't provide a fully satisfying answer. But let me suggest a way of thinking about it that draws on the conception of capitalism I've been sketching here. Assuming this conception, which encompasses expropriation as well as exploitation, politics as well as economics, I would like to address your question in its most classical and pointed form: is it possible to abolish racial oppression without abolishing capitalism? The short answer is: in theory, yes; in practice, given capitalism's history, almost certainly no. Let me explain.

A major consideration has to do with the ontology of "race." Like many critical race theorists, I hold that "race" does not exist apart from racialization, which is to say, apart from the political mechanisms of subjectivation

that sort populations into different categories, suited to different functional roles and social locations. If that is right, then “race” just *is* that differential marking of capitalism’s subjects, in the one case for exploitation, in the other for expropriation. Absent that political marking, it wouldn’t exist. By the same token, however, “race” *must* exist in one form or another wherever social arrangements constitute expropriation and exploitation as distinct and separate processes assigned to distinct and separate populations. In those situations, *whoever* is constituted as expropriable will be racialized, constructed as dependent and inherently violable, deprived of rights and protections, and on that basis oppressed—even if the people in question are not disproportionately of African descent. If “race” is understood in this pragmatic, de-substantialized way, and if capitalism requires both expropriation and exploitation, as well as their mutual separation, then it cannot be detached from racial oppression.

But before we embrace that conclusion, we should consider another possibility: that while capitalism *does* require both expropriation and exploitation, it does *not* require that they be clearly separated from one another. Suppose, accordingly, that a new form of capitalism emerges, one that does *not* assign the two exes to distinct populations. Such a regime would conscript nearly all adults into wage labor, but pay the overwhelming majority less than the socially necessary costs of their reproduction. Reducing the “social wage” by dismantling public provision, it would entangle the bulk of the population in massive debt, empowering creditors to evict them from their homes and their land, to garnish their wages and seize their assets, including their personal capacities and bodily liberty. Universalizing precarity, the new regime would compel most households to rely on multiple earners working long hours at multiple jobs and thus to sacrifice health, family life, education, sleep, nutrition, leisure, and retirement in order to service their loans and meet their most pressing needs as best they can. In this new form of capitalism, the line between exploitation and expropriation would blur. Virtually everyone would be subjected to both those processes of value extraction, which would no longer be clearly separated from one another. Neither subjects of expropriation nor subjects of exploitation would exist as such. Those “pure” positions would be replaced by a new, nearly universal hybrid status: the exploitable-and-expropriable citizen-worker, formally free, but deeply vulnerable and highly dependent. Certainly, this type of capitalism would be no picnic. But in overcoming the dichotomous separation of the two exes, it would have transcended the historic basis of racial oppression in capitalist society.

The regime I’ve just imagined is logically possible, to be sure, which is why I said at the outset that a nonracial capitalism is possible in theory. For all practical purposes, however, we can rule it out. The reason has to do with path dependency, the constraints of history on real possibility, and with the dynamics of transition, the process of getting from here to there. Given the



accumulated weight of racialization in capitalism's history and barring some unimaginable cataclysm, I can discern no practicable path to a regime of accumulation in which the burdens of expropriation are equitably shared across the color line.

To see why, we need only compare my hypothetical scenario to the really existing capitalism of the present era, with which it has clear similarities. Today's financialized capitalism is indeed a regime of universalized expropriation: of government "austerity," falling real wages, ballooning consumer debt, precarious employment, and increased hours of waged work per household. And the situation of "white" citizen-workers, previously protected from such expropriation, has badly deteriorated. Structurally, their circumstances now encompass both of the "exes," just like their counterparts of color, many of whom joined the ranks of exploited wage labor long ago, but without fully escaping expropriation. Today, accordingly, the relation between the two exes has changed. What once was a stark dichotomy, separating two distinct classes of subjects, now resembles a continuum. The hybrid status of the (disempowered, precarious) exploitable-and-expropriable citizen-worker, previously restricted to people of color, has now been generalized to virtually the entire non-property-owning population. In these respects, present-day financialized capitalism resembles the hypothetical postracial scenario I sketched above.

And yet: present-day capitalism is anything but postracial. The burdens of expropriation still fall disproportionately on people of color, who remain racialized and far more likely than others to be unemployed, homeless, poor, and sick; to be victimized by crime and predatory loans; to be incarcerated and sentenced to death, harassed and murdered by police; to be used as cannon fodder in endless wars. Racial oppression persists despite the advent of a new, less dichotomous configuration of the two exes. And that configuration may even aggravate racial animosity. When centuries of stigma and violation meet finance capital's voracious need for subjects to expropriate, the result is intense insecurity and paranoia—hence, a desperate scramble for safety—and exacerbated racialization. Certainly, "whites" are less than eager to share the burden of violation—and not simply because they are racists, although some of them are. It is also that they, too, have legitimate grievances, which come out in one way or another—as well they should. In the absence of a cross-racial movement to abolish a system that requires expropriation as well as exploitation, their grievances find expression in the growing ranks of right-wing authoritarian populism. Those movements, which flourish in virtually every country of capitalism's historic core, represent the entirely predictable response to the hegemonic "progressive neoliberalism" of the present era. The latter cynically deploys appeals to "fairness" as a cover for extending and exacerbating expropriation. In effect, it asks those who were once protected from it by their standing as "whites" and "Europeans" to give up that favored status, embrace their growing precarity, and surrender to violation, all

while funneling their assets to private investors and offering them nothing in return beyond moral approval. In the dog-eat-dog world of financialized capitalism, marked both by the historical weight of centuries of racialization and by intensified expropriation-cum-exploitation, it is practically impossible to envision a “democratic” path to nonracial capitalism.

Nor, of course, is it easy to envision a path to a nonracial *postcapitalist* society. But the kernel of the project is clear. Contra traditional understandings of socialism, an exclusive focus on exploitation cannot emancipate working people of any color; it is necessary also to target expropriation, to which exploitation is in any case tied. By the same token, contra liberal and “progressive” antiracists, an exclusive focus on discrimination, ideology, and law is not the royal road to overcoming racial oppression; it is also necessary to challenge capitalism’s stubborn nexus of expropriation and exploitation. Both projects require a deeper radicalism—one aimed at structural transformation of the overall social matrix, at overcoming both of capitalism’s exes by abolishing the system that generates their symbiosis.

Perhaps we can find some grounds for hope in the current situation. Today, when the exploited are also the expropriated and vice-versa, it might be possible, finally, to envision an alliance of populations that were too easily pitted against one another in earlier eras, when the two exes were more clearly separated. Perhaps in blurring the line between them, financialized capitalism is creating the conditions for their joint abolition.

## NOTES

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## Peter Singer

**George Yancy:** You have popularized the concept of speciesism, which, I believe, was first used by animal activist Richard Ryder. Briefly, define that term and how do you see it as similar or different from racism?

**Peter Singer:** Speciesism is an attitude of bias against a being because of the species to which it belongs. Typically, humans show speciesism when they give less weight to the interests of nonhuman animals than they give to the similar interests of human beings. Note the requirement that the interests in question be “similar.” It’s not speciesism to say that normal humans have an interest in continuing to live that is different from the interests that nonhuman animals have. One might, for instance, argue that a being with the ability to think of itself as existing over time, and therefore to plan its life, and to work for future achievements, has a greater interest in continuing to live than a being who lacks such capacities.

On that basis, one might argue that to kill a normal human being who wants to go on living is more seriously wrong than killing a nonhuman animal. Whether this claim is or is not sound, it is not speciesist. But given that some human beings—most obviously, those with profound intellectual impairment—lack this capacity, or have it to a lower degree than some nonhuman animals, it would be speciesist to claim that it is *always* more seriously wrong to kill a member of the species *Homo sapiens* than it is to kill a nonhuman animal.

**G. Y.:** While I think that it is ethically important to discuss the issue of failing to extend to other (nonhuman) animals the principle of equality, we continue to fail miserably in the ways in which we extend that principle to Black people, the disabled, women, and others, here in the United States and around the world. What is it that motivates the failure or the refusal to extend this

principle to other human beings in ethically robust ways? I'm especially thinking here in terms of the reality of racism.

**P. S.:** Although it is true, of course, that we have not overcome racism, sexism, or discrimination against people with disabilities, there is at least widespread acceptance that such discrimination is wrong, and there are laws that seek to prevent it. With speciesism, we are very far from reaching that point. If we were to compare attitudes about speciesism today with past racist attitudes, we would have to say that we are back in the days in which the slave trade was still legal, although under challenge by some enlightened voices.

Why do racism, sexism, and discrimination against people with disabilities still exist, despite the widespread acceptance that they are wrong? There are several reasons, but surely one is that many people act unthinkingly on the basis of their emotional impulses, without reflecting on the ethics of what they are doing. That, of course, invites us to discuss why some people have these negative emotional impulses toward people of other races, and that in turn leads to the old debate whether such prejudices are innate or are learned from one's culture and environment. There is evidence that even babies are attracted to faces that look more like those of the people they see around them all the time, so there could be an evolved innate element, but culture certainly plays a very significant role.

**G. Y.:** I think that it is important to keep in mind that American slavery was partly constituted by a white racist ideology that held that Africans were subpersons. There was also the European notion that nonwhites were incapable of planning their own lives and had to be paternalistically ruled over. So, in many ways, for Black people, the distinction between the human and the subhuman (even nonhuman) didn't hold in the face of white racist mythos. As a white Australian, do you think that there are parallels in terms of how the indigenous people of Australia have been treated, especially in terms of subpersonhood, and paternalism?

**P. S.:** Yes, unfortunately there are parallels. The early European settlers regarded the indigenous people as an inferior race, living a miserable existence. Because the indigenous people were nomadic, they were regarded as having no ownership of their land, which in British colonial law therefore belonged to nobody—the legal term was *terra nullius*—and so, very conveniently, could be occupied by Europeans. In some cases, when indigenous people killed cattle that were grazing on their traditional lands, Europeans went out in “shooting parties,” killing them indiscriminately, as they would animals. Some of the Europeans justified this on the grounds that the indigenous people, like animals, had no souls. Although such killings were never permitted in law, enforcement was another matter.

When the Commonwealth of Australia was formed from the separate colonies in 1901, indigenous people were not able to vote, nor were they included

in the census. Voting rights were achieved in stages over the next sixty years. The *terra nullius* doctrine was only overturned by the High Court of Australia in 1992, and indigenous communities then became able to claim rights over traditional land still in the possession of the government.

Australian government policy toward indigenous people became more benevolent, but it remained paternalistic until well into the twentieth century, and some argue, to the present day. Restrictions on the sale of alcohol in Australia's Northern Territory, where many indigenous people live, can be seen as evidence that paternalism still prevails, even though the restrictions do not, on their face, take into account the race of the person purchasing alcohol. Against that, it has to be said, many self-governing indigenous communities, acutely aware of the devastation that alcohol has caused to their people, restrict its use in the areas under their control. Indeed, some indigenous leaders have themselves promoted a swing back to more paternalistic policies.

**G. Y.:** Yet, it seems to me that the issue of alcohol abuse would perhaps be moot had indigenous people in Australia not been subjected to forms of oppression and marginalization in the first place. This is not to deny choice, but to acknowledge that structural forms of oppression, poverty, and marginalization should be taken into account when discussing alcoholism within the context of the lives of indigenous people in Australia. It's also important to note that Native Americans and First Nations people in Alaska also have huge problems with alcoholism. Some indigenous people in Australia are even sniffing petrol, which has its own specific devastating consequences. In what ways do you think that the alcoholism and the substance abuse described above are linked to these larger structural issues that disproportionately impact indigenous people?

**P. S.:** You are correct that the situation of Australia's indigenous people is in some respects similar to that of Native Americans and First Nations in Alaska, or for that matter in Canada too. The destruction of indigenous culture, and of the way of life that for thousands of years gave meaning and a social structure to the lives of indigenous people, obviously plays a role in leading some of them to drink or try to get high on petrol fumes. Indigenous Australians receive housing, health care, and sufficient income to meet their needs, but what has been taken away can never be restored. The problem goes so deep—and is now often compounded, as we have been saying, with alcohol and petrol abuse, which in turn lead to domestic violence and serious health damage—that it is hard to know how the situation can be turned around.

**G. Y.:** Above, you mentioned “emotional impulses,” but don't you think that white racism is also based upon institutional structures, and not just people acting on the basis of their emotional impulses? In fact, there need not be any immediately identifiable emotional impulses; the institutional system, which includes inertial racist practices that are expressed systemically

through banks, education, the prison industrial complex, health care, and so on, just needs to keep functioning, privileging and empowering some (white people) and oppressing and degrading others (Black people). Historically, the concept of institutional racism was systematically deployed during the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and was popularized by Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Toure) and Charles V. Hamilton.

**P. S.:** What you are here referring to as “the institutional system” includes distinct sectors of society, and each of these sectors has its own divisions and subdivisions. The extent to which they are racist will vary, and it would take detailed evidence and analysis to demonstrate that each of these sectors, and each of its divisions and subdivisions, involves or expresses racist practices. So all I can say, without getting into all the detailed evidence that would be needed to consider each sector and then build back to an overall picture, is that where there is institutional racism, it can take the place of racist emotional impulses. Often, however, there will be racist emotional attitudes as well, and they will then support the institutional structures, making them more difficult to change.

**G. Y.:** And, in turn, can we say that institutional structures can instill and support certain racist emotional impulses?

**P. S.:** Yes. Where racist institutional structures continue to exist, they will provide a specific channel for racist feelings and attitudes, and in some situations, will serve to legitimate and reinforce them. But we cannot say how important this is without first determining which institutional structures are still racist, and to what extent and in what ways they are racist.

**G. Y.:** There is, however, data that shows that Black people suffer disproportionately with respect to bank lending practices, quality of education, quality of health care, arrest rates for nonviolent drug offenses, and so on. However, returning to what you said earlier, do you think that racism is innate or cultural? Even if there appears to be a proclivity toward a kind of xenophobic tribalism expressed within the human species, racism seems to be of a different order, yes?

**P. S.:** Racism is certainly different from xenophobia, or tribalism. Racism develops its own ideology and, as you pointed out, institutional structures. But if by ‘a different order’ you mean that racism and xenophobic tribalism have distinct origins, I am not sure about that. It’s possible that xenophobia is the underlying impulse that, in different cultures, expresses itself in varying forms, and racism is one of those forms.

**G. Y.:** Yes. I think that racism may very well have its roots in a kind of xenophobic tribalism, but white racism expresses itself in all sorts of perverse ways and is perhaps motivated from psychic needs/places that transcend xenophobic tribalism.

**P. S.:** Maybe. We have strong hierarchical tendencies. We like to think that there is always someone below us, and for many people, having power over others seems, regrettably, to reaffirm their sense of self-importance and thus to make them feel good. That may be a psychic need that finds an outlet in racism. For some people, it also finds an outlet in the abuse of animals. In particular, jobs in in factory farms and poultry processing plants are poorly paid, high pressure, and low status. That may be why, year after year, undercover investigators in factory farms and slaughterhouses continue to find evidence of the most atrocious abuse, like workers bashing pigs with steel pipes, or using live chickens as footballs.<sup>1</sup>

**G. Y.:** To what extent do you think that biases against nonhuman animals are grounded within a certain unethical stewardship toward nature itself? Do you think that this is a specifically Western approach to nature where nature is conceived as an “object” over which we ought to have absolute control? Certainly, Francis Bacon seems to have had this idea. Of course, then there was René Descartes, who argued that nonhuman animals are mere machines.

**P. S.:** It is true that Western thinking emphasizes the gulf between humans and nature, and also between humans and animals, to a far greater extent than Eastern thinking, or the thinking that is characteristic of indigenous peoples. Yet it is also true that the treatment of both animals and nature is, today, generally worse in the East than in the West. Every visitor to Beijing has breathed in evidence of what China has allowed its industries to do to the air. Laws protecting the welfare of animals in Europe are far in advance of those in Eastern countries, including those with strong Buddhist traditions like Japan and Thailand. China still doesn’t even have a national animal welfare law. So if the domination of nature and of animals was originally a Western idea, the sad fact is that it is being taken up avidly in the East, precisely at the time when it is being vigorously challenged in the West.

**G. Y.:** Black people in the US have been compared to subhuman animals. Even, on various occasions, President Obama has been depicted as a monkey. These charges are meant to degrade. And this attempt to degrade must be understood against the backdrop of Black people in the US fighting against precisely what we see a reduction of our humanity. In 2015, Black people are still fighting to be recognized as fully human, and that our lives matter. How can Black people, on the one hand, reject the reduction of, say, Obama to a monkey, and yet be against speciesism?

**P. S.:** I don’t see any problem in opposing both racism and speciesism. Indeed, to me the greater intellectual difficulty lies in trying to reject one form of prejudice and oppression while accepting and even practicing the other. And here we should again mention another of these deeply rooted, widespread forms of prejudice and oppression, sexism. If we think that simply being a member of the species *Homo sapiens* justifies us in giving more weight to the interests

of members of our own species than we give to members of other species, what are we to say to the racists or sexists who make the same claim on behalf of their race or sex?

The more perceptive social critics recognize that these are all aspects of the same phenomenon. The African American comedian Dick Gregory, who worked with Martin Luther King as a civil rights activist, has written that when he looks at circus animals, he thinks of slavery: “Animals in circuses represent the domination and oppression we have fought against for so long. They wear the same chains and shackles.”<sup>2</sup> Alice Walker, the African-American author of *The Color Purple*, also has a memorable quote: “The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women were created for men.”<sup>3</sup>

**G. Y.:** Given that we have not even figured out how to treat those of our own species with dignity and respect, as someone who continues to fight against speciesism, do you have thoughts on how we might effectively dismantle racism?

**P. S.:** With all of these “isms”—racism, sexism, and speciesism—I’m an optimist about making progress, but a pessimist about achieving complete success any time soon. I’m encouraged by the facts compiled by Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. Pinker draws on and completes the argument of my own work, *The Expanding Circle*. I do believe that we are slowly expanding the circle of our moral concern. Pinker provides evidence for the claim that, notwithstanding the media headlines, we are living in less violent and more enlightened times than any previous century. This will surely help marginalized, disempowered, and oppressed groups. We can hope to isolate and reduce the impact of racism and sexism, but eliminating them altogether is going to be a long struggle. With speciesism, unfortunately, we still have much further to go, because it remains the mainstream view.

## NOTES

1. See Mercy for Animals, <https://www.mercyforanimals.org/investigations.aspx>; and Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “KFC Supplier Accused of Animal Cruelty,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/20/business/kfc-supplier-accused-of-animal-cruelty.html>.
2. Dick Gregory, “The Circus: It’s Modern Slavery,” *Marin Independent Journal*, April 28, 1998, <http://www.peta.org/living/entertainment/dick-gregory-circuses/>.
3. Foreword to Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Animal Slavery and Human Slavery* (New York: Mirror Books, 1996), 14.



# Seyla Benhabib

**George Yancy:** How do you see the importance of the public sphere as a site for critically discussing issues regarding the persistence and reality of race in America?

**Seyla Benhabib:** We are conducting this conversation in the aftermath of the church shootings in South Carolina, the moving and inspiring memorial services to the victims, and the removal of the Confederate flag from the grounds of the South Carolina state capitol. These are events that have raised some of the most significant debates about racial symbolism in the North American public sphere. We have all been reminded of the presence of the past, and to paraphrase William Faulkner, “The past is never dead. It is not even past.”<sup>1</sup>

I did not know, for example, that the Confederate flag was revived in Southern states during and after the Civil Rights Movement in clear defiance of racial equality and integration. This was not just a flag that Confederate soldiers fought and died under. It became, as some South Carolinian representatives told us, a symbol of defiance and hatred, and a reminder that the Civil War may have been won but that the battle for overcoming racial prejudice has not ended.

**G. Y.:** Yes. Within our world, though not restricted to signs and symbols of hatred, we are bombarded by racist signs and symbols.

**S. B.:** We live in televisual societies that are drowning in messages, images, and symbols that circulate at the click of a mouse. The Internet creates iconic images immediately, and these can have a galvanizing force—for good and for bad. Think of the image of Neda, the young Iranian girl shot in 2009 during antiregime demonstrations in Teheran, or Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian vegetable vendor who in 2011 set himself on fire and whose death prompted the so-called Arab Spring. Images such as these indicate the power of electronic and televisual communication in public culture at large.



These new technologies of the public sphere also challenge democratic societies in that the speed of the circulation of images often overwhelms the communicative and deliberative processes that need to take place among all those affected to unpack and understand what is being implied by these images; whether they mean the same to all involved; and if not, how or why not? In societies that are still strongly divided—even if not legally and constitutionally—along racial and ethnic lines, this public conversation becomes all the more significant for learning to live together. As we saw in the case of the South Carolina massacre, sometimes sorrow and grief, which tear apart the fabric of everydayness, are powerful teachers. They can bring forth unexpected empathy and solidarity.

**G. Y.:** We far too often fail to understand each other across racial divides. A “postracial” discourse might even occlude the effort to do so. How do we create spaces for understanding the conditions of others, especially within the context of racial boundaries that divide us?

**S. B.:** Let me begin with a personal memory: I first came to this country from Istanbul, Turkey, as a foreign scholarship student in 1970 to Brandeis University. The program that sponsored me, the Larry Wien International Program, had great outreach success in African countries, and there were many African Wien students like myself. Yet, when we sat in the student cafeteria, the African students would sit in the company of African-American students, and effectively we self-segregated in one of the most progressive institutions of its time in the country.

**G. Y.:** What was your response to this?

**S. B.:** I was almost offended by this. I came from a country that was divided along all sorts of ethnic and religious lines, but not the color line. Having been active in the Student Movement of ’68 and beyond, to me it was incomprehensible that at least those of us who shared similar political views could not be friends and colleagues. Brandeis, like much of North America at the time, was in the grips of Black separatisms. Angela Davis had been a student of Herbert Marcuse at Brandeis, and I had come to study with Marcuse, not realizing that he had already left for University of California at San Diego! It was not until I attended Yale Graduate School and formed friendships with Lorenzo Simpson and Robert Gooding-Williams that I began to fathom something about depth and hurt of the color line in this country.

I share this anecdote with you because, as the late Iris Marion Young reminded us, to understand one another across racial and many other divides we have to begin by “greeting” and “story-telling.” One of the worst offenses of racism is that it blinds us to who the individual person is—the color of your skin becomes the mask that I see and, often, behind which I do not want to see the real person. And as Du Bois, a student of Hegel, reminds us, the one who is in the dominated position is aware of the perspective of the master: she is

conscious of herself as being seen by the other, while her perspective is often irrelevant for the master. It is this double-consciousness that we must learn to understand. We must learn to see each other—to use terms that I introduced in *Situating the Self* both as “the generalized” and “the concrete other.”<sup>2</sup>

As humans, we are like one another, equally entitled to respect and dignity; but we are also different from one another because of our concrete psychological histories, abilities, racial and gender characteristics, and so forth. Ethics and politics are about negotiating this identity-in-difference across all divides. We live in a “postracial” society only in the sense that we are all generalized others in the eyes of the law; but not in the eyes of those who administer the law—as we learn painfully. Think also of the bank clerk who denies a mortgage loan or even, to use Cornel West’s famous example, the New York taxi driver who refuses to pick up the Black man on the curb and drives by! The history of discrimination, domination, and power struggles among the concrete others trumps the standpoint of the generalized other.

**G. Y.:** In *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, you observe, “But in its deepest categories Western philosophy obliterates differences of gender as these shape and structure the experiences and subjectivity of the self.”<sup>3</sup> Is it also true that Western philosophy obliterates differences of race and how this social category shapes the experiences of nonwhites?

**S. B.:** Western philosophy, as distinguished from myth, literature, drama, and many other forms of human expression, speaks in the name of the universal. Philosophy emerges when Socrates and Plato show how we have to free ourselves from the “idols of the city,” and when the pre-Socratics ask what constitutes matter and the universe, and reject the answers provided by the Greek polytheistic myths. There is something subversive in this philosophical impulse, and even when Plato reinscribes differences of natural talent and ability into the order of the city, he does so by subverting the established order of the Greek polis, in which only the free male heads of households, who were also slave-owners, were free citizens. According to *The Republic*, differences in the city will not be based on social and economic status but on talents and capabilities shown by children differentially at birth: some are bronze, some are silver, and only the very few are gold!

**G. Y.:** Yes, this is Plato’s Noble Lie.

**S. B.:** Yes. It is important to hold on to these moments in the birth of our discipline because rather than denouncing the Western philosophical tradition as the canon produced by “dead, white men,” we need to remember that moment of opening and closure, subversion and restoration, freedom and domination that are present in these texts that we love: from *The Republic* to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. From Aristotle’s *Politics* to Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government* and Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and *Emile*, this dynamic of opening and closure holds. And it is in the context of this dynamic of freedom

for some and domination for others that we need to understand both gender and racialized difference.

**G. Y.:** Perhaps we can think here of Hegel's claim that Black people have no *Geist*, and Locke's investment in the slave trade.

**S. B.:** John Locke was also Tutor and Secretary to the Earl of Shaftesbury, and he wrote the Constitution of the Carolinas for him. Locke is a colonizer, who believes that the white man's labor in appropriating and working the land will create a condition that will be beneficial to all. But who exactly is working the land? Not the master but the servant, and we know historically that there not only were indentured white servants during Locke's time in the British colonies, but also enslaved Black people. In view of the presence of these "others," who haunt the text, what do we make of Locke's theory of consent, equality, and rationality? How many of these ideals are "polluted" by the presence of the many whose equal rationality is never presumed? This is the kind of question that the critical investigation of race in these texts leads us to ask.

Unlike Locke, who is a natural rights theorist, Hegel has a deep sense of history and is a great social realist. I never know quite what to make of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where he discusses Africa and claims that Black people have no *Geist*. Clearly, he was ignorant. These were popular and popularizing lectures, simplistic in the extreme. Unlike Locke, who was familiar with the realities of colonialism and the slave trade, Hegel does discuss "Lordship and Bondage" in a most sublimated and abstract way in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* without much reference to the colonization of the New World. Yet, he has a great deal to say about the fact that persons cannot be property and that slavery is against human freedom and reason in *The Philosophy of Right*.

All this complicates the question of how to read Hegel, and even more importantly, how to appropriate him for critical philosophy and race theory. Obviously, Du Bois did so brilliantly by separating the power of Hegelian categories from Hegel's own limited historical knowledge and personal prejudice. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, even deployed the concept of *Volksgeist* for Black people, to investigate their own achievements and collective spirit.

**G. Y.:** I think that it is important to mention that within the Western philosophical tradition, the mind, coded as white and male, is privileged over the body, coded as female or a signification of Blackness, creating a false, disembodied practice.

**S. B.:** Of course, I agree with you. The master also shows "mastery" over his own feelings and emotions, where domination over the other means domination over the otherness within. As Adorno and Horkheimer argued brilliantly in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in Western philosophy reason is understood as "*ratio*," as instrumental reason, which in Descartes's famous words intends to render us "masters and possessors of Nature."<sup>4</sup> Such *ratio* is an instrument

for the social domination of others. And the slave, whether Black or not, is always represented as part of the order of nature that needs to be mastered and subjugated. Such an understanding of rationality brings with it the dualism of mind/body.

Yet we also have to remember that there is a different view of the relation of reason to the emotions, and of body to soul which is more one of education and formation and shaping—not domination. I would argue that from Aristotle to Hume to Smith and even the early Hegel, we find another model of rationality as “embodied intelligence,” as the shaping of emotion by reason rather than its domination. John Dewey is the most articulate philosopher of this alternative understanding of rationality.

**G. Y.:** As a political theorist, do you think democracy is really able to deliver equality to Black people, to fully translate universalistic human rights into real change for them, especially as they have, for hundreds of years, been deemed subpersons?

**S. B.:** I don’t think that it is democracy that is failing Black people in the United States, but the assault on democracy itself through the forces of a global corporate capitalism run amok and the rise of a vindictive and racist conservative movement that is unraveling the civic compact. Democracy is impossible without some form of socioeconomic equality among citizens. Instead, in the United States in the last two decades, the gap between the top 1 percent and the rest has increased; voting rights and union rights have been embattled. There is rampant criminal neglect of public goods such as highways, railroads, and bridges—not to mention the brazen onslaught of big money to buy off elections since the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision. We have become a mass democracy that is producing gridlock in representative institutions precisely because it is in the interest of global corporate capitalism to render representative institutions ineffective.

I fear for the future of democracy in the United States, and am grateful that, unlike in other countries, we have a military that believes in democracy and is not inclined to carry out a coup. But there are other forces that are undermining democratic institutions. Democracy can only survive as social democracy, and that is what we are lacking in the United States. Under conditions of growing inequality and plutocratic attacks on democracy, it is the most vulnerable populations such as urban or rural Black communities that are most affected.

## NOTES

1. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage, [1950] 2011).
2. Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory,” in *Situating the Self: Gender,*

- Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 148–178.
3. Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19.
  4. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 54.

# Naomi Zack

**George Yancy:** What motivates you to work as a philosopher in the area of race?

**Naomi Zack:** I am mainly motivated by a great need to work and not to be bored, and I have a critical bent. I think there is a lot of work to be done concerning race in the United States and a lot of ignorance and unfairness that still needs to be uncovered and corrected. I received my doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University in 1970 and then became absent from academia until 1990. When I returned it had become possible to write about real issues and apply analytic skills to social ills and other practical forms of injustice. My first book, *Race and Mixed Race* (1991), was an analysis of the incoherence of US Black/white racial categories in their failure to allow for mixed race. In *Philosophy of Science and Race*, I examined the lack of a scientific foundation for biological notions of human races, and in *The Ethics and Mores of Race*, I turned to the absence of ideas of universal human equality in the Western philosophical tradition.

I'm also interested in the role of the university in homelessness and have begun to organize an ongoing project for the University of Oregon's Community Philosophy Institute, with a unique website.

**G. Y.:** How can critical philosophy of race shed unique light on what has happened, and is still happening in Ferguson, Missouri?

**N. Z.:** Critical philosophy of race, like critical race theory in legal studies, seeks to understand the disadvantages of nonwhite racial groups in society (Blacks especially) by understanding social customs, laws, and legal practices. What's happening in Ferguson is the result of several recent historical factors and deeply entrenched racial attitudes, as well as a breakdown in participatory democracy.

**G. Y.:** Would you put this in more concrete terms?

**N. Z.:** Let's work backward on this. Middle-class and poor Blacks in the United States do less well than whites with the same income on many measures of human well-being: educational attainment, family wealth, employment, health, longevity, and infant mortality. You would think that in a democracy, people in such circumstances would vote for political representatives on all levels of government who would be their advocates. But the United States, along with other rich Western consumer societies, has lost its active electorate (for a number of reasons that I won't go into here). So when something goes wrong, when a blatant race-related injustice occurs, people get involved in whatever political action is accessible to them. They take to the streets, and if they do that persistently and in large enough numbers, first the talking heads and then the big media start to pay attention. And that gets the attention of politicians who want to stay in office.

It's too soon to tell, but "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" could become a real political movement—or it could peter out as the morally outraged self-expression of the moment, like "Occupy Wall Street."

But the value of money pales in contrast to the tragedy this country is now forced to deal with. A tragedy is the result of a mistake, of an error in judgment that is based on habit and character, which brings ruin. In recent years, it seems as though more unarmed young Black men are shot by local police who believe they are doing their duty and whose actions are for the most part within established law.

In Ferguson, the American public has awakened to images of local police, fully decked out in surplus military gear from our recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, who are deploying all that in accordance with a now widespread "broken windows" policy, which was established on the hypothesis that if small crimes and misdemeanors are checked in certain neighborhoods, more serious crimes will be deterred. But this policy quickly intersected with police racial profiling already in existence to result in what has recently become evident as a propensity to shoot first. All of that surplus military gear now stands behind such actions, and should offend all members of the civilian public.

**G. Y.:** How does this "broken windows" policy relate to the tragic deaths of young Black men/boys?

**N. Z.:** People are now stopped by the police for suspicion of misdemeanor offenses, and those encounters quickly escalate. The death of Michael Brown, like the death of Trayvon Martin before him and the death of Oscar Grant before him, may be but the tip of an iceberg. Young Black men are the convenient target of choice in the tragic intersection of the broken windows policy, the domestic effects of the war on terror, and police racial profiling.

**G. Y.:** Why do you think that young Black men are disproportionately targeted?

**N. Z.:** Exactly why unarmed young Black men are the target of choice, as opposed to unarmed young white women, or unarmed old Black women, or even unarmed middle-aged college professors, is an expression of a long American tradition of suspicion and terrorization of members of those groups who have the lowest status in our society and have suffered the most extreme forms of oppression, for centuries. What's happening now in Ferguson is the crystallization of our grief.

We also need to understand the basic motives of whole human beings, especially those with power. The local police have a lot of power—they are “the law” for all practical purposes.

Police in the United States are mostly white and mostly male. Some confuse their work roles with their own characters. As young males, they naturally pick out other young male opponents. They have to win, because they are the law, and they have the moral charge of protecting. So young Black males, who have less status than they do, and are already more likely to be imprisoned than young white males, are natural suspects.

**G. Y.:** But aren't young Black males also stereotyped according to white racist assumptions?

**N. Z.:** Yes. Besides the police, a large segment of the white American public believes they are in danger from Blacks, especially young Black men, who they think want to rape young white women. This is an old piece of American mythology that has been invoked to justify crimes against Black men, going back to lynching. The perceived danger of Blacks becomes very intense when Blacks are harmed. And so today, whenever an unarmed Black man is shot by a police officer and the Black community protests, whites in the area buy more guns.

This whole scenario is insane. The recent unarmed young Black male victims of police and auxiliary police shootings have not been criminals. Their initial reactions to being confronted by police are surprise and outrage, because they cannot believe they are suspects or that merely looking Black makes them suspicious. Maybe their grandfathers told them terrible stories, but after the Civil Rights Movements and advancement for middle-class Blacks, we are supposed to be beyond legally sanctioned racial persecution. Their parents may not have taught them the protocol for surviving police intervention. And right now the airwaves and Internet are buzzing with the anxiety of parents of young Black men. They now have to caution their sons: “Yes, I know you don't get into trouble, and I know you are going to college, but you have to listen to me about what to do and what not to do if you are ever stopped by the police. Your life depends on it. . . . Don't roll your eyes at me, have you heard what happened to Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown?”

**G. Y.:** We can safely assume white parents don't need to have this talk with their children. Do you think white privilege is at work in this context?



**N. Z.:** The term ‘white privilege’ is misleading. A privilege is special treatment that goes beyond a right. It’s not so much that being white confers privilege but that not being white means being without rights in many cases. Not fearing that the police will kill your child for no reason isn’t a privilege. It’s a right. But I think that is what ‘white privilege’ is meant to convey, that whites don’t have many of the worries nonwhites, especially Blacks, do. I was talking to a white friend of mine earlier today. He has always lived in the New York City area. He couldn’t see how the Michael Brown case had anything to do with him. I guess that would be an example of white privilege. Other examples of white privilege include all of the ways that whites are unlikely to end up in prison for some of the same things Blacks do, not having to worry about skin-color bias, not having to worry about being pulled over by the police while driving or stopped and frisked while walking in predominantly white neighborhoods, having more family wealth because your parents and other forebears were not subject to Jim Crow and slavery. Probably all of the ways in which whites are better off than Blacks in our society are forms of white privilege. In the normal course of events, in the fullness of time, these differences will even out. But the sudden killings of innocent, unarmed youth bring it all to a head.

**G. Y.:** The fear of Black bodies—the racist mythopoetic constructions of Black bodies—has been perpetuated throughout the history of America. The myth of the Black male rapist, for example, in *Birth of a Nation*. But even after the Civil Rights Movements and other instances of raised awareness and progress, Black bodies continue to be considered “phobogenic objects,” as Frantz Fanon would say.

**N. Z.:** Fanon, in his *Black Skin, White Masks*, first published in France in 1952, quoted the reaction of a white child to him: “Look, a Negro! . . . Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Over half a century later, it hasn’t changed much in the United States. Black people are still imagined to have a hyperphysicality in sports, entertainment, crime, sex, politics, and on the street. Black people are not seen as people with hearts and minds and hopes and skills but as cyphers that can stand in for anything whites themselves don’t want to be or think they can’t be. And so, from a Black perspective, the Black self that whites serve up to them is not who they are as human beings. This exaggeration of Black physicality is dehumanizing.

**G. Y.:** Given this, why have so many adopted the idea that we live in a postracial moment in America?

**N. Z.:** I don’t know where the idea of “postracial” America came from. It may have begun when minorities were encouraged to buy homes they could not afford so that bankers could bet against their ability to make their mortgage payments, before the real estate crash of 2007–2008. It sounds like media hype to make Black people feel more secure so that they will be more predictable consumers—if they can forget about the fact Blacks are about four times

as likely as whites to be in the criminal justice system. If America is going to become postracial, it will be important to get the police on board with that. But it's not that difficult to do. A number of minority communities have peaceful and respectful relations with their local police. Usually it requires negotiation, bargaining, dialogue—all of which can be set up at very little cost. In addition, police departments could use intelligent camera-equipped robots or drones to question suspects before human police officers approach them. It's the human contact that is deadly here, because it lacks humanity. Indeed, the whole American system of race has always lacked humanity because it's based on fantastic biological speculations that scientists have now discarded, for all empirical purposes.

**G. Y.:** So is it your position that race is a social construct? If so, why don't we just abandon the concept?

**N. Z.:** Yes, race is through and through a social construct, previously constructed by science, now by society, including its most extreme victims. But, WE CANNOT ABANDON RACE, because people would still discriminate and there would be no nonwhite identities from which to resist. Also, many people just don't want to abandon race, and they have a fundamental right to their beliefs. So race remains with us as something that needs to be put right.



# Charles Mills

**George Yancy:** You are a philosopher who thinks very deeply about issues of race. Can you provide a sense of your work?

**Charles Mills:** I think a simple way to sum it up would be as the transition from white Marxism to (what I have recently started calling) Black radical liberalism.

**G. Y.:** So, how does “white” modify Marxism? And what is it about the modification that helps to account for the transition to what you’re now calling Black radical liberalism?

**C. M.:** Mainstream Marxism has (with a few honorable exceptions) been “white” in the sense that it has not historically realized or acknowledged the extent to which European expansionism in the modern period (late fifteenth century onward) creates a racialized world, so that class categories have to share theoretical space with categories of personhood and subpersonhood. Modernity is supposed to usher in the epoch of individualism. The Marxist critique is then that the elimination of feudal estates still leaves intact material/economic differences (capitalist and worker) between nominally classless and normatively equal individuals. But the racial critique points out that people of color don’t even attain *normative* equality.

In the new language of the time of “men” or “persons” (displacing citizens and slaves, lords and serfs), they are not even full persons. So a theorization of the implications of a globally racially partitioned personhood becomes crucial, and liberalism—once informed by and revised in the light of the Black experience—can be very valuable in working this out. In my recent (2017) essay collection for Oxford University Press, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*, I try to make a case for this retrieval—the deracialization of a liberalism historically racialized.

**G. Y.:** So what then is left of the value of Marxism? And does your point mean that there is, historically, a fundamental relationship (perhaps tension) between the political ideals of modernity, the phenomenon of white supremacy, and the subhuman racialization of Black people?

**C. M.:** Marxism is still of value in various ways: its mapping of the revolutionary transformative effects of capitalism on the modern world; its diagnosis of trends of concentration of wealth and poverty in capitalist societies (Thomas Piketty's 2014 bestseller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, pays tribute to Marx's insights, while distancing itself from some of his conclusions); its warning of the influence of the material economic sphere on the legal, cultural, political, and ideational realms.

It also has various weaknesses, the recounting of which would be too long to get into here. Yes, I would claim that the tension between recognizing (some) people as "individuals" in modernity while subordinating others through expropriation, chattel slavery, and colonialism requires a dichotomization in the ranks of the human. So we get what I termed above a "racial" liberalism, that extends personhood on a racially restricted basis. White supremacy can then be seen as a system of domination that, by the start of the twentieth century, becomes global and which is predicated on the denial of equal normative status to people of color. As members of what was originally seen as a "slave race" (the grandchildren of Ham), Blacks have generally been at the bottom of these hierarchies. But the exclusions were broader, even if other nonwhite races were positioned higher on the normative ladder. At the 1919 post-World War I Versailles Conference, for example, the Japanese delegation's proposal to incorporate a racial equality clause in the League of Nations' Covenant was vetoed by the six "Anglo-Saxon" nations (Britain, the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand).<sup>1</sup> So this event brings out in a wonderfully clear-cut way the reality of a global polity normatively divided between racial equals and racial unequals.

**G. Y.:** How do you understand the meaning of white supremacy? And why is it that the reality of white supremacy has escaped traditional and perhaps contemporary political philosophers and philosophy? I wonder if there isn't a subtle, as you say, "dichotomization in the ranks of the human" operating even here.<sup>2</sup>

**C. M.:** By 'white supremacy' I mean a system of sociopolitical domination, whether formal (de jure) or informal (de facto), that is characterized by racial exploitation and the denial of equal opportunities to nonwhites, thereby privileging whites both nationally and globally. Historically, I would say that it *was* recognized by traditional (modern) political philosophy, but it was generally taken for granted and positively valorized. After World War II and decolonization, of course, the public expression of such views becomes impolitic. So you then have a retroactive sanitization of the racist past and the role of

the leading Western political philosophers and ethicists in justifying Western domination.

In the fields of political theory and international relations, there's now a growing body of revisionist work documenting this history, for example Jennifer Pitts's *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (2005), John M. Hobson's *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (2012), and Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam's coedited *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (2014). Unfortunately, mainstream political philosophy is lagging behind the times in its refusal to admit the significance of this colonial and imperial past, the way it has shaped the modern world, and its implications for conceptualizing justice, both nationally and globally. Here in the United States, for example, we have the absurd situation of a huge philosophical literature on social justice in which racial injustice—the most salient of American injustices—is barely mentioned.

**G. Y.:** In your 1997 book *The Racial Contract*, you discuss the concept of an “epistemology of ignorance,” a term which I believe you actually coined.<sup>3</sup> What is meant by that term? And how do you account for the complete thematic marginalization of racial justice? Does an epistemology of ignorance help to explain it?

**C. M.:** Yes, I believe it does help to explain it, but first let me say something about the term. The phrasing (‘epistemology of ignorance’) was calculatedly designed by me to be attention-getting through appearing to be oxymoronic. I was trying to capture the idea of norms of cognition that so function as to work *against* successful cognition. Systems of domination affect us not merely in terms of material advantage and disadvantage, but also in terms of likelihoods of getting things right or wrong, since unfair social privilege reproduces itself in part through people learning to see and feel about the world in ways that accommodate to injustice. “Ignorance” is actively reproduced and is resistant to elimination. This is, of course, an old insight of the left tradition with respect to class. I was just translating it into a different vocabulary and applying it to race. So one can see the idea (and my later work on “white ignorance”) as my attempt to contribute to the new “social epistemology” that breaks with traditional Cartesian epistemological individualism, but in my opinion needs to focus more on social oppression than it currently does.

Ignorance as a subject worthy of investigation in its own right has, by the way, become so academically important that in 2015 Routledge published a big reference volume on the topic, the *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, edited by Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey. The book covers numerous varieties of ignorance over a wide range of different areas and divergent etiologies, but my own invited contribution (“Global White

Ignorance”) appears in the section on ignorance and social oppression. In this chapter, I argue that modernity is cognitively marked by a broad pattern in which whites generally endorse racist views (one type of ignorance) in the period of formal global white domination, and then (roughly from the post-World War II, decolonial period onward) shift to the endorsement of views that nominally decry racism, but downplay the impact of the racist past on the present configuration of wealth and opportunities (another type of ignorance). So remedial measures of racial justice are not necessary, and white privilege from illicit structural advantage, historic and ongoing, can remain intact and unthreatened. Insofar as mainstream “white” American political philosophy ignores these realities (and there are, of course, praiseworthy exceptions, like Elizabeth Anderson’s 2010 *The Imperative of Integration*), it can be judged, in my opinion, to be maintaining this tradition.

**G. Y.:** So, would it be fair to say that contemporary political philosophy, as engaged by many white philosophers, is a species of white racism?

**C. M.:** That would be too strong, though I certainly wouldn’t want to discount the ongoing influence of personal racism (now more likely to be culturalist than biological—that’s another aspect of the postwar shift), especially given the alarming recent findings of cognitive psychology about the pervasiveness of implicit bias. But racialized causality can work more indirectly and structurally. You have a historically white discipline—in the United States, about 97 percent white demographically (and it’s worse in Europe), with no or hardly any people of color to raise awkward questions; you have a disciplinary bent toward abstraction, which in conjunction with the unrepresentative demographic base facilitates *idealizing* abstractions that abstract away from racial and other subordinations (this is Onora O’Neill’s insight from many years ago); you have a Western social justice tradition which for more than 90 percent of its history has excluded the majority of the population from equal consideration (see my former colleague Samuel Fleischacker’s 2004 *A Short History of Distributive Justice*, that demonstrates how recent the concept actually is); and of course you have norms of professional socialization which school the aspirant philosopher in what is supposed to be the appropriate way of approaching political philosophy, which over the past forty years has been overwhelmingly shaped by Rawlsian “ideal theory,” the theory of a perfectly just society.

Rawls himself said in the opening pages of *A Theory of Justice* that we had to start with ideal theory because it was necessary for properly doing the really important thing: nonideal theory, including the “pressing and urgent matter” of remedying injustice.<sup>4</sup> But what was originally supposed to have been merely a tool has become an end in itself; the presumed antechamber to the real hall of debate is now its main site. Effectively, then, within the geography of the normative, ideal theory functions as a form of white flight. You don’t want to

deal with the problems of race and the legacy of white supremacy, so, metaphorically, within the discourse of justice, you retreat from any spaces worryingly close to the inner cities and move instead to the safe and comfortable white spaces, the gated moral communities, of the segregated suburbs, from which they become normatively invisible.

**G. Y.:** So, part of what I hear you saying is the need to make important metaphilosophical shifts regarding the whiteness of political philosophy, in particular, and the whiteness of the profession of philosophy, more generally. What are a few of these shifts?

**C. M.:** Yes, by its very nature, political philosophy is going to have a metadimension, in that the drawing of the boundaries of the political is itself often a political act. The best-known example in recent decades of such a challenge is feminist political theory, which classically argued that the conventional liberal division between the public and the private spheres needed to be rethought, since as it stood, gender injustice was obfuscated by the relegation of the family to the “apolitical” realm of the domestic. More recently, we’ve seen the challenges of postcolonial theory and queer theory, though they haven’t had much of an impact in philosophy circles, and certainly not in analytic political philosophy circles. In the case of race, we need to do various things, like exposing the racism of most of the important liberal theorists (such as Kant), asking what the actual color-coded (rather than sanitized for later public consumption) versions of their theories are saying (are Blacks full persons for Kant, for example?),<sup>5</sup> and how these racially partitioned norms justified a white-dominant colonial world. As I said above, we need to recognize and investigate the workings of racial liberalism/imperial liberalism, since this is the actual version of liberalism that has made the modern world, and that, more subtly today, is continuing to help maintain its topography of illicit racialized privilege and disadvantage. In the title of one of my (unpublished) papers, we need to be “Liberalizing Illiberal Liberalism,” a metareconstruction of liberal theory. Likewise, we need to ask how it came about, and has come to seem normal, that “social justice” as a philosophical concept has become so detached from the concerns of actual social justice movements. Certainly it’s not the case that if people in the civil rights community were planning a conference on racial justice next month that they would be heatedly debating which philosophers to invite! Rather, mainstream political philosophy is seen as irrelevant to such forums because of the bizarre way it has developed since Rawls (a bizarreness not recognized as such by its practitioners because of the aforementioned norms of disciplinary socialization). Social justice theory should be reconnected with its real-world roots, the correction of injustices, which means that rectificatory justice in nonideal societies should be the theoretical priority, not distributive justice in ideal societies. Political philosophy needs to exit Rawlsland—a fantasy world in the same extraterrestrial league



as Wonderland, Oz, and Middle-Earth (if not as much fun)—and return to Planet Earth.

**G. Y.:** Earlier, you mentioned Black radical liberalism. I'm assuming that this position critiques Rawls's ideal theory. If this is so, how does this position engage nonideal theory via-à-vis the historical legacy of white supremacy and its impact on contemporary nonwhite persons? Indeed, what sort of *normative theory* comes out of Black radical liberalism in terms of speaking to solutions to contemporary forms of anti-Black racism?

**C. M.:** It's a normative theory that, as you correctly say, is centrally located in the realm of nonideal theory, and as such makes rectificatory justice its priority. As a Black radical *liberalism*, it is committed to *moral* individualism (the individual as the locus of value), but this does not require, I would claim, any corresponding commitment to *descriptive* individualism (the individual as an atomic asocial entity). Rather, it recognizes—as a *Black radical liberalism*—that the social ontology of a racialized world is different from the social ontology of an ideal world, so that races are social existents (social constructs) that need to be incorporated into the liberal apparatus. (For ideal-theory liberalism, races don't even exist, since the processes of discrimination that would construct them are absent. This metaphysical divergence is part of the reason why Rawlsian ideal theory is so unhelpful in dealing with these matters.) Likewise, instead of a Rawlsian ideal-theory framing of society as “a cooperative venture for mutual advantage,” it begins from the nonideal reality of societies as systems of group domination, with the focus here on racial domination (though of course in intersectional relationships with other kinds of domination). The principles of justice we are then seeking are the principles of nonideal normative theory that would correct for this legacy of domination, as manifest, for example, in second-class citizenship, racial exploitation, and social disrespect. So, as emphasized, they are principles of corrective justice, rather than Rawlsian principles of ideal distributive justice. How does one arrive at them? In other work, for example my 2007 book *Contract and Domination*, coauthored with Carole Pateman (though with separately authored chapters, given our disagreements), I have argued that we can modify Rawls's apparatus so as to use veiled prudential choice as he does, but in the different context of correcting for injustice. So our starting point is not the “original position,” but the “later position” of a white-dominant sociopolitical order.

**G. Y.:** In terms of correcting for racial injustice, does the possibility of reparations fit within your framework, or does this belie any possibility of veiling, as it were?

**C. M.:** Yes, in the same book with Carole Pateman, *Contract and Domination*, I argue that behind the veil, worried that when it lifts we might turn out to be Black (or some other subordinated racial group), we would endorse principles of corrective justice that would include reparations. We would be mindful—in

a way that the orthodox Rawlsian version of the thought-experiment is not (being a “device of representation” for *ideal* theory)—of the risks of ending up as a Black or Latina person in the ghettos of Chicago, or a Native American on the reservation. So the thought-experiment is modified in such a way as to make the correction of racial injustice central and imperative, rather than being deferred (as it is in the Rawls literature) to a tomorrow that never comes.

**G. Y.:** How has “standard” (white) political philosophy responded to *The Racial Contract*?

**C. M.:** In twenty years there has been no response that I’m aware of. The panel discussions that did take place were organized by Black philosophers, or radical white philosophers, or political scientists. Three discussion forums were later published from these panels, one in 1998 in the postcolonial theory journal *Small Axe*, one in a 2003 conference volume on race, and a retrospective forum in 2015 in the new APSA journal *Politics, Groups, and Identities* in which the contributors are all political theorists, and as indicated the journal is a political theory journal. The book has achieved widespread course adoption and corresponding sales in courses in many disciplines across the US, including philosophy. But in certain respects I think it’s more recognized outside of philosophy than within it.

**G. Y.:** How does your work speak to the situation going on in Ferguson, Missouri, and in other places in the United States where racial injustice and conflict is flaring?

**C. M.:** I would say that unfortunately it brings home the extent to which—in the second decade of the twenty-first century, 150 years after the end of the Civil War and even with a Black president in office—Black citizens are still differentially vulnerable to police violence, thereby illustrating their (our) second-class citizenship. The “racial contract” as a theory of the actual nonideal workings of society and the polity is obviously going to be a far more illuminating framework for understanding and redressing these problems than an idealized social contract which takes socially recognized moral equality and corresponding equitable treatment, independent of race, to be the norm.

**G. Y.:** Finally, you mentioned the alarming information coming out of cognitive psychology regarding implicit bias. I recall reading recently an article that suggested some Black Americans think that the Secret Service’s failure to protect President Obama is due to the fact that he is Black. Why do you think that these perceptions continue to exist? Are they reasonable? I ask this especially because your epistemology of ignorance position does suggest that Black people will have a different epistemic perspective on reality—right?

**C. M.:** The radically divergent perspectives on reality of Blacks and whites are a straightforward reflection of the radically different realities in which they live. Segregation has deep cognitive consequences as well as the more familiar

consequences for one's chances at a good education, home ownership in good neighborhoods, being able to escape gang violence, and so on. That doesn't mean that Black majority opinion is always going to be right, of course. But you would expect that those more subject to the inequities of the system will in general be the ones more likely to have a realistic perspective on it. Whites have not merely an unrepresentative group experience, but a vested group interest in self-deception. Sociologists have documented the remarkable extent to which large numbers of white Americans get the most basic things wrong about their society once race is involved. (See, for some hilarious examples, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists*, now [2017] in its fifth edition.) My favorite example, from a poll a few years ago, is that a majority of white Americans now believe that *whites* are the race most likely to be the victims of racial discrimination! If that's not an epistemology of ignorance at work, I don't know what would be.

## NOTES

1. For a detailed account, see chapter 12 of Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
2. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 23.
3. Mills, *Racial Contract*, 18–19.
4. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.
5. See Charles W. Mills, "Kant and Race, *Redux*," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 35 (special issue on race and philosophy), nos. 1–2 (2014): 125–57.

## Falguni A. Sheth

**George Yancy:** Can you discuss your own view of your “racial” identity and how that identity is linked to your critical explorations into the philosophical and political significance of race?

**Falguni A. Sheth:** Until 2001, I thought of my identity in terms of ethnicity rather than race. I was an immigrant, and in the American imaginary, immigrants were rarely discussed in terms of race. After September 11, 2001, I tried to reconcile what I saw as the profound racist treatment of people (often Arab, Middle Eastern and South Asian migrants) who were perceived as Muslim, with a politically neutral understanding of “racial identity,” but it didn’t work. That’s when I began to explore race as a critical category of political philosophy, and as a product of political institutions. The biggest surprise was my coming to understand that “liberalism” and systematic racism were not antithetical, but inherently compatible, and that systemic racism was even necessary to liberalism. Soon after, I read Charles Mills’s *The Racial Contract*, which supported that view.

**G. Y.:** In what ways do you see liberalism and systemic racism as complementary?

**F. A. S.:** There isn’t a simple link. I am seen as a brown woman, but also as racially ambiguous, which has its own set of problems, as Linda Martín Alcoff discusses.<sup>1</sup> Gender is a key component of racial identity. I suppose that if I were less racially ambiguous, I might have been affected by the Asian “model minority” myth, which identifies Asian women as “good” or “docile,” or “smart.” But to both whites and nonwhites (including South Asians), my visible, physical self doesn’t easily lend itself to that stereotype.

Racial identity is also complicated by class: I went to a public high school in a mostly Irish- and Polish-American working-class town with a large emerging population of brown and Black kids: Puerto Ricans, migrant kids of Mexican,

Colombian, Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, Brazilian, and Portuguese descent. I felt more comfortable there with the brown kids than I did in my middle-class grammar school composed almost entirely of white kids, many of whom, as I realized only as an adult, were racial bullies. To this day, I exhibit personality traits that are stereotypically “Jersey working class,” which make it rather awkward to fit into the “genteel academic” circles in which I often find myself these days.

Aside from the cultural hostilities that are foisted upon brown people, my nonambiguous brownness sensitizes me to the vulnerabilities—the lack of rights, security, safety, legal protection—of being nonwhite in a polity that understands “good” and “deserving” members as being white and upper- or at least middle-class men and women. I remember my mother being treated roughly by police when she was in a traffic accident and, again, their indifference when she was targeted by the “Dotbusters,” a self-appointed gang of racial nationalists that was assaulting Asian Indians in northern New Jersey in the late 1980s.

When I was finally granted an interview for US citizenship in December 2000, I asked a relative to accompany me in the event that there was trouble. The interview was demanded by the government during the American Philosophical Association meetings in December 2000 (it was virtually impossible to renegotiate the appointment without a long, punishing delay). Despite a heavy snowfall, we arrived an hour early. The INS interviewer was over an hour late in opening up the office, and cheerfully told me that I was lucky he had decided to show up. Conversationally and with a broad smile, he told me a series of stories about the various applicants he had had deported, even if they—like myself—had been in the United States since they were toddlers or infants, even if they knew no one from their countries of birth, and even if they stood to be in danger there. He emphasized how few protections immigrants had, and his message was this: The United States will deport without a second thought, and hey, it’s the immigrant’s problem, not theirs.

Through such experiences, I have come to understand identity not as racial, but racialized, through populations’ relations, and vulnerability, to the state, which also is the basis of my book. The political framework of liberalism, which promises equality and universal protection for “all,” depends on people to *believe* those promises, so that racial discrimination, brutality, violence, and dehumanization can be written off as accidental, incidental, a problem with the application of liberal theory rather than part of the deep structure of liberalism.

My book attempts to show that racism, racial exclusion, and racial violence are part and parcel of liberalism. For example, we see the exclusions in early liberal writings: In John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, he discusses the social contract and the equal opportunity to “earn” property for everyone, except the “lunatics and idiots,” women, and “madmen,” or those

incapable of reason, and therefore of creating property.<sup>2</sup> The treatise also offers a “just war” theory of slavery.<sup>3</sup> Locke helped write the “Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina,” which afforded slave owners complete control over their slaves, alongside representative government. These key ideas are both, “compatibly,” in that document.<sup>4</sup>

**G. Y.:** When you mention vulnerability to the state, I’m reminded of the American eugenics movement in the early twentieth century. Is there a connection here? I’m also reminded of Michel Foucault’s concept of bio-power and its relevance within the American eugenics context. How does your work speak to this sort of policing of certain bodies?

**F. A. S.:** Certainly, that’s one example. Political vulnerability is intrinsic to any society, but the rhetoric of universal and equal protection conceals the systematic impulse to exclude certain populations at any given time. The groups who are vulnerable are subject to change, depending upon how threatening they are, and/or how useful it would be to those in power to discard them. In the 1990s, the legal scholar Dorothy Roberts drew attention to how the bodies of American Black women were policed.<sup>5</sup> For example, if they were using drugs while pregnant, they were subject to being charged with crimes and thrown in prison.<sup>6</sup> Vulnerability goes beyond bio-power.

Other examples include the internment of Americans, Peruvians, and other Latin Americans of Japanese origin during the Second World War, or the deportation of Chinese migrants from the United States in the 1880s, and the disfranchisement of Asians from their United States-purchased land in the early 1900s. And needless to say, the wide-scale disfranchising of Muslims in the post-9/11 United States is but another recent example. In each of these cases, they are deprived of protections because they are perceived as threats in some way, and so they become—explicitly or not so explicitly—subject to laws intended to constrain, dehumanize, and criminalize them. It is a gradual process, but they are increasingly vilified, demonized, and dehumanized, which then rationalizes the move to strip them of protections under the mantle of “legality.” That is what my work explores.

**G. Y.:** Given the continuing racial tensions across the nation, how do you see these events as deep problems endemic to liberalism? Or, are such events just a “misapplication” of liberal theory?

**F. A. S.:** The charge of “misapplication” of liberal theory is, I think, a desire to see selectively—to see only the best possible articulation of liberalism. But liberal frameworks are fundamentally predicated on violence or on rationalizing its effects, such as the conquest of *terra nullius*, of justifying enslavement, or the privation of rights to “idiots,” “madmen,” and “women.” And it’s not just Locke’s theory that is a problem. Rousseau’s very beautiful *Social Contract* must be read alongside his novel, *Émile*, in which Sophie is raised to support Émile’s political existence as a true citizen. It

is a remarkably sexist, if not misogynistic, understanding of women. But even more to the point, for Rousseau, these are not contradictory; they are rather compatible ideas.

While we can make corrections to “ideal” liberal theory, these corrections are at base additive. They don’t fundamentally restructure the foundation of liberal society—namely the promise of universal and equal protections alongside a systematic impulse to violence in the name of “civilizing” the heathens, or for the purposes of maintaining “law and order.” At base, this is what the killing of Michael Brown, and the ensuing encounters between the police and protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, have exposed: peace, safety, recognition of one’s humanity, law, order, rights will be doled out—or withheld—only in terms that allow those in authority, those with wealth, to remain comfortable. Consider the recent Supreme Court decision to allow restrictive voter ID requirements in Texas—which hurts the poorest citizens. But—and here’s the kicker—until we confront the repeated incidents of dehumanization as systematic, and not just a proliferation of accidental violations of humanity, we won’t be able to address or challenge the fundamental flaw of liberalism: the “compatibility” between the promise of universal protections for some groups, and violence for others.

**G. Y.:** The discourse of a “postracial” and a “colorblind” America has been invoked since the election of President Obama. How do you see white power and white privilege as continuing to operate as sites of white sovereign authority?

**F. A. S.:** The idea of a “postracial” United States is quite bizarre, but it seems to reflect a narrative of distraction: Electing one, two, or even fifty politicians or hiring multiple bureaucrats of color doesn’t end systemic racial inequality or discrimination, although it does provide a convenient (if superficial) defense against charges of racism. It also assumes that those politicians or functionaries are actively interested and focused—let alone “authorized” or empowered—to change racially problematic policies. In itself, that is a problematic assumption to make, since racism is systemic and deeply embedded in cultural outlooks, laws, ways of life, and traditions.

The political philosopher Charles Mills’s understanding of white supremacy is useful here. Mills uses the term to note that the social contract is predicated on a racial hierarchy where whites are at the top, and Blacks and nonwhites below. I want to clarify that, in terms of political institutions, “whiteness” is a category of power based on a general, but not universal, correlation between those in power and general racial identity. In my work, “whiteness” is not about any individual specifically but about groups in power, and it is negotiated and contoured by factors of gender, class, ethnic identity, and institutional and historical factors—such as how certain groups are understood at various moments.



In “postracial” America, white supremacy continues by ensuring that those in bureaucratic, lawmaking, executive, policy-making functions continue to do what those in the top 5 percent—and others who benefit from white supremacy—need to remain on top: ensure that bankers are not punished; pretend that minorities weren’t duped into taking on subprime loans or balloon-payment mortgages; justify rampant invasive surveillance and war-mongering in the name of national security; and arrest and detain immigrants—not just adults, but children! Laws and policies that support these events enable at least two things: the siphoning of money away from poorer, darker, vulnerable, vilified populations who have been subject to racism, violence, and police brutality, and a distraction from the real, everyday problems that affect those populations.

Even in “postracial” America, the US government has continued to wage war on Muslims and Arab populations: detainees still remain in Guantánamo Bay without charges. Some of them are still being force-fed, but the United States military deliberately no longer offers updates on their status; the current administration has created the “disposition matrix,” and expanded the drone program, which has killed hundreds, if not thousands, of Yemeni, Somali, and Pakistani civilians. And there is a noticeable absence of a reprimand for the most recent Israeli attacks on Gaza. There is vocal, visible support for these policies, not through invocations of racism but through appeals to national security or “helping bring democracy” to “backward” regions, through justifications about saving “women and children” or innocent “civilians.” The institutional effect is that Muslims and Arabs and South Asians are still systematically suffering at a greatly disproportionate rate to any possible “transgressions.” It seems that “postracial” America continues to racialize and dehumanize.

**G. Y.:** How does an epistemology of ignorance work within this context—in, for instance, the comparison between the experience of Black Americans and Asian-Americans?

**F. A. S.:** As Mills has argued (and as many feminist philosophers and philosophers of race argue), pervasive racial inequality—understood within the frames of legal, social, and political systems—persists because “whites themselves are unable to understand the world that they themselves have made.” Here’s what that looks like: “Slavery’s over. Why are we still discussing it? What does this have to do with poverty? After all, look at all those Asian immigrants: They’re not asking for handouts. They’re doing very well for themselves.”

But such a comparison ignores history and context: Asians who migrated post-1965 to 1985 were a different class of migrants. They were migrating as professionals, or for graduate study, and did not have a history of slavery in the United States, nor a vivid history of racism (ironically, because they were almost entirely prevented from migrating to the United States for forty years,



and therefore were largely invisible). They were not migrating on H1B-visas, as many South Asians do today (which restrict access to the full complement of economic and legal protections that permanent residents are eligible to receive). Such a comparison also doesn't acknowledge that white wealth was built not only on the backs of Black slaves, but on the backs of their "free" and mightily persecuted descendants, nor that whites as a group benefit from *not* being recipients of racist treatment. And of course, it neglects the very pointed goal of redlining, which was to block the entry of Blacks into white neighborhoods, and thereby access to better schools for their children, among other benefits. It neglects the specific history of targeted harassment toward Blacks, whether in the South, or after they migrated North, as Ta-Nehisi Coates details in his excellent article in *The Atlantic*, "The Case for Reparations."<sup>7</sup>

And perhaps most importantly, such a comparison falsely focuses on poverty and wealth as a consequence of individual character, rather than as the result of policies that benefit those who already have, while hurting those who have little. This is why I think discussing racism as a "matter of the heart," or individual cultural attitudes is useful but limiting. It inhibits us from considering systemic analyses, and thereby systemic solutions to systemic problems.

**G. Y.:** There are some theorists who continue to want to reduce race to class. My sense is that W. E. B. Du Bois was correct regarding his claim that even poor whites possess whiteness. Do you think that such a distinction has any relevance in our contemporary moment in American history?

**F. A. S.:** In *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880*, Du Bois discussed the wages of whiteness paid to white workers by the Southern white bourgeoisie—through the vehicle of racial apartheid—in order to divide and conquer the working class, and get white and Black workers to hate and fear each other, despite, as he says, "their practically identical interests."<sup>8</sup> There is certainly truth in the claim for today, but it also depends on context, geography, historical moment, and situation—and the racial perspectives of those in power.

Poor whites won't be racially profiled by white police, or store clerks, or white or nonwhite landlords to the same degree as darker men across economic classes will be. Yet, thinking institutionally, because economic policies adversely impact those who are already disadvantaged, poor Blacks and poor whites will both suffer that impact. However, those in power and positions of authority will most often blame working-class and poor Blacks for various moral character flaws. We have seen it countless times: from Daniel Moynihan's infamous 1965 report that traces poverty to character flaws of African-Americans to Ronald Reagan's vilification of poor Black women who then came to be referred to as "welfare queens," to President Obama's multiple admonitions to Black men to be more responsible fathers. This is despite the fact that we have ample evidence illustrating that Black men are incarcerated six times as often as white men, and that they suffer from racial profiling and

discrimination and unfair laws like “stop and frisk,” which collectively inhibit them from finding employment, housing, or economic success.

Presumably, if poor Blacks suffer from “character flaws,” then so do poor whites and other populations of color, but we rarely hear the same moral admonitions directed toward them.

**G. Y.:** Lastly, from what you’ve argued, engaging in a critical overthrow of white supremacy as a system will certainly involve a *systemic* approach. Yet, people of color must deal with virulent manifestations of white racism on an everyday basis, even enacted by “well-intentioned” whites.

**F. A. S.:** Certainly. Those, it seems to me, are but symptoms of institutional aggressions, manifestations of virulent racism that are expressed through the larger structures of our society. How can those aggressions disappear without the simultaneous coextensive reform of our larger juridical, legal institutions, and federal laws and policies that, at some level, endorse and approve those microaggressions? While it is important to note those microaggressions, I think, reform and redress have to occur at the macrolevel, with policies that address socioeconomic, and political change. Many people take their cues from the laws under which they live; if the laws reflect respect and dignity, then . . .

## NOTES

1. Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
2. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Hafner Press, 1947), par. 60; 61.
3. Locke, *Two Treatises*, chapter 3.
4. The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina: March 1, 1669, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th\\_century/nc05.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc05.asp). Regarding slave ownership, see clauses 107 and 110.
5. Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage, 1997).
6. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, ch 4.
7. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.
8. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 700–1.

## PART IV DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Noam Chomsky suggests that “intentional ignorance” is characterized by the desire and efforts to whitewash the past to erode uncomfortable or inconvenient truths. Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams are

symbols of this tendency insofar as they know first-hand the atrocities in which they are participants and in fact recognize the moral repugnancy of slavery and genocide even as they engage in them. In our time, “intentional ignorance” has flourished in multiple and complex forms. Charles Mills identifies his concept of “epistemology of ignorance” in the global trend to adhere first to racist views and then to “shift to the endorsement of views that nominally decry racism, but downplay the impact of the racist past on the present configuration of wealth and opportunities.” Another manifestation of this ignorance is evident in Falguni A. Sheth’s discussion of the “narrative of distraction.” In what ways are claims about a “postracial” America, expressed in “colorblindness” at the level of the individual, distractions from the racial injustices that currently exist and have existed in the past?

2. Charles Mills explains that Rawls employs ideal theory for the sake of developing nonideal theory, but that the latter’s ideal theory has mistakenly become an end in itself. Radical Black liberalism dwells in the nonideal reality in which race necessarily impacts social ontology. Radical Black liberalism seeks “principles of justice . . . [that] are the principles of nonideal normative theory that would correct for this legacy of domination, as manifest, for example, in second-class citizenship, racial exploitation, and social disrespect.” The emphasis, Mills explains, is on corrective rather than distributive justice, and would include reparations, for example. Develop an account for what a “nonideal normative theory” is, and determine what might constitute the principles of such a theory.
3. Nancy Fraser addresses the question, “Is it possible to abolish racial oppression without abolishing capitalism?” She argues that it is theoretically possible, but nearly impossible in practice. The difficulty is rooted in part in capitalism’s exceptional ability to nourish subjectivation through both exploitation and expropriation. Fraser explains that “in the absence of a cross-racial movement to abolish a system that requires expropriation as well as exploitation, their grievances find expression in the growing ranks of rightwing authoritarian populism.” Naomi Zack suggests that loss of agency fuels fear and its attended hatred for the other. She notes as one example that when young Black men are shot by police officers and there is popular protest in response, neighboring whites buy more firearms. Falguni A. Sheth’s personal experience following the terror attacks on September 11, 2001 and the widespread disfranchising of Muslim Americans further supports Zack’s suggestion. Selya Benhabib expresses concern over the future of democracy that is being damaged by global capitalist structures “run amok” and the corresponding “rise of a vindictive and racist conservative movement.” In this complex framework, the ebb and flow dynamic of progress and pushback, loss of agency and vicious retaliation cannot be ignored. Thus it seems necessary to address loss of agency and its toxic

effects if we want to dismantle racial oppression without abolishing capitalism. How do we get started with this work, and what might we use to replace the oppressive support system on which that capitalism currently depends?

4. Peter Singer discusses the role of emotional impulse in perpetuating racism, despite the widespread rational acceptance that racism is wrong. On the one hand, unthinking emotional reactions without ethical reflection make education, progress, and tolerance impossible. On the other hand, emotion's counterpoint cannot be "pure" reason. Mastery of emotion and reason itself are used to render the other docile. Seyla Benhabib discusses this destructive and subjugating role of reason in the history of philosophy in Descartes's desire to make us "masters and possessors of Nature" and Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Reason is, she writes, "an instrument for the social domination of others." Since emotion and reason can both be used to fight against or galvanize a white racist framework, how can we best direct them against that framework? The relationship between emotion and reason is further complicated concerning race with respect to terror. To be terrorized is fundamentally "to be susceptible to socially tolerated violence . . . to be constantly bracing oneself in expectation of a blow, without knowing when or whence it will come," in Nancy Fraser's words. Can we effectively diffuse the toxic effects of the vicious emotional outbursts that Singer discusses when terror characterizes the mode of living for an individual in a terrorizing environment? Can we effectively diffuse those effects when terror becomes an abstract entity that characterizes a country's domestic and international policy and infiltrates its social structures?
5. Discuss the central concept of dehumanization that discussions of race, history, capitalism, ethics, and neoliberalism have in common. What tools might the different disciplines provide to address the problem of dehumanization and restore humanity to those living within a matrix of both oppressive ideologies and structures as well as human ethical and epistemological failures?



PART V

*Race Beyond the Black/White Binary*



# Linda Martín Alcoff

**George Yancy:** What is the relationship between your identity as a Latina philosopher and the philosophical interrogation of race in your work?

**Linda Martín Alcoff:** Every single person has a racial identity, at least in Western societies, and so one might imagine that the topic of race is of universal interest. Yet while whites can sometimes avoid the topic, for those of us who are not white—or less fully white, shall I say—the reality of race is shoved in our faces in particularly unsettling ways, often from an early age. This can spark reflection as well as nascent social critique.

The relationship between my identity and my philosophical interest in race is simply a continuation through the tools of philosophy of the pursuit that I began as a kid, growing up in Florida in the 1960s, watching the Civil Rights Movement as it was portrayed in the media and perceived by the various parts of my family, white and nonwhite. I experienced school desegregation, the end of Jim Crow, and the war in Indochina, a war that also made apparent the racial categories used to differentiate peoples, at enormous cost. It was clear to me from a young age that it was too often the case that white North Americans were the ones with no value for life, at least the life of those who were not white.

My sister and I came to the southern United States from Panama as young children and had to negotiate our complex identities (mixed-race Latina and white) within a social world where racial borders were being challenged and renegotiated and, as a result, ceaselessly patrolled and violently defended.

**G. Y.:** So, given these early experiences, were you drawn to philosophical questions of racial identity?

**L. M. A.:** In philosophy I was drawn to topics of knowledge (epistemology) and metaphysics, never ethics, which may seem odd given this background. But the issue of metaphysics raised questions about how we name what is, and



the issue of epistemology raised questions about how we know what we think we know. Hence, these subfields opened the way for me to consider the contestations over reality as well as over authority. Of course, the received canon in philosophy was both useful and infuriatingly silent on the topics I was most interested in: bodies showed up little, and difference was routinely set aside, and yet the debates over mereological essentialism and other concepts illustrated the possibility of multiple right answers and of a social and practical context silently guiding the debate. Quine was in vogue and his ideas about contingent rather than necessary ways to name what is was a short step from the political analysis of dominant ways of naming that I was interested in.

For many years, my personal and my philosophical life were lived as parallel tracks with little overt interaction. I went to demonstrations and then came home to finish my Heidegger homework. I glanced across the fence now and then, but did not attempt serious philosophical engagement with race until I had published enough that had nothing to do with race or gender or Latin American philosophy to establish a foothold in the profession. Tenure set me free, and I immediately began a project on the metaphysics of mixed-race identities.

**G. Y.:** You mentioned how questions of embodiment were not treated in any substantive way in your early philosophical training. Why is it that the profession of philosophy, generally speaking, is still resistant to questions of embodiment and by extension questions of race?

**L. M. A.:** In my view this is primarily a methodological problem. Philosophers of nearly all persuasions—analytic, continental, pragmatist—aim for general and generalizable theories that can explain human experience of all sorts. And the ultimate aim, of course, is not description but prescription: how can we come to understand ourselves better, to know better, to understand our world better, and to treat each other better? Worthy goals, but they are usually pursued with a decontextualized approach, as if the best answers would work for everyone. To get at that metalevel of generality, some aspects of one's context need to be set aside, lopped off, cut out of the picture, and this has traditionally meant the concrete materiality of human existence as we actually experience it in embodied human form.

This is just a way of saying that the body *had* to be ignored except in so far as we could imagine our bodies to be essentially the same. And to achieve that trick of imagination—to imagine all of our wild diversity in embodiment to be irrelevant—required a bad faith that can be seen throughout the canon: racist asides and ridiculous theories about women alongside generic pronouncements about justice and beauty and the route to truth.

I call it bad faith because, on the one hand, nearly all the great philosophers divided human beings into moral and intellectual hierarchies even while, on the other hand, they presumed, from their consciously particularist

space, to speak for all. Hence, methodologically, the problem for philosophy is how to speak *for* all when one does not, in fact, speak *to* all. And the solution is to enact a doublespeak in which one justifies not speaking to the mass of humanity at the same time that one imagines oneself to be speaking for the human core that exists in all of us. The body, and difference, is simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed.

This is why philosophers such as Bartolome de Las Casas in the sixteenth century and W. E. B. Du Bois from even his early writings in the nineteenth century are such powerful figures: they each explore their own specificity and its impact on how they view the world and others, even to how they formulate moral questions. They model a discourse that can become part of a general dialogue in which others can have a voice as well.

**G. Y.:** Yes. I understand your point about methodology and bad faith. Speak to how this presumption to speak for others, to place under erasure our diversity of embodiment, is something that is linked specifically to whiteness, especially within the context of our field that continues to be dominated by white males.

**L. M. A.:** Entitlement is a core feature of white subjectivity, as numerous works by sociologists such as Joel Feagin document. There is a sense of entitlement to rights and resources, comfort and attention, access to space and to deference, or being granted presumptive credibility until proven otherwise. Entitlement is always complicated and modified by class, gender, religion, and sexuality; poor whites, for example, learn early on to defer to others. But white people as a whole, or as an imagined grouping, are the presumed paradigms of rights-bearing American citizens. And this seeps into one's consciousness.

It is inevitable that these social realities will find some manifestation in white-majority (or even exclusively white) philosophy classrooms. This is especially so given the fact that philosophy curricular requirements almost never include course topics that might enhance students' knowledge or capacity to reflect about these realities. So it should be no surprise that the work (teaching and scholarship) produced by a white-majority philosophy profession manifests, in general, an assumed entitlement to rights and resources, comfort and attention, access to space, and deference. They assume the ability to access all knowledge, and resent (and resist) theories that might restrict that access, on the grounds, for example, that one's identity and experience play a formative role in what one can understand on some matters. They assume the right to dominate the space—literal and figurative—of philosophical thought and discussion. They assume the right to have attention, and they assume this is nonreciprocal: others should be reading their work even while they neglect to read the work of nonwhites. I am speaking in gross generalities that will be unfair to numerous individuals, but the patterns I am describing are, I suggest, familiar to marginalized philosophers.

**G. Y.:** In what way has Latin American philosophy challenged such bad faith and the proclivity to be so methodologically narrow?

**L. M. A.:** The philosophies developed in the colonized world during the emergence of European modernity have not had the luxury of such universalist pretensions or obliviousness. Philosophy in Latin America is very diverse, but one can discern a running thread of decolonial self-consciousness and aspiration. Thinkers from Europe and the United States persist even today in dismissing Latin American philosophy, and as a result, Latin American philosophers have had to justify their prerogative, and their ability, to contribute to normative debates over the good, the right, and the true. But this has had the beneficial result of making visible the context in which philosophy occurs, and of disabling the usual pretensions of making transcendent abstractions removed from all concrete realities.

All of the great thinkers, from Simon Bolívar to José Martí, José Carlos Mariátegui, José Vasconcelos, Leopoldo Zea, Che Guevara, and Enrique Dussel, have had to develop philosophical arguments within a contextual consciousness ever mindful of colonialism's effects in the realm of thought. Since the social identities—racial and ethnic—of their contexts were made grounds for dismissing claims to self-determination or original thought, each of these thinkers engaged with the question of Latin American cultural, racial, and ethnic identities and histories. It's a rich tradition. Knowledge requires self-knowledge. Philosophy's lack of diversity in North America has compromised its capacities for both self-knowledge and knowledge.

**G. Y.:** Your very last point raises issues of standpoint epistemology, the idea that one's social identity is sometimes relevant to what one notices and how one makes judgments. I'm thinking here in terms of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's comment that her experience being a wise Latina woman would help her to reach better legal conclusions than a white male. My sense is that there still exists within America the assumption (inside and outside the academy) that Latino/a voices and Black voices are biased/inferior voices. Yet, both within and outside of the academy, it seems that there is a positive relationship between "racialized" identities and the production of knowledge. I think that this question also speaks to the "reality" of race as lived. What is your view on this?

**L. M. A.:** One can make an analogy between how Latin American thinkers have had to theoretically reflect about the intellectual and political effects of their geographical location and ethno-racial identities, and the way everyone who is not white in North America has had to engage similar questions just as a necessity of survival in a white supremacist society. So as a result, outside of white dominant spaces, the set of debates and discussions about such topics is much richer, older, and more developed, especially in the African-American philosophical tradition, than anywhere else. Knowledge is not an automatic

product of the experiences engendered by different identities, I would suggest. But there is more motivation to pursue certain kinds of knowledge, and one often has willing and able interlocutors in one's immediate home and community environments who are comfortable with such topics and have reflected on and debated them. And it is also true that simply the experience of being nonwhite provides a kind of raw data for analysis.

Sotomayor received so much vitriol for her claims about the link between identity and judgment that she was forced to renege on them in order to be appointed to the Supreme Court. But the view she expressed is quite a common-sense view most everyone actually accepts. Of course it is the case that our differences of background and experience can affect what we are likely to know already without having to do a Google search, and these differences also influence what we may be motivated to find out. There is a wealth of empirical work on jury selection that bears this out, and the congressmen and lawyers grilling Sotomayor knew this literature. But there is a taboo on speaking about the epistemic salience of identity in our public domains of discourse, although it is a taboo that primarily plays out only for nonwhites, women, and other groups generally considered lower on our unspoken epistemic hierarchies.

During the Sotomayor kerfuffle, Jon Stewart helpfully played back clips of all the Congressmen who played up their veteran status in their political campaigns, and even Supreme Court nominees who talked about their own modest class backgrounds as relevant to their appointment to the Court. It is only accepted for whites, and white men in particular, to use their particularity to augment their epistemic authority in this way, to generate a heightened trust in their judgment, and almost never for others to do the same.

This is itself an interesting issue to explore. Why can the mainstream media acknowledge the positive epistemic contributions of white particularities but no others? I believe the answer is that it would simply be too dangerous to the social status quo. Admitting the relevance of diversity to knowledge would require too much social change at every level and in nearly every social institution.

Some believe that capitalism will solve this problem with its natural tendency to maximize profit over all other considerations, such that if racism and sexism thwart product development, capital will promote inclusion. I am skeptical of this. For one thing, capitalism profits too much from racism and sexism to let go. And secondly, the need of corporations to diversify their management pool has more to do with the need to manage effectively a diversity of low-paid workers than anything else. And if racism and sexism helps maintain the disempowered and underpaid conditions of those workers, capitalism wins both ways.

If we were to acknowledge the relevance of identity to knowledge, the solution would not be simplistic diversity quotas, but a real engagement with the

question of how our unspoken epistemic hierarchies have distorted our educational institutions, research projects, academic and scientific fields of inquiry, and general public discourse across all of our diverse forms of media. And then we could pursue a thorough attempt at solutions. Philosophers working in many domains—concerning epistemology, the social ontology of identity, moral psychology, the philosophy of science, and others—could contribute to these efforts, but philosophy must first direct such efforts internally.

**G. Y.:** Lastly, what do you say to those philosophers of color who might feel the pain of rejection, especially because, for them, their racialized identities are so important to their philosophical practice/projects? And, more generally, what advice do you have for our profession in terms of challenging those “unspoken epistemic hierarchies”?

**L. M. A.:** Our profession continues to be an inhospitable climate for philosophers of color working on race, so the first thing to do is to acknowledge this. Some significant progress has been made, it is true, and there are a few high-profile individuals, but one can no more imagine that these individual successes show that the climate is now open and fair than we can imagine that Oprah’s and Beyoncé’s successes prove that all is fine for Black working women. Too many philosophers still operate with depoliticized notions of “real” philosophy and consider both feminist and critical race work suspect because they are politically motivated rather than concerned only with truth. The result is a lot of microaggressions, as well as general neglect of the emerging scholarship.

I am not optimistic about convincing the mainstream. I don’t believe that if we just do serious and good philosophical work that its merit will shine through. To believe that one would have to believe that philosophy is a true intellectual meritocracy, that philosophers are immune from racism and sexism and implicit bias, and that long-standing framing assumptions about the depolitical nature of philosophy will not skew judgment.

A better solution lies in working multiple strategies: (1) carving out, and regularly nurturing, those spaces—journals, professional societies, conferences—in which all who are interested in the subfield of critical race philosophy can develop our work within a constructively critical community; (2) developing our understanding of the sociology of the profession, in other words, the extent, causes, and effects of its demographic challenges and hostile climate. We need to develop this understanding in a philosophical way, which might include, for example, new and more realistic norms of epistemic justification and argumentation that can provide some redress for our nonideal context of work; (3) doing as much as we can to widen and strengthen the stream of young people of color who make a choice, an informed choice, hopefully, to try their hand at philosophy. The burden is on the marginalized and our allies to do this work. What else is new?

But what I would also say to young philosophers is that this is actually a great time to join the discipline. We have the beginnings of a critical mass, a beachhead, with multiple conferences now each year, several organizations such as the Society for the Study of Africana Philosophy, the Caribbean Philosophical Association, and the California Roundtable on Race. There is a new journal, *Critical Philosophy of Race*, as well as some receptivity in existing journals. And there is a growing community of frankly rather brilliant people busily working to advance our collective understanding of race, racism, and colonialism. Also, there are many students in undergraduate classrooms receptive to these questions. The margins are flourishing and growing. In this sense, it is a positive moment.



# Eduardo Mendieta

**George Yancy:** How do you understand the logic of a postrace discourse in our contemporary moment?

**Eduardo Mendieta:** Let me begin by saying that we are no more “postrace” because of Obama’s presidency than we would be “postgender” if Hillary Clinton is elected to the White House.

I do agree that shortly after Obama’s election there was a triumphalist rhetoric that reveled in the idea that “we” had left behind the shame of racism, that somehow Obama’s election had redeemed the nation and elevated us beyond the still-too-evident indications that we had not. I am not sure that discourse is convincing, although it still has slivers of America in its grip. Nonetheless, I think ideologies are not only epistemic veils; they are also diagnostic. They point to certain tendencies in our society.

**G. Y.:** In the case of “postracialism,” provide a few examples.

**E. M.:** I would single out four factors. First, I think “postrace” is symptomatic of the hegemony of the gospel of “neoliberalism” that has spelled the dismantling of the social welfare state—that is, the retrenchment and elimination of social programs aimed at remedying and alleviating social inequities through the intervention of programs underwritten by Federal and State governments. Postliberalism is an economic dogma that says that the best economy is the least steered or balanced by government intervention. It is also a political ideology that says that the best politics is the least politics, or rather that the best politics is when we leave politics alone. Neoliberalism means the uncoupling of economics from politics. In this sense, neoliberalism is an antipolitical politics. Neoliberalism is an ideology, and as such it is also prescriptive; it is a prescription that says that we need to think of social agents as financial assets, as economic units, as, let us say, “hedge funds.” This is what has been called the “entrepreneurial self.” I think these dimensions



of “neoliberalism” were captured aptly by the ’80s and ’90s discourse of the “contract with America.” Evidently, this language dissimulates the ways contracts are always between “solvent” and “credible” creditors that could be signatories to an “exchange” that allegedly would be symmetrically beneficial. Mesmerized by this ideology, we are unable to comprehend the persistence of race. We are lulled into thinking that racialized subjects remain in their positions of disadvantage and marginalization not because of institutional and societal constraints, and deliberate discrimination, but due to individual failures. Neoliberalism says that if one is disadvantaged, marginalized, deprived, poor, victimized, and so on, it is because the individual is culpable, completely responsible for their situation; he or she has failed to properly take care of themselves, has failed to properly make of themselves their own asset; which continues the big lie: that the system as such is designed to enable everyone to be their own entrepreneurs. Neoliberalism, as a form of economic reductionism, atomizes race into an individual choice, while depoliticizing the causes of racist institutions. Neoliberalism reduces race to this: If you invoke race, it is because you want to come up with an alibi for your failure.

Second, I think “postrace” expresses a malaise or confusion that has arisen from the dramatic demographic changes of the US population over the last three to four decades. In many states, mostly on both coasts of the country, and the so-called Sun Belt, whites have become minorities and minorities have become majorities. This is what has been called, invidiously, the “Browning of America.” Latino/as are now the largest minority, and are projected to become a quarter of the US population by 2050. This demographic transformation would seem to indicate that the racial matrix of “Black/white” has been displaced, or at least called into question, from the center of the imaginary of the US. This is what “postracialists” seem to think, namely, that we are “postrace” because now “Blacks” and “whites” are minorities within minorities. But these demographic shifts have neither displaced nor abolished the “white/Black” racial matrix; instead they have shifted the racial boundary to one side or another of the “color line,” and they have mutated it into new modalities of racializing discourses, and above all practices and technologies. Let us take the “Latino/a” or “Hispanic” label, which operates both as an ethnic and as a racial label, which is played against the “Black” label. Latino/as are neither “Black” nor “white,” but they are treated as though they were “Black.” We have the birth of a third race, an ethnorace.

There is, then, a third factor that dictates the “logic”—as you call it—of “postracialism,” and this has to do with the mythologizations, or mirages, of our hypermediatized culture. Here I would appeal to Patricia Williams’s important insights into what she calls the “dynamics of display” that bounces Blacks between “hypervisibility and oblivion.”<sup>1</sup> We see “Blacks” everywhere on the Media, as actors, as athletes, as secretaries of defense, as Supreme Court justices, as the face of American popular culture, as the therapists and

cultural arbiters of US culture, as the poets and Nobel Prize writers who are our ambassadors to the world of letters, while we don't see all the faces "at the bottom of the well," the faces and bodies exiled to the carceral archipelagos of the prison industrial complex, to use Angela Davis's language, the families of generations consigned to the "Gray Wastes"—the assemblage of institutions that link poor ghettos, unemployment lines, detention centers, prisons, and of course, the postprison branding institutions—as Ta-Nehesi Coates refers to them.<sup>2</sup> As you point out in your own work, "Blacks" are seen and not seen. It is as though Blacks were afflicted by an epidermal malady: they are a reflecting surface that reflects back only what the white eye wants to see, not what it must see or could see." So, "postrace" names this double malady: we see only what we want to see and not what must and can see.

The fourth factor has to do with something that was diagnosed, at least for me, by Cornel West in his pioneering book *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989), namely the ideology of "Adamic Innocence" that undergirds the deeply ingrained myth about the newness and innocence of this country. I think the relative youth of our country has licensed the myth that, in contrast to Europe, and the Motherland in general, we are not weighted by the sins of feudalism, colonialism, totalitarianism, genocides, and the slave trade. I think this theologically sanctioned "Adamic Innocence" has resulted in what I would call "Promethean Amnesia." We are the country of the short history, and thus, of the collective imaginary that dispenses with the weight of its own history. "Promethean Amnesia," furthermore, is potentiated by the demographic shifts that, like waves of the sea, continue to wash away innocently and without remorse the sins of our past. We, and I count myself among them, the new generation of assimilated immigrants and children of immigrants, take up the mantle of "American," step up on the pedestal of a protean America, but without assuming its history. We are not the latecomers, but the newcomers who renew the nation's mythological innocence. But, of course, history is not simply a narrative that we weave to make sense of our collective self; it is also the very material house that slavery, Jim Crow, the Ghetto, the Japanese internment camps, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Prison Industrial complex, and the Gray Wastes, the many Proposition 187s, the many Immigration Acts of Congress that criminalize immigrants from certain specific parts of the world, all of which continue to reproduce race in the US.

I think these four factors are what nourish the fiction that we are "postracial." But, at the same time, I think these factors have proven to be poor nutrients, as they are all unsustainable and indefensible. Let me say one last thing about why I am deeply skeptical of "post" discourses in general. They all operate on a certain way of thinking about history specifically, and temporality in general. The "post" discourses assume that history is homogeneous, synchronous, directional, and teleological. That at its core, history

is driven by a developmentalist logic, each stage building on the prior while superseding it. History is the great ladder of ever-advancing and progressing humanity; at each moment, we can throw away that ladder and be content to have climbed to the heights we have allegedly ascended. But, in fact, we can no more say that we are “post” racial than we can say that race in the US has remained unchanged since the postbellum “Reconstruction” and the de-constitutionalization of “Jim Crow.” History is not a ladder. It is certainly not a theodicy, that is, the belief that any modicum of progress is built on the suffering of the many and the most destitute—in fact, neoliberalism is the latest version of Christian theodicy. It is more like a haunted plantation, a crumbling ghetto, Alcatraz, La Frontera, the roads built by leased prison labor, in which the past is barely past, and in which the future is mortgaged to the dream of the “Dreamers,” the dream of those who refuse to carry the weight of our history.

**G. Y.:** You know, on this point about the “Browning of America,” one might think that this is an inherent threat to white power, privilege, and hegemony. It seems to me that this is a non sequitur. I think that “post-Apartheid” South Africa is a counter to such an assumption. Whites there continue to have most of the real power. Whites in the US can continue to flourish existentially, politically, and economically despite the “Browning” process.

**E. M.:** Yes, yes, I agree, especially if we think of South Africa, and I would say Brazil as well, as counterexamples. Notwithstanding what I generally take to be a salutary effect of Latino/as on the whole racial discourse in the US, there are ways in which Latino/as contribute to the entrenchment of white power and privilege. Some of “my” people totally buy the “Dreamers” dream. Like the Irish, Italians, and to a certain extent the Jews, some Latino/as would like to become white. But, then, too many of us are really Black folk, mixed like a creole dish, or a Sancocho—poor people stew. *Mestizaje* is the crucible that made us, already before Colon left Europe to “discover” the new world. But that is another story.

**G. Y.:** Returning to President Obama’s tenure for the last eight years, do you think that his longevity has helped to underwrite such a “postrace” discourse?

**E. M.:** Let me begin by noting, or confessing, that I was one of the many Americans who volunteered to canvass for Obama back in the summer of 2008 when he was first running for office. At the time, I lived on Long Island, certainly not a bastion of liberalism, much less of pro-Black political sentiment. Still, I remember that after I volunteered I was sent to canvass in the north districts of Philadelphia, in mostly white but also some racially mixed neighborhoods. It was a beautiful and powerful experience. My then wife and I had voted for Nader in the 2000 election that gave us Bush, and we felt guilty and partly responsible for the debacle that befell us. So, this time around I felt that I had to do something. I had to put shoulder to the boulder, or shut up.

In any event, it was a great civic education for me. Many people welcomed me into their houses, and we talked politics, about the candidates, and about Obama. I remember that many were skeptical, but not for “racist” reasons; others were truly energized by Obama’s very presence as a candidate. Now, mind you, I was sent to canvass in middle-class areas, in areas of Pennsylvania that are liberal and perhaps even Democratic strongholds, though I did come across some Republicans. I also remember very distinctly arriving in California for a conference as the election was taking place. I had been traveling on a red eye, and was getting bits and pieces of the news about the ballot results. But, when I took BART to San Francisco, there was a sense of collective joy. I saw people smiling, some were even tearing up—I myself teared up in joy and a bit of self-congratulation, as Obama was declared President-Elect. I felt part of a great moment in our history. I had done my bit in shifting “Our America” in what seemed like a better direction. I think many felt that way. Again, San Francisco is probably not a good place to get the pulse of the nation, but at least there we all seemed to exude an aroma of accomplishment, and our faces smiled with hope.

But almost immediately, Obama became entangled with the bailout of the banks and the scandals in the banking industry, the protracted pull out of Iraq, the contraction of troops in Afghanistan, the blocked attempt to close Guantánamo, and of course, the drone policy. But I am sanguine enough to recognize that Obama stepped into a situation with tremendous institutional constraints. As much as Obama wanted to thwart the discourse of neoliberalism, he had to cavil to its institutional forces and constraints. He could not talk about poor, working-class America. He had to talk about the middle class. Why? Because poor America is Black and Brown America. The middle class is a code word for white America. He was trapped in that discursive logic of our public language.

Now, let me recall that whenever Obama did attempt to talk about “race” in America, he was immediately chided, censored, and attacked. The vitriol that was spewed because of his “relationship” to Jeremiah Wright is just emblematic of how Obama was boxed into a certain way of viewing Blacks in the US. I also distinctly remember the pre- and postelection discourse about Obama not being an American citizen, and the invocations and incitements to violence. To his credit, his opponent, Senator McCain, criticized such discourses and worked hard to stop it. Many of us feared that some white supremacist would kill Obama. In general, I think very few presidents have had to face the kind of racially motivated, ad hominem attacks that Obama has had to deal with—the catalogue of the defamations, offensive caricatures of both him and Michelle Obama, is unmatched, I bet you, by the caricatures of any other president in our history. Even so-called respectable politicians used racial innuendos that left as little to the imagination as a *Hustler* spread leaves to the pornographic mind, as when Newt Gingrich called Obama a “food

stamp” president (!). I remember very indelibly when Obama had to intervene on behalf of preeminent scholar and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., and he got in trouble with the police and many, many white Americans. I remember his statement shortly after the shooting of Trayvon Martin by a Latino vigilante, and he got flack, major backlash because of his authentic expression of condolences and deeply felt shame and sorrow for the killing of a young Black American. I remember very clearly the hot waters he got into because of his nomination and defense of now Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

Obama has tried, like no president, to get us to have a “civil,” honest, introspective, and healing public discussion about race; but, in my assessment, “America” has not let him. In order to attempt to jumpstart this discussion, Obama had to take distance from many constituencies in the racially progressive Black and white movements of the US. He had to distance himself from the Black Church, from Black intellectuals like West, or even Gates, notwithstanding his initial solidarity with them. In the process, he has had to isolate himself. I can’t imagine how “alone” Obama must feel. He has had to retreat into the “Washington Machine,” and there his moral soul has gotten lost in the labyrinths of the Pentagon. Still, I don’t want to get carried away with that metaphor. Even in the midst of the fog of war, a war that he inherited, and the wars he refused to fight, one can still glimmer a fundamentally moral president. Recently I have been reading Scott Shane’s *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone* (2015), because I have been trying to philosophize about what the “drone” means as both a military weapon and a political device. In this carefully researched, investigative journalism, we discovered an incredibly engaged and scrupulous Obama presidency. This book led me to reread Obama’s speech before the 2013 graduating class at the National Defense University. I have never read anything like this by an American president in my lifetime—a time that included Nixon, Ford, Carter, Clinton and Bush. There are many important and historic speeches by Obama, but this one is particularly important. Here a president avows his responsibility for authorizing and commanding the killing of an American citizen, while also assuming responsibility for the “collateral damage” of the killing of two innocent bystanders. Now, let me be clear, I am not sanctioning Obama’s actions. I am trying to foreground the issue that Obama is here pulling us into the space of giving moral reasons. This speech is not moralizing, but rather both an exemplar of how politics is and must be underwritten by moral reasons, and how we must either agree or disagree with these moral reasons. Of course, I disagree with the moral reasons given by Obama; but that Obama invites us as citizens to be part of this moral reasoning is breathtaking. I have no doubts that all the “drone attacks” Obama authorized weigh heavily on his soul, in ways that evidently all the killings of “shock and awe,” and the torture and assassinations signed by Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld don’t register on their moral radars.

But I really have not answered your question. I wanted to qualify why perhaps I have a very biased disposition. Still, let me attempt to answer it by saying that unwittingly Obama partly has contributed to the “postrace” discourse. Or, rather, he has been unwillingly dragged into the witness stand of this ideological trial. Returning to what Williams calls the “dynamic of display,”<sup>3</sup> Obama is evidently hypervisible, but yet we refuse to see him as a “Black” president. He is caught in the great machinations of the neoliberal machine that runs Washington from Wall Street, offshore bank accounts, and multinationals with headquarters in London, Frankfurt, and Geneva. As a mixed-race American, he is also part of what I called before the demographic transformation of the US. Here, however, I would have to interject a qualification. Obama may be suspect as a “Black” president, but First Lady Obama certainly is not suspect. I wish we could talk about Michelle Obama, but that is another long story. Let me just say quickly that her presence in the White House has the character of a tectonic shift, namely, slow, but profound. I think that as a high-power lawyer, an accomplished professional, along with her beauty, elegance, poise, intelligence, and commitments, Michelle Obama is a formidable role model, an unsurpassed historical figure. And all of this has not been properly acknowledged. But her distinct qualities certainly shed a unique halo on the President. If he is our “Black President,” it is in large part due to Michelle Obama. Here is a hypothetical question: would he have been electable had he been married to a white Woman?

Finally, to his credit, I think that Obama has refused to invoke the grammar of the “Adamic Innocence” rhetoric that underwrites so much of our public religion and theodicy. I think that his speech on the occasion of the Wright controversy is testimony to this refusal. I am referring to his speech, “A More Perfect Union,” from March of 2008.

**G. Y.:** In answer to your question, I would say, “Hell, no!” Given this country’s white violent history against sexually intimate (real and imagined) and conjugal relations between Black men and white women, Obama would not have been elected, and had he been he may have even been killed. I mean, think about the young Emmett Till. You know, it is my sense that there is something always already racialized about the office of the presidency in the US. In other words, the highest office in the world is already in some sense normatively white. If this is true, then a robust discussion of race by the president is ipso facto precluded. If I’m right here, how much could we have expected of Obama? The proverbial deck is already stacked against him.

**E. M.:** I totally agree that the “proverbial deck is already stacked against him.” I think that Obama has had a mighty fight with that stacked deck, and he still has managed to do some impressive things. But I am not sure I agree with the diagnosis that the office of the presidency in the US is “normatively white.” If it were, Obama would never have been elected. OK, there are many Americans



who do not accept Obama as our legitimate president, notwithstanding his election to two terms in the White House. In fact, there are many who do not think of him as a US citizen, and thus suspect his citizenship. But those who believe this are not operating within mainstream American political culture. I agree that the office of the president is “overdetermined,” that is, that it is the site for the negotiation of a lot of “racial” fantasies, as well as masculinity, and religious, and purity, and all kinds of imperial and Manifest Destiny fantasies. But does that mean that the body of the president is “normatively male,” and “normatively protestant”? Evidently, for a long time Americans could not countenance to elect a Catholic president, but we did. Evidently, for a long time many Americans thought that women were to be consigned to the private realm, and could only be in the White House as wives, servants, and mistresses, but we are about to elect a woman to the highest office in the United States.

Here I would want to appeal to your own work, as well as that of the rich, majestic, encyclopedic, uniquely American, African-American, Black, Negro, call it what you will, philosophical, historical, theological, feminist traditions that have taught us to see through the historicity of race, through its constructedness, its archeology, its contingency, but also its endurance, its renewal, its vitality, its viscosity, its capillarity. I don't know, when we dive into the deep waters of Douglas, Du Bois, Wells, Hurston, hooks, Davis, West, Williams, Yancy, Gooding-Williams, we come out not as Kantian/Rawlsian subjects, baptized into “Promethean Amnesia,” but as good political genealogists and phenomenologists, who know that we do need norms to discern between what is allowed and disallowed, but who also know that those norms are products of struggles, of transformations of our imaginaries, of the expansion of our moral horizons. Normativity is not a standpoint, but a horizon, one that is expanded or contracted by our acts of imagination. It just occurred to me that perhaps that is what you mean by “normative whiteness”—namely, let us assume that in fact the office of the presidency were “normatively White,” what would that mean? Something like an Einsteinian “thought experiment.” But, perhaps you should just correct me or let me know what you mean by ‘normatively White.’

**G. Y.:** By ‘normatively white,’ I don't mean that the most powerful office in the world is fixed; as you imply, there is too much of the historically informed in my work. Take the space in my home office where I study. It has become dialectically expressive of my presence, my movements. I have left a trace; it speaks of my being, my unconscious and conscious motility, my moods, how I arrange objects, and why. Indeed, my study is the kind of space such that were you or someone else to enter that space, you might find it alienating or even resistant to your way of inhabiting space. So, I think of the presidency in this way. It is a site, a space, configured by whiteness. Just as my room is

structured by my being there. That Obama actually became president doesn't deny the reality that the presidency is normatively white no more than that my being hired at Emory (or you at Penn State) makes those institutions less normatively white. They can accommodate us, just as the presidency has accommodated Obama. And it is this white sedimentation of configured space, with its normative assumptions, ways of being, that I see as always already operating against Obama. Perhaps this is linked to my next question. Do you think that racism has abated or increased since we've had an African-American president?

**E. M.:** I have to split my answer. On the one hand, I think that straight-out racism has become intolerable, or at least unacceptable, as part of the civil and public language of our society. I think that the blunt and explicit racism that we saw and heard not so long ago has acquired a rancid, unpalatable, uncouth taste and smell. Look, I was also shocked by all the images of Black bodies being submitted to obscene violence, enacted by the police. Yet, we don't have lynchings, those public rituals of blood and racial punishment that should certainly make us ponder whether we have come a long way after all. When white supremacists hang nooses from trees in college campuses, there are immediate responses condemning such acts. On the other hand, given what I read about how the African-American community, as a whole, is treated, and how Latino/as are treated, I would have to say that racism remains vibrant and that its effects have grown more intense. I read some years ago that African-Americans, collectively, are worse off than they were before the sixties. I can believe this. Given the ways that two generations of African-Americans have been caught in the crushing wheels of the Prison Industrial Complex, I can only assume that racism has increased, but as an institutional, material, economic, political, and social phenomenon. I think that US neoliberalism has contributed to the exacerbation of racism, while also throwing a fog of obfuscation in front of its nefarious and long-lasting effects. Michelle Alexander is right to talk about the *New Jim Crow*, that is, new regimes of exclusion, expropriation, and marginalization that build on past such regimes.<sup>4</sup>

**G. Y.:** There is a way in which Obama's election was symbolically important, a feel-good moment in North American history. Yet, his presidency seemed to unleash all sorts of racist hatred and racist myth-making. How do you explain this apparent paradox?

**E. M.:** Yes, Obama's election was profoundly symbolic, and it was certainly a feel-good moment for many Americans. But for the very reason that he is representative of certain forces, tendencies, and ideals of progressive American society, he has also become the object on which forces of anti-Black racism have performed a cathexis, a transfer and fixation, of their resentment, their virulent and visceral rejection of what he stands for. At



the same time, Obama stands as a reminder of how much has been accomplished symbolically, if not materially and institutionally, against racism, and thus he has become an alibi for unleashing all kinds of violence, both macro and micro, against Blacks and Latino/as. I think you are right to refer to these dual responses to Obama as an “apparent” paradox. I think Obama means many things, many opposite things to many different Americans, but I am not sure all of these different and opposing meanings are held together for the same reasons by the same persons. I think how you see Obama, and how you talk about his presidency, is a kind of litmus test about your stand on race and your views about what America means. I do agree that Obama’s Blackness has invited some shameful behavior not only against him, but also other Black Americans. But this violence comes from those sectors that questioned his citizenship, his religious loyalty to America’s public religion, his competency, his impartiality, his commitment to defend the heartland, his fealty to American empire, and there I only see apple pie, resilient, rejuvenated American racism.

**G. Y.:** Finally, neoliberalism has deep ties not only to a certain ways of thinking about markets and responsibility, but it seems to offer us a deeply problematic and morally corrosive philosophical anthropology. While I know that it is difficult to be brief given the gravitas of this question, what is needed as an alternative?

**E. M.:** First, we need to revitalize the agency of citizens. Citizens must take back control of their government, but not through populism, which appeals to the worst aspects of identities, resentments, and fears, as we are witnessing in this 2016 election. Second, we have to recover the language and spirit of the Civil Rights Movement with its commitment to nonviolence, and to legal and political transformation that appealed to the best of the political morality of our country. In fact, I think that the Civil Rights Movement is one of the most important political, social, cultural, and moral movements we have had in this nation, along with the abolition, women’s suffrage, and the anti-nukes movements. The Civil Rights Movement remains an open agenda. Third, we have to initiate and sustain a Black and Latino/a coalition and dialogue about how to take up the civil rights agenda again. Fourth, we have to reject, philosophically, politically, and morally, the reduction of the political and moral to the economic. It is important to note that economics was always part of moral philosophy or applied philosophy. Today, we seem to subordinate everything to the chaos of the economic. And finally, we have to continue to reject the illusion that race is a thing of the past, and face up to the fact that we have become the nation we are because of race, as that which has subordinated many, and as that which has been relentlessly resisted, giving birth to new vocabularies of emancipation and political agency.

## NOTES

1. Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1997), 17.
2. Ta-Nehesi Coates, “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” in *The Atlantic*, 316, no. 3 (October 2015): 60–84; 64.
3. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future*, 17.
4. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).



# David Haekwon Kim

**George Yancy:** A great deal of philosophical work on race begins with the white/Black binary. In what ways does race mediate or impact your philosophical identity as a Korean American?

**David Haekwon Kim:** In doing philosophy, I often approach normative issues with concerns about lived experience, cultural difference, political subordination, and social movements changing conditions of agency. I think these sensibilities are due in large part to my experience of growing up bicultural, raced, and gendered in the US, a country that has never really faced up to its exclusionary and often violent anti-Asian practices. In fact, I am sometimes amazed that I have left so many tense racialized encounters with both my life and all my teeth. In other contexts, life and limb were not at issue, but I did not emerge with my self-respect intact.

These sensibilities have also been formed by learning a history of Asian Americans that is more complex than the conventional watered-down immigrant narrative. This more discerning, haunting, and occasionally beautiful history includes reference to institutional anti-Asian racism, a cultural legacy of sexualized racism, a colonial US presence in East Asia and the Pacific Islands, and some truly inspiring social struggles by Asians, Asian-Americans, and other communities of color.

It's a challenge to convey this sort of lived experience, and this too has shaped my philosophical identity. So little has been said in philosophy and public life about the situation of Asian Americans that we don't have much in the way of common understandings that are accurate and illuminating. Making matters worse is that the void is filled by many misleading notions about race in general, which includes such notions like our country being beyond race, that critiquing white privilege is hating whites, that any race talk is racist, and so on.

There is also problematic discourse about Asian Americans in particular, like the Model Minority myth. This popular notion posits Asian Americans as being successful along many indices of assimilation and socioeconomic well-being and thus a model for other nonwhites. Its veracity aside, its actual political function is to excuse anti-Black and anti-Latino racism and prevent interracial solidarity. In any case, I believe the invisibility of Asian Americans in our culture has been so deep and enduring that Asian Americans themselves are often ambivalent about how they would like to see themselves portrayed and perhaps even uncomfortable about being portrayed at all. It will be interesting to see how the new sitcom, *Fresh Off the Boat*, which features the assimilation woes of a Taiwanese-American family, develops over the coming months. Will it repeat conventional narratives, only in a funnier way? Or will humor and a richer truth unite?

**G. Y.:** In what ways has Asian American philosophy had to legitimate itself within or even against a philosophical myopia that focuses on Western traditions?

**D. H. K.:** As I see it, the undoing of this hegemony requires at least two sorts of diversification, and ultimately these efforts have to be integrated. One has to do with race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, and other identities related to subordination and social justice. The other concerns the study of non-Western conceptual traditions, like those found in Buddhist, Confucian, Vedic, Ubuntu, Nahuatl, and Islamicate perspectives, as well as modern hybrid traditions of the non-Western world. If we look at philosophy journals and requirements for the philosophy major and for graduate school in philosophy, it's hard to deny that white, Euro-American male perspectives and Euro-American traditions form the center of the profession both historically and presently, and descriptively and normatively. It's just silly to deny this.

Given this context, I think Asian American philosophy as philosophy of Asian American experiences or conditions faces a steep uphill struggle. Insofar as Asian American philosophy seeks to draw from indigenous Asian traditions, and I think it should, it faces Eurocentrism and the traditions diversification problem I mentioned. Furthermore, if Asian American philosophy tries to expand the justice dialogue and the traditions dialogue simultaneously, it may take on a damaging burden. Just think of what a dissertation or tenure committee would say to a philosopher putting forward, say, a Confucian theory of racial shame or a Buddhist critique of the exoticization of Asian women. Such a philosopher has committed professional harakiri.

**G. Y.:** And yet, by remaining so philosophically insular, I wonder if Anglo-American and European philosophy will, perhaps, die by its own hand in light of the “browning” or even “yellowing” of America.

**D. H. K.:** As the US becomes a majority nonwhite nation, a transition from insularity to obsolescence is a vital concern for the profession. We are already

seeing setbacks to philosophy departments in the wider tide against the humanities. So if philosophy wants to avoid the diminishing trajectory of classics departments, then among other things, it must fully commit to social justice diversification. It should have done so yesterday!

However, I think it is also quite possible that insularity and hegemony unite and create a professional membership consisting largely of dark bodies and Westernized minds. The idea that philosophy simply is Western philosophy, be it analytic or continental, is such a deep structure of the profession. In fact, I don't think it's such a strange future in which we have a statistical majority of Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and Middle Easterners in the American Philosophical Association, nearly all members of which work primarily in the Western canon. Even philosophy addressing race, gender, and class inequality can rely solely on Rawls or Foucault, or on analytic moral psychology or Heideggerian phenomenology, out of more ideological than pragmatic reasons. Such a future would mean a terrible loss of opportunity. Ending formal Western imperialism was difficult; ending Eurocentrism may prove to be still more challenging. So, as I see it, there may yet be a sense in which Anglo- and Euro-American philosophy persists as the center, even in a profession filled with a darker professoriate.

And transformative efforts face a complex legacy of insularity. For example, currently, there is an increasing presence of "East-West" comparative philosophy in the profession. Unfortunately, the wider picture, one including a "North-South" axis, reveals that non-Asian non-Western philosophies, like those found under the headings of Africana philosophy, Native American philosophy, and Latin American philosophy, do not even make it onto the map in the Western profession of philosophy. I think it's no coincidence that these exclusions are of philosophies of colonized peoples. And it should be pointed out that Asian peoples and philosophies too have been enmeshed in colonial conditions. A sign of significant progress would be the robust development of what we might call "East-South" philosophy. In fact, I propose that we operationalize this idea and build it into the infrastructure of the American Philosophical Association. This would not only indicate the admission of "South" philosophy into the profession, but also "South" philosophy's engagement with "East" philosophy would imply a strong decentering of Western philosophy. Perhaps all this is to say that I long for the day when we let the world teach us about the world.

**G. Y.:** A Chinese student of mine said to me recently that she was told by a white male to go back to her own country. The fear of the "Yellow-Peril" is well known. What are some of the ways in which you see this playing itself out in our contemporary moment?

**D. H. K.:** I think Yellow Perilism, or anti-Asianism more generally, persists. This is especially clear if we look beyond large coastal cities, like San Francisco,

or contexts like the academy. There is a whole lot of America between the urban dots in which Asian Americans are beginning to appear more familiar, and there are many realms of life outside of the university, a place where Asian Americans are regarded as a model minority. In many of these other locations and contexts, Asian Americans are often not welcome. And in these places as well as the ones where they are more familiar, they are often welcomed in a conditional fashion: they have to be “good” Asians, politically compliant and sometimes even white-identified.

Sometimes the exclusion is crass or violent with classic racist elements. Historically, this is often linked to the state of our foreign policy. So if we continue to see a large influx of Asian immigrants and tensions with China and North Korea persist or worsen, then predictably we’ll see a spike in Yellow Perilism. We have already seen a terrible rise in hate crimes and arguably state crimes against many members of Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian peoples since 9/11.

**G. Y.:** I recall that once at a conference you mentioned being called “Ching Chong.” How did you resist this sort of racist vitriol and slur? And what sort of psychic scars does this sort of thing leave?

**D. H. K.:** To your first question, honestly, the answer is: poorly! I sometimes hear Asian Americans and other people of color insisting on matching the vitriol in kind. I have often resisted in this way simply because I couldn’t control my outrage or contempt.

However, I would not insist upon this sort of resistance. It can quickly escalate the nastiness of the situation, and one may end up beaten, humiliated, even killed. And whatever else may be true, we do not need more people of color degraded or killed by racism. Also, at the end of the day, we need to have community, in some wide sense of the word, with racists. I don’t know if I’m saying something controversial here or simply identifying part of the agony of race in this country. But, as W. E. B. Du Bois mournfully noted, as infuriated as we may get by violent or structural racism, we must be reminded by the end of the day that racists are human, even all too human.

Having said all this, I do think that a decently effective response to racist vitriol is needed because a lack of resistance can deepen the stereotype of Asian passivity, which can encourage more such racism elsewhere. Also, not resisting can have corrosive effects in which one begins to internalize the image of oneself conveyed by the racist, which gets at your point about scarring. There is something about constantly returning to the site of degradation in one’s memory and imagination that has really baleful effects on one’s sense of self. Perhaps we can get help by thinking about all this in terms of practices with aims. I think typically the aim of the antagonism is to goad the victim into anger, fear, or agitation, the expressions of which incite pleasure and more such ridicule, intimidation, or violence. So I think in many such cases an

alternative to countervitriol is performing a kind of imperturbability with a calm indignation or even a kind of composed hostility.

I have sometimes folded my arms in front of my chest and calmly glared at antagonistic racists, trying to convey with my face and comportment two things: you don't unsettle me, and you're pathetic. Sometimes, I even smile a little and say in my own mind, "Uh uh, no, you're an idiot." The problem with this strategy is that sometimes I cannot end the performance, and afterward I continue to feel animosity and contempt. There are clearly other, and no doubt better, strategies that can be used. Importantly, given the support offered by the wider context of racial and gender hierarchy, it may actually be impossible to win this battle of wills.

Perhaps the hardest part of all this is contending with a distinctive kind of vulnerability, one that can also cause scarring. Following a Fanonian line of thought, one that resonates with some Confucian themes of the ritualization of the social self, I am thinking of a very basic kind of sociopolitical affiliation or identification process, a subject-forming sense of attunement to and belongingness within a community, which subsequently conditions, often invisibly, one's social encounters in everyday life.

This process often unfolds as naturally and unconsciously as breathing air, but it forms one of the many fundamental bases of the self. In broad outline, this is not so different from how philosophers talk about how basic kinds of background, embodiment, or know-how are more fundamental than, and condition more consciously, explicit propositional knowledge or know-that. The problem, then, is when this subject-forming sociopolitical affiliation is directed toward the very community in which racists are important members. One of the very bases of the social self makes the subject deeply vulnerable to racist vitriol and to the more pervasive context of racist exclusion.

To appreciate this point, it can be useful to contrast two Asian Americans, one who has mostly grown up in the United States and one who recently immigrated here. Both can be angry at racist insults, fearful of racist assaults, and can worry over racist exclusions. Thus, they are both vulnerable to racism. But insofar as the "American" in "Asian American" plays a significant role in the former's subject-forming sense of sociality, whereas it is, say, China, Korea, or Vietnam that plays a parallel role in the latter's sense of self, then the former can be more deeply, we might say existentially, unsettled by racism than the former. This, I believe, is one of the points of contention between immigrant parents and their children who are raised here. The parents puzzle over how much their children are impacted by racism and sometimes even flee from any cultural affiliation with their homeland. The deep unsettling effects of racism can be relatively easily described, but are very difficult to appreciate with a kind of lived understanding. And here, I'm afraid only structural changes to society can significantly remove the vulnerability I've just described.



**G. Y.:** What has to change in America, more generally, for you, as an Asian American, to feel affirmed? And what, specifically, in the professional field of philosophy?

**D. H. K.:** I think the sort of affirmation that's salient here isn't a sense of feel-good multiculturalism but an ethical affirmation that concerns social transformation and political accountability. In regards to the profession of philosophy, I would go back to the two processes of diversification noted earlier. I am certain that less than 1 percent of philosophy departments across North America have students pursuing majors or minors, to say nothing about graduate students, required to take courses that could be considered part of either justice or traditions diversification, like feminism and Buddhism, respectively. But if even 10 percent did, I would have an energized sense of hope.

In regards to national changes, and to limit myself, two things come to mind. First, I think we need to align the implicit sense of history in our civic affairs with the best history produced by our Asian Americanist scholars and others doing the work of justice diversification. Stories of anti-Asian institutional racism, American imperialism, and Asian American democratic struggles must be a part of the basic infrastructure of our historic self-understanding in our K-12 education and our civic narratives, rather than being relegated to an elective history seminar in college.

Second, Asian Americans have to see themselves as part of a larger community of color. We are often hoodwinked into believing the model minority story and that we should be grateful for our successes. Note that such gratitude, apparently compulsory, frames our interests or affiliations in an unethically narrow fashion and invites a kind of political affiliation with whiteness. But the America of Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, Middle Easterners, and so on is also a part of our America. The killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown are but the tip of the iceberg of anti-Black racism; Latinos are hunted by ICE (Immigration and Enforcement Customs), and the tragedy of border crossing is a human rights issue for which subsequent generations will judge us; Asians have arrived on an already occupied land, one filled by peoples for whom virtually every treaty was violated. And with the same logic as the Japanese Internment, so many Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims are being held without trial, and more generally they are profoundly ostracized in our "War on Terror." Thus, with a wider sense of ethical community, I'll have to reserve my gratitude for the day when a deeper democracy is achieved.

## Emily S. Lee

**George Yancy:** You work at the intersection of race and phenomenology. What got you interested in this area?

**Emily S. Lee:** Well, I've always been interested in how people can live in close proximity, share experiences, even within a family, and yet draw very different conclusions from the experience. So when I began reading French philosopher M. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, I really appreciated his care and attention to how this phenomenon can occur. Because an experience is not directly drawn from the empirical circumstances, it is also structured by the accumulated history and aspirations of each of the subjects undergoing the experience. Merleau-Ponty's work helps to systematically understand how one can share an experience, and yet still take away different conclusions.

It was with luck that while I was reading Merleau-Ponty's book, I was also reading the critical race theorist Patricia Williams's book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. I found some of her descriptions and analysis demonstrating the chasms of understanding among different "races" incredibly enlightening. I thought an explanation for many of the racial phenomena that Williams described in terms of the inexplicable dearth of understanding among various racialized subjects could be facilitated with the phenomenological framework.

**G. Y.:** I think that what you suggest above really opens up an important way of accounting for differential understandings of race and racism in the United States. Many white people fail to grasp what it means for people of color who experience living in this country very differently—whether it be people of color undergoing experiences of racist microaggression or overt racist physical violence. Is there a way to make sense of this through a phenomenological lens?

**E. S. L.:** I think that the question and the problem is determining—that is, having people agree—that something constitutes racism and what constitutes a microaggression or a macroaggression, although I do hope that the latter is

clearer by now. I like the phenomenological framework because it highlights the entire lens, orientation, or framework through which to recognize something as racist. Keep in mind that expressions of racism have not been static, and hence they creatively change.

Perhaps the following example might help—and it goes beyond the black/white binary. As Korean American, I came to the provinces of the US, specifically Guam, when I was five or six. I came to the mainland of the US, specifically New York City, at the age of ten. So, as someone who is Korean American, I still cringe when told that I “speak good English,” and I must point out that blacks as well as whites have said this to me. Half the time, I want to correct their grammar, to let them know that they should say that I “speak English well.” But so far, I’ve refrained from this. The person speaking to me usually thinks they are giving me a compliment. But I recognize this statement as their inability or unwillingness to understand that Asian Americans have been living in the United States and have been citizens for well over one hundred years. This unwillingness or inability to recognize Asian Americans as Americans has the result of insistently casting Asian Americans as foreigners or people who do not belong here.

I recognize this “compliment” as *macroaggressive*, not *microaggressive*, setting the stage to treat Asian Americans as not quite deserving of the same rights as Americans, because Asian Americans are, after all, only “immigrants.” Considering the controversy even over the Dream Act, immigrants can clearly be maltreated. But of course I also recognize that this “compliment” can only be the result of a specific socially constructed understanding of the history of the United States, so I do attempt to be more understanding of it. Nevertheless, such a “compliment” is problematic.

People may not accept the above scenario as a macroaggression, but rather that perhaps I’m being too sensitive, that I’m making a mountain out of a molehill and that the above scenario only constitutes at most a microaggression. I am absolutely sure that there are even Asian Americans who would insist I am being much too sensitive. I think that stereotypes and jokes about stereotypes function much in the same way. They may be about small characteristics, but they are part of a bigger framework. It is in this sense that I think the problem is in determining what constitutes a racist act and what constitutes a microaggression or macroaggression.

After all, to cast something as a microaggression is to suggest somehow that these aggressions are not too damaging, that they are not that important, and, hence, “understandable.” And it is here, where people occupy a crossroad, where people may simply disagree and not see eye to eye, that phenomenology can be helpful. Because of the priority of phenomenology’s framework of describing the world, not simply the material conditions of the world, but also the subject’s very ambiguous, contextual, situated conditions of being-in-the-world, phenomenology can be helpful in describing why or how people

can so completely diverge in understanding an event as racist, or aggressive, in a micro or macro sense.

**G. Y.:** Your point about speaking “good English” reminded me of the “I, too, am Harvard” Photo Campaign, where students of color at Harvard were tired of the institutional and microaggressive racism that they experienced on a daily basis. As a philosophical approach, how might phenomenology help them to make sense of their situation? I’m reminded of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he describes the *lived experience* of black bodies.

**E. S. L.:** I am reminded that Fanon recognized that alienation for the black male professional is different from the alienation of the black male worker. In other words, I appreciate Fanon’s attention to the different forms of alienation because of class. I guess I especially like this because as much as I sympathize with the students at Harvard and their sense of alienation, their alienation is distinctly different from the alienation of the working class. I read Fanon as utilizing and critiquing both dialectical and phenomenological frameworks. And as you hint at here, yes, his work (as well as your work) deploys a necessary phenomenological approach to describe the lived experience of the black man and woman, though when it comes to women, his work is not without controversy. But I also appreciate phenomenology not only in terms of its descriptive capabilities—in describing the functioning of perception, embodiment, and experience—but hopefully in its normative possibilities. In other words, I appreciate phenomenology in making explicit the functioning of these three lens through which we engage the world. With this accomplishment or some advancement in this area, we can move toward making ethical and political decisions with lasting changes.

**G. Y.:** Speaking of lived experience, I have shared with my white philosophy graduate students how alienating it can be within a profession like philosophy that is predominantly white. What is this alienation like for you as an Asian American woman philosopher?

**E. S. L.:** I guess that I’m still not quite sure how to describe this experience of being an Asian American woman philosopher. Working on the American Philosophical Association Committee on Asian and Asian American philosophy and philosophers, I am very much aware of how few of us there are in the discipline. I’m still left wondering if some of my experiences are from being a woman, especially as philosophy really is still a good ol’ boys’ network. Or, I wonder if some of my experiences occur from being Asian American, in the ways people stereotypically assume that I must specialize in certain areas of philosophy or behave in specific ways, such as being quiet and subdued. At times, it appears if I speak at all, people immediately assume I’m aggressive.

I know these expectations about behavior make a significant difference because, in academia especially, a clear boundary between work colleagues and friends does not exist. I think sometimes at conferences, people just don’t

know what to make of me, though at times people seem to react with genuine effort to be inclusive. But I guess to the extent that there is discrimination, I feel it most in two ways.

First, I feel it in the sense of not being regarded as a philosopher, or as a good philosopher, and as someone who just accidentally or barely made it into the discipline. I am always left questioning my intelligence and my ability to think as well as the others who look like they are members of the discipline. The questioning by others in the discipline of whether I belong becomes internalized, making me question myself and second-guess myself about whether I can do this.

Second, I work on feminist and race philosophy. People both within and outside the discipline do not regard these areas as “true” philosophy because they presume to guard the boundaries of what constitutes and does not constitute real philosophy. These presumptions challenge my understanding of philosophy and my legitimacy as a philosopher.

**G. Y.:** Why are there so few Asian American professional philosophers in the United States?

**E. S. L.:** The philosopher David H. Kim has written on this.<sup>1</sup> Kim speculates that part of the reason may be because Asian Americans are primed by their parents to enter more lucrative positions such as law or medicine, or more secure positions like engineering or computer science. He also acknowledges that stereotypes about what talents Asian Americans possess, that is, the sciences and math-related fields, may prime some Asian Americans themselves not to enter the humanities. However, the burgeoning field of American Studies, and the specialization of Asian American studies, seems to suggest that it isn't that Asian Americans are averse to studying and working in the humanities. I believe that Kim suggested that the field of philosophy itself, in terms of the professors encouraging or discouraging Asian American youth from furthering their studies in philosophy, or other sorts of subtle signals, is discouraging more Asian Americans from entering philosophy.

Recently, Carole Lee has empirically traced the numbers and attempts to provide an answer as to why there are so few Asian American professional philosophers. So I think the conclusion is that influences within the discipline of philosophy as well as broader social forces provide an explanation for the paucity of Asian American philosophers.

**G. Y.:** In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes what it was like for him, while in France riding on a train, to experience his body as a problem when a little white child, in its mother's arms, exclaims, “Look, a Negro!” When you think about the profession's policing of the boundaries of what philosophy “really” looks like, do you ever feel as if the profession communicates to you, “Look, an Asian!”? Of course, what comes with this is that sense of being reduced to one's body.

**E. S. L.:** It's interesting, because since moving to Southern California, I do not feel the sense of being noticed for being Asian as much as I did while living in New York City and in the northern parts of New York State. There I definitely felt the sense that my Asian features defined me and spoke for me. Even I would note if I saw an Asian person on the street. Here in Southern California the population is so diverse that I don't feel the sense of overdetermination of my body all the time. But more specifically within the discipline of philosophy, at conferences, I think at this point in my career, I've found enough circles of collegial philosophers—admittedly mostly philosophers of color—among whom I do not feel reduced to my body. So, whether I am reduced to the racial features of my body depends on the context. I am glad to say that I've participated in niche conferences such as at the Society for Women in Philosophy meetings, at the Future Directions in Feminist Phenomenology, or at the Korean Modernities/Colonialities Workshop where I thoroughly enjoyed myself while engaging in thought-provoking conversations and learning a great deal.

But at some of the larger mainstream conferences, yes, I definitely feel self-conscious both as an Asian and as a woman. I think to some extent I am aware of being a woman more than being Asian. I say this because the Asian racialized identity works in ways I cannot quite pinpoint yet. I am aware that there are claims out there that Asians are becoming "white." I do not want to fall into this scenario. I think the racialization of Asian Americans is distinctly different from whiteness, but not so different from whiteness as blackness is—perhaps different but not different enough? The identity functions between denigration and exoticism. Perhaps this difference functions ambiguously enough that I still do not fully understand it.

If anything, I want the difference to be acknowledged, I do not want the sense that my identity does not matter. I do not want acceptance on the condition of reducing my differences away.

**G. Y.:** There are experiences that African American, Afro-Caribbean, Latin American, Native American, and Asian American philosophers share as minority philosophers (or even graduate students) in a profession that is still predominantly white and male. What are some shared philosophical themes or topics that you think would be relevant for these minority groups to critically engage as a collective, a collective that would be mutually empowering? And what positive impact do you think that such a collective would have on our profession's understanding of itself?

**E. S. L.:** This is a hard question. I want to begin by noting that I know that we have shared experiences; I know this because one of the first books that woke me up to the question of race and deeply rang true for me was Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Audrey Lorde's *Zami*. I don't know what is the shared experience, in that I think it is not just feelings of alienation or marginalization.

I hope it is more a sense of knowing there is more than the prevailing structures of existence and knowledge.

But in terms of philosophical themes that it would be relevant to critically engage—I'm going to answer by describing my experiences, and hopefully it will speak to this concern. I guess I am a phenomenologist: I want to leave open the question of which topics and themes to engage, because I do not want to presume to be able to speak for others. I feel like the experience of participating in academia as a philosopher has been similar to teaching a class on philosophy of race. Because in my institution the class is a general education requirement, I get quite a few students who are resistant to the material and as a result attack my pedagogy and my abilities to teach. I have read enough material indicating that this experience is quite common among professors who teach material on race. At one point, it was so difficult that I considered not teaching the class. But then I recalled the students, not many, but a significant number, who personally expressed how important the class was to them. If I did not teach the class, these students might be left in a vacuum. I decided I want to continue teaching this class to meet these students. Now, the class is a pleasure to teach.

I think in the same sense, it's been a difficult journey getting here, and it continues to be challenging, but I must say that the few philosophers of color (and white philosophers who are more "enlightened," let's say, or who at least try) with whom I now engage philosophically and socially, really make the journey worthwhile. In a deep sense, I know I made the right decision becoming a philosopher.

## NOTE

1. David Haekwon Kim, "Asian American Philosophers: Absence, Politics, and Identity," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 25–28.

## PART V DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Eduardo Mendieta explains that "normativity is not a standpoint, but a horizon, one that is expanded or contracted by our acts of imagination." The word 'horizon' is often used to represent opportunity or possibility, and sometimes carries with it the implication of a destination. Discuss the notion of horizon as it applies to racialization, one's identity as "Black," "white," and so on.
2. Out of its own struggle for philosophical legitimacy, philosophy in Latin America has made "visible the context in which philosophy occurs,"

according to Linda Martín Alcoff. She suggests that throughout the diverse range of Latin American philosophy “one can discern a running thread of decolonial self-consciousness and aspiration.” The works of the great Latin American thinkers that Alcoff identifies all seem to share an origin and discursive center in self-knowledge. To what extent does the role of the United States as a colonizing, imperial power make its own philosophers reluctant to know themselves?

3. In many cases, it seems like the discussion of race cannot get off of the ground because we lack the prerequisite education. In some cases, as for example the anti-Asian policy and practices in the United States noted by David Haekwon Kim, shameful aspects of American history are rarely addressed in standard curricula. In the same way, we fail to understand the full picture of race and culture in the present. The “insularity and hegemony” of disciplines like philosophy continue to exclude non-Western, nonwhite, nonmale modes of philosophy, as attested to by Kim and Alcoff, Mendieta, and Emily Lee. Thus, in addition to the failure to understand what Lee discusses as macro- and microaggressions when they occur, we also deny them access in discourse. To what extent can we account for Western myopia in terms of the failure of the education system in the United States, intentional ignorance on the part of the white racist structures and the people who live among them, and the “Promethean Amnesia” that Mendieta describes? Is this enduring failure to understand or even acknowledge racism, to the point of excluding pluralistic philosophy, a form of micro- or macroaggression?





PART VI

*Race and Africana Social  
and Political Frames*



# Molefi Kete Asante

**George Yancy:** From an Afrocentric perspective, how do you define race in America?

**Molefi Kete Asante:** Race in America is a psychological, physical, and social location for determining the conditions of one's current and future life. This is because America's benefits and privileges have been structured around race and its markers for difference. Those markers, largely physical, identify some people as being privileged and others as being victims. As a central concept in America's history, race has always been an arena for selecting who will eat and who will not eat or for determining the quality and condition of a group's possibilities.

**G. Y.:** Given the recent killings of unarmed Black people by white police officers, does Afrocentricity provide a prescription of any sort for eliminating racism?

**M. K. A.:** Afrocentricity as an intellectual idea takes no authority to prescribe anything; it is neither a religion nor a belief system. It is a paradigm that suggests all discourse about African people should be grounded in the centrality of Africans in their own narratives. However, the warrant "given the recent killings of unarmed Black people by white police officers" is part of a continuing drama in America; its contemporary emergence is simply a recent exposure through popular media.

When one asks about the elimination of racism, then the concentration cannot be on African people but on the perpetrators of racism. Who acculturates racists? What does a white child learn about privilege? How can we dismantle the apparatus that supports white *exceptionalism* in a multicultural society? It will take really bold and courageous action to bring about several key components of a national will to overcome racism. It must mean an acceptance of the fact that racism is a principal fact of American life.

It also necessitates an embrace of all national cultures in the country in a defiant act of seeking to contest ignorance in all arenas. This is what the brilliant people of Starbucks attempted to do recently by having their baristas engage customers in conversations about race—to the utter disgust of the racist class. Thus, in the end, to eliminate racism will also require a rewriting of our understanding of the United States of America from the perspective of the oppressed, the violated, and the marginalized. The Native Americans must be folded into the discussion of racism because they lost an entire continent based on racism as a location of what their future conditions should be.

Of course, you cannot do any of this if you seek to whitewash the facts of American history. Institutions should and could support the least powerful and thereby redress a thousand wrongs. I would like to see politicians open the discussion on reparations for 246 years of enslavement.

The question of the killing of Black men by police is not a recent one; it is more in view now because of the new social media. I am afraid that the country has not overcome the pockets of racist fearmongers who are happy to kill African-Americans in the tradition of the old KKK. I personally believe that some KKK-style racists have found homes inside police forces and are now called “systematic failures.” Removing racists, these “systematic failures,” from police departments is rightly the work of criminal justice scholars, some of whom spend too much time seeking to criminalize Black people. Consequently, statements about mechanized forces, better training, mistaken shootings by reserve deputy police, and aggravated behavior miss the point of dealing with rogue police officers who get an “adrenalin charge” by subduing Black males with deadly force.

**G. Y.:** On your view, who is it that, as you point out, acculturates racists, and what does a white child learn about privilege?

**M. K. A.:** Let me remind you of a recent event. A white policeman in New Richmond, Ohio refused to shoot a white man begging to be shot. The policeman, Jesse Kidder, is praised for demonstrating restraint in refusing to shoot the man, Michael Wilcox, who had been accused of killing his fiancée. Pundits and commentators announced gleefully that Kidder’s action was exceptional and certainly an example of good police behavior. Few would dispute the fact that the police used restraint, but the lesson to the white child and to the Black child, I should add, is that police can show restraint when the suspect is white, even if he is suspected of murder.

The point that I am making is that almost everyday, perhaps hundreds of times per day, white children learn how special they are in the society and how unspecial Blacks are to whites who control the society. Racism begins to assert itself quite early, and children learn at an early age, perhaps as early as three to four years of age, that people are different and they are treated differently. If you are a white child, it is extremely obvious that you have

privileges that a Black child does not have because you are surrounded by privilege, opportunities, and power buttons that are often denied to African-descended children. Thus the white child finds three aspects of privilege immediately in a racist society. They are secure in their physical and psychological situations; they are protected in their living spaces; and they have the freedom to explore every conceivable adventure without fear or trepidation. On top of this, they are granted audacity that is condemned in Black children. Furthermore, white people have the privilege of being blinded to their privilege by the protocols of the society. It is like the white view of the police as good guys and the general Black view of suspicion of the police. The blindness comes because the police in a racist society make racial judgments and decisions. They decide to stop and arrest Blacks at a rate greater than that of whites. They decide to harass young Black males and to send young white males home to their parents. This blindness to racism is an inherent part of the meanness of the system of privilege. Alas, Black children are rarely protected and are not secure in their spaces.

**G. Y.:** I have heard from both white and Black pundits that Black people ought to spend the same level of energy protesting “Black-on-Black” crime. Other scholars with whom I’ve spoken see this move as a way of avoiding a critical discussion of the fact that some white police officers, who have sworn to protect citizens across race, actually see Black lives as disposable. What are your thoughts?

**M. K. A.:** “Black-on-Black” crime is not an anomaly; most crimes are committed in the communities where victims are found, and since most Blacks live among other Blacks, the criminals and the victims will tend to be Black. But this is only part of the issue; it is a small part of the bigger problem that is the cause of violence in the African-American community. There is a morbid philosophy of demise operating in a systemic way to destroy the elements that maintain Black communities.

Here is what I mean. Unemployment, racial profiling, housing discrimination, educational shabbiness, exploitation of the poor, and the rampant physical abuse by the authorities create a cauldron of frustration and fear. The brew is violent and its manifestation engulfs those who enter the madness of this arena of violence. It cannot be justified, but it must be understood for us to continue to find a solution.

**G. Y.:** You stated above that Afrocentricity “is a paradigm that suggests all discourse about African people should be grounded in the centrality of Africans in their own narratives.” Given this time of grief, suffering, and sadness that so many African-Americans are feeling as we continue to hear about (and in some cases actually see) one killing after another of unarmed Black people by white police officers, what are some of our “own narratives” that might be drawn upon to bring about a sense of empowerment during these times?

**M. K. A.:** In the worst of times there are always victories, even if they are small ones. So when we are whipped, broken in culture and spirit, effectively destroyed physically, we can still manage to sing, to laugh, to rebel, and to join revolution; this is the victory of those whose lives are wounded by brutality. You remember the Middle Passage crossing? When our ancestors sat on those ships they were not all dejected; some were defiant, others nodded in solidarity to their daughters or sons and gave them signs of victory. Those who leaped over board and drowned themselves were also gaining victories over the criminal kidnapers. The key to centering is situational; that is, one must claim space or take space, intellectually or physically, in any situation, however difficult and dire it may be seen.

What are we to do if we are in bad situations where our freedoms are stolen? We are to resist and the best way to resist is to claim our space, even if it is in short bursts of time to assert ourselves and consequently to become the subjects of our own narratives.

**G. Y.:** Speak to how you do or do not see the protests taking place, as of this interview, in Baltimore, as an example of Black people claiming space.

**M. K. A.:** In my book *The Afrocentric Idea*, I suggested that the objective of the oppressed, the victimized, and the exploited is always to “seize” the accoutrements of power in order to correct the imbalance when the mastering force least expects assaults on the ramparts of villainy that seek to marginalize them. The youth of Baltimore seized the space and the time when they went to the streets and posed the threat of violence; it is always the threat of violence, not violence itself, that unnerves the system because of the uncertainty that comes when a people hold in their hands the potential of competing for power. Thus, the claiming of space adjusts the narrative of confrontation so that you no longer have a hierarchical symbolism but a more balanced position, even if only temporarily, that allows the oppressed to establish itself as a contestant for attention and power.

This is what the demonstrative protests brought into play in Baltimore, because the people took to the streets and seized the space, the time, the lime-light of the media, and the assertive rhetoric of action that demanded change in the system. Those few who burned down buildings and destroyed cars *were not* demonstrating; they were much too literal to pose a threat. In effect, they took advantage of the seizure of space and corrupted it to an obvious provocation that could and did draw down the awesome power of the state. Without military capacity, protesters are in no position to survive a literal confrontation; this is why the threat of violence with its potentiality is a more effective strategy for gaining change.

**G. Y.:** If you were speaking to young Black boys and Black men about the recent killings of unarmed boys and men who look like them, what would you say?

**M. K. A.:** There would be two points I would make to them, the same two points I made to my own son, some years ago. The first is “The United States has always been a dangerous nation for African boys and men.” The second is that “you must always be on the side of fighting for transformation in the society.” Actually the intent of the enslavement was to kill us, to work us to death, to dispense with us in one way or the other, or to conspire against our success, or to hang us from a tree because of the inherent threat that the Black male body posed for the society. Young Black boys must know their power and learn to respect it, to be amused by the fear that they cause in those who reflect on the violence they have measured against us. Young Black boys bring a sense of unease to many whites who expect them to do something, to say something; it is the same unease that rides on the shoulders of the police who have been trained in a culture that disrespects Black people.

And yet I would say to them that they must resist narcissism because journalists and social media love to fetishize them. Once you are fetishized, you are ready to be destroyed, overturned, subverted, interrogated, and incarcerated. The Baltimore mother who reacted emotionally to save her son from arrest by beating him away from the protests appeared to do something wholly parental because she was saying that she was not going to lose her son. However, the media saw the beating of the Black male body, not the mother’s love, as the main story. I would also insist that young Black boys and men understand that we must be on the side of justice, progress, and transformation. What is correct for us is correct for others, and we must fight all forms of human oppression; this is truly the legacy of African ancestors in the Americas whose destinies have always been tied up with those of the abused, harmed, hurt, and brutalized. In the end, they should know that they should be careful, but have no fear; be confident but not arrogant, and let no one separate them from goodness, character, and justice.

**G. Y.:** Returning to your point about space, there is also canonical or curricular space. As a professional philosopher, I was primarily taught European and Anglo-American philosophy. In what ways does Afrocentricity seek to rethink the canon of Western intellectual and philosophical space?

**M. K. A.:** Yes, George, you are right about Afrocentricity rethinking the canon. There is nothing really wrong about the European canon; it is what it is, the European canon. I think that often African and to a lesser degree Asian scholars are asking Europeans to do what others have not done. We privilege Europe and European people as the ones who should set the canon, but just allow us inside with one or two books of our own. Afrocentricity understands that the European project is not something that we should change; we could, for example, suggest items for the canon, but in the end its purpose is to canonize European thought and thinkers.



Yet in a diverse society like ours we must have space for all people who share this land with us. This requires knowledge and generosity. Thales must be paired with Imhotep, and the pyramids must be seen as the monumental icons of the ancient world long before the creation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. You cannot have a canon, however, in the United States that avoids the profound works of David Walker, Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, James Weldon Johnson, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and E. Franklin Frazier, for example.

I think it is important to say that Afrocentricity is in opposition to the imposition of particularisms as if they are universal. There has to be cultural and intellectual opportunity in the curriculum for cultures and people other than European. Who created the calendar that we use today? Who established the foundations of geometry? If we do not know the answers to these questions, it is because what has been imposed as if it were universal may be only those items and achievements that are European-derived.

Intellectual space must be shared because all humans have contributed to human civilization. The ancient African philosophers such as Amenhotep, the son of Hapu, Imhotep, Ptahhotep, Amenemhat, Merikare, and Akhenaten lived hundreds, even thousands of years before Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Why is it that children do not learn that the African Imhotep built the first pyramid? Our children do not know that Hypatia, Plotinus, and St. Augustine were born in Africa.

## Bill E. Lawson

**George Yancy:** Why do race and racism continue to be a problem in the US? Also, talk about why critical discussions of race and racism are still relatively marginal points of philosophical discussion within the context of professional philosophy.

**Bill E. Lawson:** These questions seem to have a lasting hold on people in the United States. My basic answer is that the reasons are complex. Nonetheless, I think that there is a certain aspect of American culture and history that maintains racism as a problem. But first, we must understand what is the problem regarding race and racism in the United States. Straightforwardly, the problem is at least two-fold, the failure of national, state and local governments to ensure that the rights of Blacks, as full members of the state, were respected, and the failure of the state to ensure that employment and educational opportunities were afforded to Blacks collectively. I contend that these problems are interrelated. There is a general lack of regard for the opinions and rights of those people who are descendants of American chattel slavery. The history of the United States is replete with examples of this lack of regard for the rights of Black people. This lack of respect was in play before there was a United States. As early as 1669, The Fundamental Constitutions of the Carolinas gave the slaveholder absolute and complete power over their African slaves. After the founding of the country, the legal sanctions and public policies regarding the social inclusion of Blacks have always had a bias toward keeping Blacks in their place, that is, no Negro could be better situated than a white person. The central problem of the United States regarding Black people after the Civil War was and still is, What to do with the Negro? The Negro Problem remains.

Let me be clear here: none of this means that there have not been whites who sought or seek to respect Blacks as fellow humans and citizens, but only to note that there has been a consistent and prevailing anti-Black bias in the

treatment of Blacks as both humans and citizens in the United States. This anti-Black bias has given rise to negative views of Blacks as persons and citizens. This anti-Black bias permeates every aspect of life in the United States. It has been particularly embedded in the educational and academic life of the country. I would hate to guess how many trees have been sacrificed to record the manner in which Black people do not measure up to white standards. All of the academic disciplines have taken their turn explaining why Blacks and Black culture are of no value and that Blacks cannot be scholars of note. For an interesting discussion on this point, read John Hope Franklin's "The Dilemma of the American Negro Scholar."<sup>1</sup> In this regard, philosophy is no different. The Black experience has not been seen as a source of philosophical exploration or enlightenment. Since philosophers are supposed to be part of the intellectual elite and their intellectual investigations are the height of intellectual acumen, only the best of humankind can be philosophers, and this means that people from marginalized groups with marginalized histories bring nothing to the academic table. Thus, there is no reason to respect these people or their experiences as having philosophical importance. The problem of race and racism continues because of a racist social climate that influences all aspects of social life in the United States, and academic philosophy is no exception.

**G. Y.:** In fact, one might argue that philosophy is one of the "whitest" of the professions in the humanities. Why is this? And can it be inferred that Black humanity is in some sense least respected in philosophy, especially historically?

**B. E. L.:** George, that is an interesting way to put the question. Why not ask, Would you argue that philosophy is one of the "whitest" of the disciplines and professions in the humanities? My answer would be yes, it is. It is the whitest in regards to the relative number of philosophers who are white, and it is the whitest in terms of the persons and areas of interest researched. Unlike the other disciplines in the humanities, there could be no call for a philosopher to teach the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, or Ida B. Wells. These scholars were not considered philosophers and thus had nothing to say about the real-world problems of philosophy. Plus, they were not white. People often teach what they were taught. Most of our professors in graduate school knew little and cared less about the people and concerns we brought to graduate school. (Alain Locke was never presented as a philosopher to study.) One should not be surprised. Philosophy as a discipline is situated in the racist history of this country. Why would white philosophers be concerned with the writings of people deemed intellectually and morally inferior? Does this mean that all white philosophers avoided issues of race and racism in the profession? No! While there have been mainstream white philosophers who took issues of race and racism seriously as subjects of study, for the most part, Black people and the Black experience have been avoided. Would I infer

that this reflects how philosophers fail to respect the humanity of Blacks? Yes. It seems as if it was thought that there was nothing in the experience of this group of humans that warranted philosophical exploration, or could bring philosophical insight. This does not mean that the Black experience should permeate every area of philosophy. There are questions of social and political philosophy and ethics that could use the insights gained from the Black experience to make moral and political theories more attuned to the social reality of many people, not just Black people. But because the prevailing way of thinking discounts the Black experience, we lose these insights. It has been mainly through the work of the African-American philosophers who came into the profession beginning about forty years ago that we see at least some acknowledgement of the Black experience as philosophically relevant. This is not to discount the handful of academically trained Black philosophers who were in the profession before the mid-1960s, but only to note that between the early 1970s and the late 1980s there were at least two handfuls of Black philosophers. Departments that had progressive white colleagues were often at the forefront of the recruitment of Blacks into the profession as colleagues and graduate students. The numbers of Black philosophers was still low. The paucity of Blacks in the profession meant that more often than not the Black philosopher was the only person of color in their department. White philosophers did not see this as strange because they had tried to get the best Black in their department, and, of course, you only need one Black to show that your department was not racist and socially concerned. These were hard times. As bad as it was for Black men, it was hell for many Black women, both as professors and graduate students. This is a story that also must be told. Fortunately, there are younger white philosophers who are trying to make the future of philosophy more inclusive on all fronts than was its history. Still, *one* might argue that historically philosophy, as an academic discipline and profession, has *worked* to maintain its “whiteness.”

**G. Y.:** Frederick Douglass endured the absurdity and dehumanization of American slavery. Given your work on Douglass, in what way does he offer a set of experiences and conceptual frames of reference that can inform philosophy?

**B. E. L.:** I think that Frederick Douglass’s life experiences do have something to tell us about the profession and the doing of philosophy. Douglass is interesting, as is anyone who lived so long and wrote so much. From his life as a slave to elder statesman, Douglass experienced the best and worst of United States history from before the Civil War to the late 1890s. Douglass’s life gives us reason to reflect on both the practice of philosophy and the profession of philosophy. First, Frederick Douglass is not often thought of as a philosopher. He is considered an abolitionist, civil rights advocate, women’s rights supporter, and humanitarian. Yet a careful reading of Douglass’s work shows that

he exhibits all of the academic attributes of a trained philosopher. This was one of the reasons I, along with Frank Kirkland, chose to do an anthology of articles by philosophers looking at the writings of Douglass as a philosopher *by philosophers*.<sup>2</sup> In part it was Douglass's commitment to arguments that were sustained and substantive that made this project possible.

Douglass in his speeches and writings reflected on the social and political status of Blacks in the United States, the meaning of racial difference, the meaning of democracy, what it means to be human, and the role of art in the push for social and racial progress. In fact, in his speech "Pictures and Progress," he notes that he is doing philosophy of art. I am in the process of working through Douglass's theory of art. I see a line of reasoning about the role of art that runs from Douglass through the works of Booker T. Washington to the aesthetic writings of Alain Locke. So not only was Douglass a philosopher, but his writings influenced later generations of Black scholars. Frederick Douglass was both an activist and a scholar.

I would contend that those in the philosophy profession did not examine his writings because it would be assumed that his writings were not philosophical. Of course, no one would take the time to read his work because it was about race, and until recently there *had not been* a sustained treatment of issues regarding race in the profession of philosophy. Issues regarding race were not the subject matter of philosophy. Rather, other areas of the humanities and the social sciences were the arenas for research on race. Douglass's work and life raise questions about who can do philosophy and what should be counted as philosophy. Those concerns still haunt Blacks in the philosophy profession today. I would suggest reading Kristie Dotson's "How Is This Paper Philosophy?"<sup>3</sup> and my paper "Philosophical Playa Hatin': Race, Respect, and the Philosophy Game,"<sup>4</sup> as examples of these concerns.

**G. Y.:** We generally ask what Martin Luther King Jr. would think about race relations in America if he were still alive. But what would Douglass think, especially within a context in which Black people continue to feel existential pain and suffering on so many indices (employment, poverty, healthcare, police profiling, etc.)?

**B. E. L.:** If Douglass were still alive, he would be 196 years old. He would have lived through the *Plessy* decision, the lynching of Black soldiers returning from WWI and WWII, the massive racial segregating of America, the *Brown* decision, *Brown II*, the Civil Rights Movement, the killing of Martin Luther King Jr., the rise of someone like Oprah, the election of President Obama, the increasing wealth disparity between Blacks and whites over the past 25 years, and the shooting of Michael Brown. What would Douglass think about the state of race relations in the United States today? Douglass was born into slavery and lived to see that horrible institution dismantled. He was, I think, at the end of his life, disappointed in the way race relations in the United States were

going. In 1871, he realized that without some form of affirmative action, qualified Blacks would not get employment; in 1888, he questioned the value of the Emancipation Proclamation; in 1890, he addressed the race problem and noted that it was not Blacks who were the problem but white attitudes toward the rights of Blacks. In 1895, a year before his death, he again addresses the problem of Blacks being upright citizens when national, state, and local governments do nothing to protect their rights. You can read his reflections in the speech “The Lessons of the Hour.” In this speech, Douglass notes that the Supreme Court has surrendered. State sovereignty has been restored, and the Republican party has become the party of money and things rather than a party of morals and justice. He concludes with the question, What next? We know what came next. The nation became more racially segregated, Jim Crow Laws, governmental sanction segregation, sundown towns and neighborhoods, lack of political protection for Black citizens, and, of course, racial violence against Blacks in the form of lynching. It may be argued that these are not the times we live in now. Douglass, I contend, understood the manner in which laws and social practices impact on the attitudes of people. Three hundred years of anti-Black thought cannot be eradicated in fifty years. Even if people want to claim that Douglass would be hopeful, it must be remembered that he would also have thought that the country could have treated Black people differently than it did. It could have treated Blacks like the full citizens they were and protected their rights and opportunities. Douglass died in 1895, and in 1896 we had the *Plessy* decision. Given this history, he might be disheartened at the current state of race relations.

**G. Y.:** Yes, but what would we make of Douglass’s hope in light of the recent killings of not only Michael Brown, but Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and now Walter Scott and Eric Harris? There is a pervasive feeling of panic and angst (across race) at this time.

**B. E. L.:** Some people look at the social and political status of Black people now and marvel as to how far the country has come in regards to race relations. I do not think that most people either know or understand the depth of anti-Black thinking in this country. Events of late have caused many Blacks and whites to re-evaluate the meaning of racial progress. Some whites feel that given all the country has done for Blacks, many Blacks seem strangely ungrateful. “Hell,” they say, “we let them into our neighborhoods, our schools, our jobs; we even let them marry our daughters. What more do they want?” On the other hand, the current level of anti-Black thought shocks many Blacks and whites. “How can these overtly racist actions be happening in 2014–2015? My God! We have a Black President of the United States!” Both of these views ignored the deeply racist history of this country and how difficult it is to overcome the impact of that history. Remember that it was only seventy years ago that *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* was

published.<sup>5</sup> By the time of its publication, Douglass had been dead for fifty years. Douglass's hope has to be seen in light of his having been born into slavery. He saw the social and political attitudes turn from supporting slavery to being anti-Black. Yet, he remained hopeful. Douglass understood that resolution of the race problem required the full political and moral weight of the United States government.

I think that you are correct that there is panic and angst across and on both sides of the racial divide. What does hope mean in these times? It depends on what you hope for and how you access the possibility of the situation hoped for to materialize. Hopes can be weak or strong. I have examined the position of Martin Luther King Jr. and Derrick Bell on hope in "The Aporia of Hope: King and Bell on the Ending of Racism,"<sup>6</sup> and would contend that King's hope, like Douglass's, was based on a belief in faith, reason, and the adhering to liberal principles of respect for the individual, along with hard social and political work would bring about the beloved community. Bell, on the other hand, had little hope that the beloved community will be established in the United States. Thus, Bell has a permanence of racism thesis. The killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and others push many people to Bell's position. Whether you agree with King or Bell, one's understanding of United States history is important. In sum, the current panic and angst is rooted in the racist history of this country that has never been addressed because of a tradition of being ahistorical when it comes to issues of race and racism.

**G. Y.:** When confronted by the "slave breaker" Covey in 1833, Douglass physically resists him. Yet, when the white abolitionist John Brown calls upon Douglass to join him in a war against white slave-holders, Douglass backs down. What has Douglass to teach us about tactics when it comes to resisting racial injustice in our contemporary moment?

**B. E. L.:** Frederick Douglass teaches us that given the history of racism in this country, people concerned with racial justice have to know when to act and when not to act. In other words, don't be stupid!

## NOTES

1. John Hope Franklin, "The Dilemma of the American Negro Scholar," in *Soon One Morning*, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Knopf, 1963).
2. Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland, *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999).
3. Kristie Dotson, "How Is This Paper Philosophy?" *Comparative Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2012): 3–29.
4. Bill E. Lawson, "Philosophical Playa Hatin' Race, Respect and the Philosophy Game," in *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 181–202.

5. Gunnar Myrdal, Richard Sterner, Arnold Marshall Rose, and Robert L. Harris, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (Norwalk: Easton Press, 1993).
6. Bill E. Lawson, "The Aporia of Hope: King and Bell on the Ending of Racism," in *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.: Critical Essays on the Philosopher King* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 321–40.





## Lucius T. Outlaw Jr.

**George Yancy:** Your work has played a major role in introducing the critical examination of race within the professional field of philosophy. Briefly, what sort of resistance did you encounter early on in terms of introducing the philosophical significance of race, and would you say there are still forms of resistance in the profession that deem philosophical treatments of race unimportant or nonphilosophical?

**Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr.:** If I interpret your question correctly, George, as asking me to comment on what resistance I encountered to my endeavoring to focus thematic philosophical efforts of analysis and critique on conceptualizations and praxes involving raciality, then I must say that your question doesn't seem to call attention to efforts on my part, efforts joined and led by more than a few others, to call attention to various ways in which investments in raciality were distorting the discipline and profession of philosophy, efforts that preceded the emergence of "philosophy of race." In my judgment, struggles against *racism* (and other impediments) in the profession of philosophy were a precursor to, and prepared the way for, the forging of discursive contexts through which a more structured and persistent subfield, "philosophy of race," has been developed. "Philosophy of race" grew, to some extent, out of efforts to forge what has become the now-multidimensional subfield of Africana philosophy. In other ways, "philosophy of race" has been part of a larger insurgent intellectual venture—antiracist "critical race theory/studies"—advanced by critical thinkers in several other disciplines (law, literary studies, political theory/philosophy, sociology, Liberation Theology, etc.). In short, it is crucial to have an understanding of the extent to which there had to be successes in antiracist struggles to win and secure the presence and legitimacy in disciplines and professions in addition to philosophy of *persons* of particular racialities (and other important identifying characteristics), persons for whom

those identities were significant for/in critical philosophizing, as the social basis for engaging in and legitimating discursive foci as disciplinary fields or subfields.

There was strong resistance to those early efforts to secure places in the profession (through appointments, reappointments, tenure, and promotions) of those waging efforts to forge and legitimate discursive contexts for Black/African-American/African/Caribbean/Africana philosophy. Of particular significance were the many years when virtually all publishers of works of philosophy that would have booths at divisional meetings of the American Philosophical Association and were approached with inquiries or formal proposals for projects that were the focus of the insurgent discourses refused, some repeatedly, to publish offered works. So, too, editors of many journals.

But, there has been substantial success, so much so that, several decades ago, the American Philosophical Association added “Africana philosophy” to its list of recognized subfields and added “Philosophy and the Black Experience” to its roster of newsletters. And today there are more works of Africana philosophy, broadly conceived, being published that I can keep up with. No small matters, these. Still, not all departments of philosophy, those with graduate programs especially, honor the recognition or publications in their curricula, hiring of new faculty, regard for publications, and so forth. Moreover, I suspect that a substantial number of professional philosophers, distinguishable to some extent by their areas of specialty and the years of their training in philosophy, continue to nurture the idea, the aspirational ideal, that philosophizing at its best is not influenced by the philosopher’s investments in raciality, a matter that is “morally irrelevant” and without “scientific” (empirical) grounding. For more than a few of these, as for many other thoughtful persons, to best be done with racism we should be done with any and all investments in raciality. Persons so persuaded continue to be resistant.

**G. Y.:** So, what would be a productive way to address those who would conflate investments in raciality with the continuation of racism?

**L. T. O. Jr.:** Well, I wouldn’t consider the situation as involving persons “conflating investments in raciality with the continuation of racism.” Rather, I think that there are particular (by no means all) investments in raciality, too often unacknowledged and/or denied, that contribute to the continuation of instances and institutionalizations of racism (i.e., invidious racial judgments and valorizations manifested in behaviors and practices), sometimes inadvertently, sometimes willfully.

Addressing such instances would require deliberately structured occasions of discussion (structured by shared commitments to regulating practices by shared principles of disciplined respect, openness, courage, and cooperation guided by the ideal of a shared mission) devoted to working together to identify, explore critically, propose renovations of, and implement and

continuously evaluate the consequences of implementations of revisions to, or eliminations of, the instances of shared life conditioned by investments in raciality that are invidious or produce invidious consequences. As well, such critical interventions would be especially productive if efforts were also devoted to identifying and fortifying all instances of shared life that currently (or during previous times and conditions) nurture and enhance shared life in positive ways for all concerned, for those, especially, who suffered from invidious investments. Of course, such explorations would also benefit from considerations of instances of shared life in other contexts (departments, programs, disciplines, institutions, organizations; in different life-worlds and cultural traditions, etc.) that critical examinations persuade those involved that there are lessons from which to learn, examples to be followed, with appropriate modifications for the situations under review.

In short: addressing such instances motivated by the shared desire—and the shared commitment—to change things for the better requires a shared commitment to shared learning, growth, and adaptive reorganization of (particular aspects of) shared life, a shared commitment, that is, to work together to foster directed personal and social coevolution.

**G. Y.:** So, for you, what are some of the “invidious racial judgments and valorizations manifested in behaviors and practices” that continue to sustain (whether deliberately or not) racism as manifested, for example, in the field of philosophy here in the US?

**L. T. O. Jr.:** An appropriate response requires knowledge growing out of empirical data regarding behaviors and practices, accumulated and analyzed systematically, drawn, at least, from a credible representative sample of persons, institutionalizations, and organizations of academic and professional philosophy, in the USA, for example. I have neither such data nor such an analysis. Nor, to my knowledge, has any organization of professional academic philosophers—the American Philosophical Association, the Society for Phenomenological and Existential Philosophy, for example—undertaken the tasks of gathering and analyzing such data in order to contribute to the development of a synthetic and diachronic empirically informed understanding of behaviors and practices, the conceptions and valorizations that give rise to and sustain (and are sustained by) behaviors and practices, constitutive of academic and professional philosophy and philosophizing. I am left, then, to take on the risks of offering considerations drawn from my limited experiences of more than four decades of engagements in academic and professional philosophy and philosophizing in the contexts of departments in colleges and universities (in four as a full-time member, in four others as a visitor); organizations (the APA and SPEP, among others: several of the organizations’ committees; being a participant and member of the audience in many, many of the organizations’ sponsored and hosted sessions); local, national,

and international conferences sponsored and hosted by various departments, institutions, and organizations.

So, then, let's begin with historical and genealogical accounts of the emergence of "philosophy" that tend to be put forward in texts and recapitulated in introductory courses in the discipline: "Philosophy began in Greece . . . subsequently spread to Europe . . . then to . . ." Such accounts tend to be more than historical when serving to valorize certain peoples/civilizations as having given unique "gifts" to the world never before produced by any other peoples/civilizations. And to the extent that "philosophy" becomes identified with the exercising of reasoning capabilities to such accomplishment as to be the realization of "Reason," then those canonized as exemplars of such reasoning serve as paradigmatic representatives of the peoples/civilizations producing the unique "gifts." The histories of such peoples/civilizations, then, of the practices of reasoning and the products thereof, have been valorized and canonized as achievements that distinguish the producers (and their practices, institutions, cultures, nations, nation-states, continental regions, peoples, races) from, and as better achievers, than all other peoples/civilizations (and their practices, institutions, cultures, nations, nation-states, continental regions, peoples, races). Such, I hazard to believe, constitutes much of the disciplinary self-understanding and professional identity-formation that are cultivated in the education/socialization organized and mediated in a great many of the departments of philosophy in our country.

To the extent that this is the case, there continue to be valorized and valorizing cultivation and mediation of invidious considerations of both favored and disfavored peoples/civilizations, the favorings and disfavorings often, I suspect, being highly correlated with invidious racial identifications and characterizations of peoples/civilizations. What tend to be regarded as basic notions of "what it is to be human" are made problematic by limited and/or distorted comparative considerations of projects of reasoning by peoples/civilizations excluded from study. Likewise for conceptions of the agendas of reasoning in the diversity of circumstances in which, across the history of the evolution of our species, humans, across successive generations, have survived and adapted. It is across the whole of the species, then, to which our careful studies of adaptive reasoning should be oriented in order to learn about learning while refining our capabilities for critical comparisons leading to fallible judgments that are to be continuously subjected to review as we make history. Such an orientation would require very substantial renovations of much of our curricula, of much of our research practice, of much of our pedagogy, of our guiding agendas for philosophizing. One of the most substantial efforts to wrestle with these matters has been taken on by Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, insights from which she shares in her *Transforming Knowledge*. Very highly recommended.

**G. Y.:** Yes. I think that Minnich's view not only questions and critiques epistemic sites that are exclusionary of other legitimate sites of knowledge production, but her view (as well as what you've argued above) raises deep philosophical anthropological issues. I recall reading recently where North Korea's state media referred to President Obama as a "wicked black monkey." And we have footage of a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri saying to a group of Black protesters, "Bring it, all you fucking animals! Bring it!" How can Black people even begin to be seen as producers of knowledge and civilization, when there is this relatively fixed image of Black people as subhuman persons?

**L. T. O. Jr.:** The economist Paul Samuelson has been credited with the insight that theory advances funeral by funeral. Similarly, a fuller appreciation of contributions by persons of African descent, to knowledge production as well, will come with the succession of older generations by newer ones comprised of persons many of whom will have been educated, formally and informally, across the full range of contexts of education, by teachers and mentors who themselves have acquired knowledge that has facilitated their cultivation of appreciations for peoples African and African-descended and their many contributions.

We are farther along in this development than in previous decades and centuries, but have a ways to go still. The electoral successes yesterday of Republicans are in important ways indicative, I believe. Republican strategists and operatives guided Republican candidates in waging successful campaigns to persuade willing voters that President Obama is a "failed leader" who has accomplished nothing worthwhile and is "bad for the country." And this after Republicans waged a successful campaign of obstruction in the US House and Senate to deny the President any significant legislative successes, a campaign that was launched over dinner in a local Washington, DC establishment while the just-inaugurated President and his wife were making the rounds attending celebratory balls.

This strategy has a long and inglorious history, and was diagnosed insightfully by Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal, who was recruited to lead the massive study of "the Negro problem" during the 1940s, the results of which were published under his editorial guidance as *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Foundational to "the Negro problem," Myrdal concluded, was white racial prejudice, the manifestations of which he understood as "dynamic causation" formally identified as a "principle of cumulation" or "vicious circle": "White prejudice and discrimination keep the Negro low in standards of living, health, education, manners and morals. This, in turn, gives support to white prejudice. White prejudice and Negro standards thus mutually 'cause' each other."<sup>1</sup>

Myrdal's conclusion, after the education he gained through the studies he directed, led him to propose the need for a "virtuous circle" as a corrective for

the “vicious circle.” He was convinced, however, that because the “dynamic causation” had many factors, no attempted corrective would be effective if directed at one factor alone, or if directed at what was thought to be the primary determining factor (economic conditions, for example). All factors had to be addressed, in a coordinated fashion, within and among all the contexts of life and social interactions: work, play, worship, entertainment, education, “manners and morals,”<sup>2</sup> and so forth. Virtually all modes of knowledge-production can be resources on which to draw, philosophy included, though there are no privileged resources in the latter to guide and structure the long, slow, renovative and replacement work. For the discipline of philosophy has had to be subjected to renovation. Here, too, the work is not finished. And it will not be finished even after the funerals that will memorialize the lives ended of my generation and those but slightly ahead of us.

**G. Y.:** But don’t you think that there is something far more racist and vicious at play here? It seems to me that the discourse of “failed leader” and “bad for the country” can function as tropes for anti-Black racism where the real charge is that it is because Obama is Black that he is really, quite frankly, “incompetent.”

**L. T. O. Jr.:** Well, George, drawing on personal and shared histories of experiences of folks African and African-descended, I have a heightened suspicion—a working hypothesis—that, indeed, for many white folks, even for many folks of color, judgments and expectations regarding particular competencies are racially construed. So it is after nearly four centuries of social constructions of realities<sup>3</sup> grounded on and shaped by ideologies of White Racial Supremacy and negro/black racial inferiority. And while important changes have produced liberating reductions and transformations in the forms and forces of such ideologies, there are continuing modalities of changed ideologies such that, perhaps, voting for Barack Obama as a presidential candidate involved, I suspect, exaggerated assessments of him and heightened expectations for his performance: he was, for many, an *exceptional* Black man, *unusually* well qualified (in part, for some folks, *because* his mother was white). When, then, his performance in any arena is judged by some as less than extraordinary, there is a quick and all-too-easy regression by some of those judging to the not-yet-eradicated presumption of racial inferiority—or, less perniciously, to a presumption of racially induced subpar competencies brought to light by subpar performance, accomplishments otherwise notwithstanding.

Such are my suspicions, my hypotheses. I need the assistance of social scientists accomplished at empirical research, social psychologists especially skilled at researching opinions and sentiments not often made explicit or even acknowledged by those harboring them, in order to determine whether my suspicions/hypotheses are cogent, or not, and for whom they are true, more or less, if at all.

**G. Y.:** Lastly, what role do you see for white philosophers (within the more immediate context of our profession) in generating forms of knowledge production toward the end of creating a less hostile space for philosophers of color? Of course, this question bleeds over into the whole of American race relations and the responsibility that white people have to engage in antiracist practices.

**L. T. O. Jr.:** All folks “white” have not, do not, take up “being white” in the same ways. Even at the heights of white racist dominance in the United States of America, there were white folks who became willful, courageous traitors to projects of impositions, institutionalizations, and perpetuations of White Racial Supremacy.

There are persons in the profession of academic philosophy who have continued these legacies of courage. The development of “Africana Philosophy” has benefitted substantially from the support of numerous white philosophers, scholar-practitioners in other disciplines, administrators in institutions of higher education, and officials in foundations and federal agencies. Already, then, the emergence of new modes of knowledge-production less constrained and less distorted by white racism is under way; so, too, the lifting up of philosophically significant articulations of insights and wisdom by Black folks heretofore unheralded in our profession. The publication of this and other interviews you have conducted with the likes of me for publication via *The Stone* is yet another milestone of these historic developments.

Meanwhile, slowly but significantly, more undergraduate and graduate students are partaking of these developments in regular and special courses; through attendance at and participation in lectures, conferences, symposia; through engagements with texts and other media; through direct encounters and engagements with white teachers who lead them into discoveries of learnings through engagements with productions of articulations and creative expressions by persons African or of African descent. Of particular significance, through several signal anthology projects, you have forged provocative queries in response to which white philosophers have drawn on their courage as well as their philosophical competencies to explore racist whiteness as contributions to disclosures that, when taken up critically, warrant revisions of attitudes, beliefs, passions, habits, and behavior such that white racism can be reduced and more respect for nonwhite peoples and persons, their life-worlds, can be forged and lived.

The very hard work of creating less hostile spaces for philosophers of color is thus well underway. I suspect—I hypothesize—that, gradually, as older generations are replaced by younger generations, funeral by funeral, more and more white philosophers will share in this challenging work.



## NOTES

1. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, [1944] 1996), 75.
2. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 75.
3. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1957).

## Cornel West

**George Yancy:** One of your newest books is entitled *Black Prophetic Fire*, which has a conversational structure. Define what you mean by ‘Black prophetic fire.’

**Cornel West:** Black prophetic fire is the hypersensitivity to the suffering of others that generates a righteous indignation that results in the willingness to live and die for freedom.

**G. Y.:** When I think of black prophetic fire, I think of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Audre Lorde, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Martin L. King Jr, James Baldwin, and so many others. In recent weeks, some have favorably compared the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates to Baldwin. I know that you publicly criticized this comparison. What was the nature of your critique?

**C. W.:** In a phone conversation I had with Brother Coates not long ago, I told him that the Black prophetic tradition is the collective fightback of sustained compassion in the face of sustained catastrophe. It has the highest standards of excellence, and we all fall short. So a passionate defense of Baldwin—or John Coltrane or Toni Morrison—is crucial in this age of Ferguson.

**G. Y.:** In what ways do you think the concept of Black prophetic fire speaks to—or ought to speak to—events like the tragic murder of nine people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina?

**C. W.:** I think in many ways we have to begin with the younger generation, the generation of Ferguson, Baltimore, Staten Island, and Oakland. There is not just a rekindling, but a reinvigoration taking place among the younger generation that enacts and enables prophetic fire. We’ve been in an ice age. If you go from the 1960s and 1970s—that’s my generation. But there was also an ice age called the neoliberal epoch, an ice age where it was no longer a beautiful thing to be on fire. It was a beautiful thing to have money. It was a beautiful thing to have status. It was a beautiful thing to have public reputation without

a whole lot of commitment to social justice, whereas the younger generation is now catching the fire of the generation of the 1960s and 1970s.

Charleston is part and parcel of the ugly manifestation of the vicious legacy of white supremacy, and the younger generation—who have been wrestling with arbitrary police power, arbitrary corporate power, gentrification, the land-grabbing, the power-grabbing in and of the black community, and arbitrary cultural power in terms of white supremacist stereotypes promoted on television, radio, and so forth—has become what I call the “marvelous new militancy,” and they embody this prophetic fire. The beautiful thing is that this “marvelous new militancy” is true for vanilla brothers and sisters; it’s true for all colors in the younger generation, though it is disproportionately Black, disproportionately women, and, significantly, disproportionately Black, queer women.

**G. Y.:** Why the metaphor of ‘fire’?

**C. W.:** That’s just my tradition, brother. Fire really means a certain kind of burning in the soul that one can no longer tolerate when one is pushed against a wall. So, you straighten your back up, you take your stand, you speak your truth, you bear your witness and, most important, you are willing to live and die. Fire is very much about fruits as opposed to foliage. The ice age was all about foliage: “Look at me, look at me.” It was the peacock syndrome. Fire is about fruits, which is Biblical, but also Marxist. It’s about praxis and what kind of life you live, what kind of costs you’re willing to bear, what kind of price you’re willing to pay, what kind of death you’re willing to embrace.

That was a great insight that Marcus Garvey had. Remember, Garvey often began his rallies with a Black man or woman carrying a sign that read, “*The Negro is not afraid.*” Once you break the back of fear, you’re on fire. You need that fire. Even if that Negro carrying that sign is still shaking, the way that the lyrical genius Kanye West was shaking when he talked about George W. Bush not caring about Black people, you’re still trying to overcome that fear, work through that fear.

The problem is that during the neoliberal epoch and during the ice age you’ve got the process of “niggerization,” which is designed to keep Black people afraid. Keep them scared. Keep them intimidated. Keep them bowing and scraping. And Malcolm X understood this better than anybody, other than Ida B. Wells—they represented two of the highest moments of Black prophetic fire in the twentieth century. Ida, with a bounty on her head, was still full of fire. And Malcolm, we don’t even have a language for his fire.

**G. Y.:** Does this process of “niggerization” in American culture partly involve white supremacist myths being internalized by Black people?

**C. W.:** Yes. When you teach Black people they are less beautiful, less moral, less intelligent, and as a result you defer to the white supremacist status quo, you rationalize your accommodation to the status quo, you lose your fire, you

become much more tied to producing foliage, what *appears* to be the case. And, of course, in late capitalist culture, the culture of superficial spectacle, driven by capital, driven by money, driven by the market, it's all about image and interest, anyway. In other words, principle drops out. Any conception of being a person of integrity is laughed at because what is central is image, what is central is interest. And, of course, interest is tied to money, and image is tied to the peacock projection, of what you appear to be.

**G. Y.:** Can we assume then that you would emphasize a form of education that would critique a certain kind of hyperrealism that is obsessed with images and nonmarket values.

**C. W.:** That's right; absolutely. It's the kind of thing that my dear brother Henry Giroux talks about with such insight. He's written many books providing such a powerful critique of neoliberal market models of education. Stanley Aronowitz, of course, goes right along with Giroux's critique in that regard. The notion has to do precisely with that critical consciousness that the great Paulo Freire talks about, or the great Myles Horton talked about, or the great bell hooks talks about in her works. How do you generate that kind of courageous critical consciousness that cuts against the grain and that discloses the operations of market interests and images, capitalist forms of wealth inequality, massive surveillance, imperial policies, drones dropping bombs on innocent people, ecological catastrophe, and escalating nuclear catastrophe?

All of these various issues are very much tied into a kind of market model of education that reinforces the capitalist civilization, one that is more and more obsessed with just interest and image.

**G. Y.:** What do you see as the foremost challenge in creating a common cause between the past generation and the current generation now "catching fire," as you put it?

**C. W.:** For me, it is the dialectical interplay between the old school and prophetic thought and action. I'm an old Coltrane disciple just like I'm a Christian. You can be full of fire, but that fire has to be lit by a deep love of the people. And if that love is not in it, then the fire actually becomes just a sounding brass and tinkling cymbal that doesn't get at the real moral substance and spiritual content that keeps anybody going, but especially people who have been hated for so long and in so many ways, as Black people have.

For me, the love ethic is at the very center of it. It can be the love ethic of James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Marvin Gaye, John Coltrane, or Curtis Mayfield, but it has to have that central focus on loving the people. And when you love people, you hate the fact that they're being treated unfairly. You tell the truth. You sacrifice your popularity for integrity. There is a willingness to give your life back to the people given that, in the end, they basically gave it to you, because we are who we are because somebody loved us anyway.

**G. Y.:** This question relates to the collection of Dr. King's writings you edited, called *The Radical King*. Why did you undertake the job of curating and editing the book?

**C. W.:** Because Martin had been so sanitized and sterilized. He has been so Santa Claus-ified, turned into an old man with a smile, toys in his bag to give out, and leaving everybody feeling so good. It was like we were living in Disneyland rather than in the nightmare that the present-day America is for so many poor working people, especially poor Black working people. So, we needed a kind of crystallization.

But there has been a variety of different voices talking about the radical King. You know my closest friend in the world, James Melvin Washington, was the only person that the King family allowed to bring the collection of sermons and writings together. Clayborne Carson was another scholar who early on published King's sermons, speeches, and writings. It's one of the greatest honors for me to be one of the few that the King family allowed to bring those kinds of writings together across the board, laying out a framework. You've got James Melvin Washington's *A Testament of Hope*. You've got other wonderful scholars like James Cone, Lewis Baldwin, and others who have done magnificent work in their own way. But, you know, as I pass off the stage of space and time, I want to be able to leave these love letters to the younger generation. I want to tell them that they're part of a great tradition, a grand tradition of struggle, critical, intellectual struggle, of moral and political struggle, and a spiritual struggle in music and the arts, and so on.

Contrary to when people talk about King every January, there is in *The Radical King* in fact a particular understanding of this moral titan, spiritual giant, and great crusader for justice. So you get a sense of who he *really* was beyond all of the sanitizing and sterilizing that are trotted out every year in celebration of him.

**G. Y.:** How does *The Radical King* compare with other books that you've written or produced?

**C. W.:** That, for me, is the most important book I've ever done. That's why I dedicated it to my blood brother who is the closest person to me in the world. He is the most Coltrane-like, Christ-like, and the most Curtis Mayfield-like person I've ever met in my life. He just happened to be the person I grew up with and slept in the same bedroom with and talked to every day. That's grace right there, brother. It's a gift. I'm not responsible for that. I just showed up.

**G. Y.:** King is well known for quoting the American reformer and abolitionist Theodore Parker's words, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." What's your assessment of King's claim now, in 2015, particularly in the light of the kind of existential plight and angst that Black people and poor people are experiencing? Is there an arc of the moral universe?

**C. W.:** I think King had a very thick metaphysics when it came to history being the canvas upon which God was in full control. As you know, I don't have such a thick metaphysics. I am closer to Anton Chekhov, Samuel Beckett, and a bluesman. I think that King at the end of his life became more of a bluesman. He began to think, "Lord, have mercy. That arc might be bending, but it sure is bending the wrong way." After all, he's dealing with white supremacist backlash, patriarchal backlash, and capitalist backlash against working people and the possibility of ecological catastrophe. He was already wrestling with the possible nonexistence of life on the earth in terms of the nuclear catastrophe that we were on the brink of. So, he made a leap of faith grounded in a certain conception of history that was heading toward justice. I don't accept that. I just do it because it's right. I do it because integrity, honesty, and decency are in and of themselves enough reward that I'd rather go under, trying to do what's right, even if it has no chance at all. Or, if it has the chance of a snowball in hell, I'll do it anyway. I'm not a consequentialist in that sense, either theologically or politically or anything else. So, my view is much, much darker than brother Martin's view. It's just that he and I made the same leap, where the leap has to do with telling the truth, bearing witness, and dealing with whatever scars and bruises that go along with it. It's a process of trying to listen to critics, but also, keeping track of the "sell-out" folk who demonize you. I go right back at them and pull the cover from over their own hypocrisy, mendacity, and their willingness to defer to the powers that be.

**G. Y.:** I was thinking about your existentialist sensibilities that would in fact be critical of the claim that the universe is moral at all. Yet, both you and King share a blues sensibility that places emphasis on touching the pain and yet transcending the pain, and also the importance of the Christian good news.

**C. W.:** Oh, absolutely, we are both very similar in terms of never allowing hatred to have the last word, not allowing despair to have the last word, telling the truth about structures of domination of various sorts, keeping track of the variety of forms of oppression so we don't become ghettoized and tied to just one single issue. Yet, at the same time, we're trying to sustain hope by being a hope. Hope is not simply something that you have; hope is something that you are. So, when Curtis Mayfield says, "Keep on pushing," that's not an abstract conception about optimism in the world. That is an imperative to be a hope for others in the way Christians in the past used *to be* a blessing—not the idea of praying for a blessings, but *being* a blessing.

John Coltrane says *be* a force for good. Don't just talk about forces for good; be a force. So it's an ontological state. So, in the end, all we have is who we are. If you end up being cowardly, then you end up losing the best of your world, or your society, or your community, or yourself. If you're courageous, you protect, try, and preserve the best of it. Now, you might preserve the best, and

still not be good enough to triumph over evil. Hey, that's the way it is. You did the best you could do. T. S. Eliot says, "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

**G. Y.:** Indeed. When it comes to race in America in 2015, what is to be done?

**C. W.:** Well, the first thing, of course, is you've got to shatter denial, avoidance, and evasion. That's part of my criticism of the president. For seven years, he just hasn't or refused to hit it head-on. It looks like he's now beginning to find his voice. But in finding his voice, it's either too late or he's lost his moral authority. He can't drop drones on hundreds of innocent children and then talk about how upset he is when innocent people are killed. You can't reshape the world in the image of corporate interest and image with Trans-Pacific Partnership and then say that you're in deep solidarity with working people and poor people. You can't engage in massive surveillance, keeping track of phone calls across the board, targeting Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning and others, and then turn right back around and say you're against secrecy, you're against clandestine policy.

So that, unfortunately, if he had come right in and asserted his moral authority over against Fox News, over against right-wing, conservative folk who were coming at him—even if he lost—he would have let the world know what his deep moral convictions are. But he came in as a Machiavellian. He came in with political calculation. That's why he brought in Machiavellians like Rahm Emanuel and Larry Summers, and others. So, it was clear it was going to be political calculation, not moral conviction.

How can anyone take your word seriously after seven years about how we need to put a spotlight on racism when, for seven years, you've been engaged in political calculation about racism? But then you send out your lieutenants. You send out all your Obama cheerleaders and bootlickers and they say to his critics that he is president of all of America, not black America. And we say white supremacy is a matter of truth. Are you interested in truth? It's a matter of justice. Are you interested in justice? It's a matter of national security. Are you interested in national security? Well, we talk about Black America. We're not talking about some ghettoized group that's just an interest group that you have to engage in political calculation about. When you talk about Black people, you're talking about wrestling with lies and injustice coming at them and their quest for truth and justice. If you're not interested in truth and justice, no politician ought to be in office, and not just the president. And that's true in our classrooms, as you know. Should we study Black history, or brown history, indigenous people? Are you interested in truth and knowledge and justice? Then you're going to have to come to terms with them. You're not doing us a favor. You're talking about your commitment to truth. Well, the same is true for the President. So, we've actually had a major setback in seven years; a lost opportunity.

One of the grandest public intellectuals, brother David Bromwich, said it so well in “What Went Wrong,” which is published in *Harper’s Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> What a lost opportunity we’ve had for progressives and for people concerned with poor people and working people. Look at the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Five hundred babies killed in fifty days and the President can’t say a mumbling word? And not a politician can say a mumbling word? What kind of moral authority can anybody have, if you can’t say a word? “Well, that’s the way American politics is.” No, no, no, we know we’ve got Jewish brothers and sisters willing to engage in critique of vicious Israeli occupation and bomb-dropping on innocent people. They’re human beings, too. And if they are not willing to come to terms with it, let them engage in an argument, but you have to make the effort. That’s part of my being so upset about brother Martin being in the Oval Office. You can’t have Martin staring at you every day and you’re losing moral authority in regard to drones, Wall Street, massive surveillance. Being re-elected and talking about race after seven years. I would say that even when it comes to our precious gay brothers and lesbian sisters and bisexuals and trans-folk. It was just three years ago that both Hillary Clinton and Obama were defending the Marriage Act. And then finally, when they were pushed because Joe Biden made his move. No, no, take a moral stand! Is it right or is it wrong? How are the states going to deal with it if in fact you’re taking a moral stand and you know they have a right to equality, and you know they have a right to have their dignity affirmed, then the federal government ought to come in. “No, it’s a matter of the polls.” We’re back to Machiavellian calculation again. And, you know, the gay brothers and lesbian sisters know this. You either take a stand or you don’t. You can’t just ride the wave at the end when the movement is successful. That’s just wrong. And for me, that’s what prophetic fire is all about. And then people say, “Well, that sounds self-righteous. You do understand how American politics functions. You have to grow up to come to terms with the limits of any historical situation.” I say, BS. If that were the case we’d still be enslaved, women would still be dealing with patriarchal households, and workers would still be unorganized. We can go right down the row in terms of the various struggles for freedom around the world. Colonized people would still be dealing with empires on their backs. You’ve got to be willing to try to tell the truth, engaging in witness bearing, organizing, and then, in the end, pass it on to the next generation. The greatest example, of course, is W. E. B. Du Bois. The greatest, the best, is Du Bois, and where did Du Bois end up? 31 Grace Court, Brooklyn Heights. One major visitor, a giant named Paul Robeson, was under house arrest in Philadelphia. Both of them, pariahs; viewed as people who lost their minds because they wanted to tell the truth. The world is still trying to catch up with Du Bois and Robeson, even as I speak, in terms of their critique of capitalist civilization, their critique of how deep white supremacy cuts. And they were concerned about the Dalit people in India, working people and poor people in Tel Aviv as



well as the plight of Palestinians. They had a universal and humanistic orientation, but it led them to cut so radically against the grain that we're still trying to catch up. See, that's my tradition right there. And Du Bois was wrong about the Soviet Union, no doubt about that. But I'm talking about their critique of capitalism which we're still coming to terms with, even today.

**G. Y.:** But is it really possible to speak courageous speech while acting as the most powerful country in the world? Of course, we also have to admit the history of racism preceded Obama's tenure and will exceed it. My point is that there is a deep tension that exists for someone who desires to embody prophetic fire and yet be in charge of an empire.

**C. W.:** I think that's true for most politicians, actually. Now when it comes to the intellectuals who rationalize their deference to the politician, so they want to pose as prophetic even though they are very much deferential to the powers that be, they need to be criticized in a very intense way. That's why I'm very hard on the Obama cheerleaders, you see, but when it comes to the politicians themselves, *it is* very difficult to be a prophetic politician the way in which Harold Washington was or the way Paul Wellstone was or the way Shirley Chisolm was, or the way my dear brother Bernie Sanders actually is. He is a prophetic politician. He speaks the truth about wealth and equality. He speaks the truth about Wall Street. He speaks the truth about working and poor people being afterthoughts in terms of the kind of calculations of the oligarchs of our day. He shows that it's possible to be a politician who speaks the truth.

Once you occupy the White House, you are head of the empire. Then you have a choice. We've had two grand candidates in the history of the United States. We've had Abraham Lincoln and we've had Franklin D. Roosevelt. Both of them are full of flaws, full of faults, full of many, many blind spots. But they pushed the American experiment in a progressive way, even given their faults. And that's what we thought Obama was going to do. We were looking for Lincoln, and we got another Clinton, and that is in no way satisfying.

That's what I mean by, we were looking for a Coltrane and we ended up getting a Kenny G. You can't help but be profoundly disappointed. But also ready for more fightback in post-Obama America!

## NOTE

1. David Bromwich, "What Went Wrong? Assessing Obama's Legacy," *Harper's Magazine*, June 2015, <http://harpers.org/archive/2015/06/what-went-wrong/>.

# Kwame Anthony Appiah

**George Yancy:** How did you become interested, philosophically, in the question of race? Did it grow out of something like a conceptual problem of reference, or did it come more out of lived experience? Or, perhaps this disjunction is a false start?

**Kwame Anthony Appiah:** I'm always skeptical when intellectuals give accounts of how they came about their interests! So you should take what I have to say as a set of hypotheses about my own past, not as the results of introspection, which yields nothing about this.

When I first started teaching in the United States in 1981, I had a joint appointment at Yale, in African and African-American studies, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other, and I was casting about for things to do on the African and African-American side of my work, both as a teacher and as a scholar. I had been an undergraduate student at Cambridge in medical sciences for one year, and philosophy for two, and I was puzzled, as a newcomer to the United States, by the fact that many people appeared to think "race" was a biological concept, whereas I had been taught in my brief career in the life sciences to think it was not.

So I looked to see what there was of a philosophical sort to teach on this topic and discovered not very much. And since "race" was a rather central concept in the field of African-American Studies, it seemed to me that thinking a bit about it was a contribution that someone with my training could make.

Since my dissertation had been in the philosophy of mind and language, issues about reference seemed like one thing to take up, but I began mostly with explorations that were less technical, just trying to get across why it was that the life sciences had given up on race and what the best conceptual and empirical evidence suggested about whether they were right. Eventually I got to see that the concept had a life in many fields—or rather that many concepts

travel under the flag of the word “race.” So I’ve written about it as a topic in literary studies as well as in biology, the social sciences and metaphysics.

**G. Y.:** In your new book, *Lines of Descent*, you write that W. E. B. Du Bois saw himself as an American and a Negro (as opposed to an African-American). You state correctly how being an “American” and being a “Negro” did not fit well for him. I’m reminded of Du Bois’s encounter in *The Souls of Black Folk* with the tall (white) newcomer and how she refused to exchange visiting cards with him and how this signified early on in his life a deep tension in his sense of “racial” identity.<sup>1</sup> Do you think contemporary African-Americans also find themselves possessed by, as Du Bois describes it, “two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps them from being torn asunder”?<sup>2</sup>

**K. A. A.:** I think that Du Bois’s way of thinking about this, which was informed by nineteenth-century German social philosophy, can be put like this: each people, each *Volk*, has a soul, a *Geist*, that is the bearer of a folk culture and of what he called spiritual “strivings.” American Negroes were possessed of the soul of America and the soul of the Negro. Since America’s folk culture was racist, they were possessed by a spirit that was, in some respects, hostile to them. The Negro soul gave them the resources for a positive sense of self, which helped to resist this, but it also gave them various other gifts.

I don’t believe in the *Volksgeist* myself. (Big surprise.) So I would translate all this into perhaps less exciting terms. But to begin with I’d have to challenge one of the tendencies of this German Romantic line of thought—which is to think that there’s a kind of wholeness and homogeneity to the collective soul. Because it seems to me that Black identity in America brings with it a whole host of contradictory forces, which are not easily parsed either as American or as Black. And how they play out for you depends on other things about who you are—a woman, a skilled laborer, a philosopher, a bisexual, a Catholic, and so on.

But there are surely many contemporary Black Americans who are taken up in an American concern for individuality but frustrated by the undeniable obstacles to success for Black people in a way that most Americans can’t be. (Though Hispanics, I think, increasingly are as well.) And similarly, many Black Americans draw on Black traditions of community, based in churches and mosques, that are thicker than much white religiosity. So, though I don’t think it’s the case that you can parse African-American life as *one* tension between the two sides of the hyphen, I do think that there clearly are characteristic sources of racial storm and stress, but that class and gender and other factors mean that it’s a different story for different subgroups.

**G. Y.:** Even if one agrees, as I do, that there is not really anything like a “collective Negro soul”—and especially not in the metaphysical sense—isn’t there a way we can still hold on to something like “Black identity”? In other words, aren’t there ways in which to be Black in America is based upon shared

traditions of resistance, shared pain and angst, shared assumptions about things like the racial policing of our bodies or white supremacy, and so on?

**K. A. A.:** One reason I'm a nominalist about identities is that you can say that there's a shared label, then say that what it does, both in the mind of the bearer and in her treatment by others, has elements that are shared and elements that are distinct. So what makes the identity *one* identity is its label, I think, more than what is done with them.

Similar complexities surround the idea of a Black culture. Black Americans can certainly draw on cultures transmitted within communities of Black people, and those cultural traditions may have elements shared across the board. Black adults, for example, tend to teach Black children ways to handle American racism. The Black label explains part of why they do this: bearing the label brings with it the risk of racist responses. So we could then say that teaching kids to deal with racism is part of Black culture.

Then there's the equally vexed issue of shared experiences. The sense in which a Black American in New York now shares the pain of the lynch victim in Georgia one hundred years ago is importantly figurative rather than literal. And it is a difficult question how much Booker T. Washington shares the traditions of resistance of Frederick Douglass. An idea, a practice, a response can be marked as Black in various ways, without its being shared among Black people. The advantage of abandoning the *Volksgeist* is that we can ask what is and isn't actually shared.

**G. Y.:** I'm also thinking about Du Bois's essay "The Souls of White Folk," where he says he is "singularly clairvoyant" when it comes to understanding white people.<sup>3</sup> "White folk" isn't just a nominal concept here; it has political, psychological, and existential content. His claim about knowing the ways of white folk is an epistemic claim that is grounded upon his own identity as an oppressed Black person who is part of a suffering group, one who rides the Jim Crow car, but who in his clairvoyance also sees what I don't think we want to deny—that is, a collective white supremacist *identity*. What do you think?

**K. A. A.:** One thing that I think is absolutely true in Du Bois's remark is the recognition that the oppressed often have a deeper understanding of the lives of oppressors than vice versa, because they have to make sense of the powerful to survive. (If you want to know how the marriage of a person with servants is going, don't ask their friends; ask the servants.) But again, I'd be a nominalist about white identity. And I'd agree that the role of whiteness in white supremacy is part of the story. But John Brown, like many other white abolitionists, wasn't participating in the supremacist narrative; he was trying to undo it. So while white people share an identity, it isn't going to follow that they share an agenda, or beliefs or values in virtue of that fact.

**G. Y.:** You also wrote in *Lines of Descent* that Du Bois would say that the race concept should be retained, or that a Black identity should be preserved, until

justice and freedom reigns on earth.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this seems to confine Black identity to a kind of master-slave relationship; once the white master disappears, there will be no need for a Black identity. Do you think there are legitimate ways in which Black people can hold on to their “racial identities” after, let’s say, the collapse of white supremacy? Isn’t Black identity certainly more than being forced to ride the Jim Crow car or being disproportionately profiled by white police officers?

**K. A. A.:** I think it would take an imagination more powerful than mine to know what would be possible once white supremacy came to an end everywhere. Identities shift their meanings all the time, and a Black identity in a world without white supremacist institutions or practices would undoubtedly mean something different. What would happen to the way the identity relates to transnational forms—Pan-Africanism, Black churches—and how it would change within our country would be worked out by real people in real time. So while racism gives Black and white identities a central role in their particular current inflections, who knows what they would mean in a future without racism?

And even in the present, as you say, the meaning of the Black label for particular people and communities has to do with a great deal more than the experience of racial insult and injustice. We have vibrant Black cultures in music, film, literature, sport, dance, the visual arts, and one’s relation to these forms is psychologically and sociologically mediated by a Black identity. You can think of these things as “ours” through the Black label, the Black identity. And there’s no obvious reason why any of this would stop just because we got, say, institutionalized racism under control.

**G. Y.:** There are not enough John Browns fighting against white supremacy (even if one disagrees with his method) and all the subtle ways in which it has continued to exist. To invoke Du Bois again, how have you experienced what he says is an unasked question—How does it feel to be a problem? And in what ways do you personally negotiate that question and what it implies?

**K. A. A.:** Well, I should begin by saying that I think that a background of class privilege on both sides of my family has protected both my sisters and me from some of the worst challenges of living in a racist world. (They have also had the advantage of living much of their lives in various parts of Africa!) I was born in London but moved with my family to Ghana when I was one. My sisters were all born there. When I was an undergraduate at college in England, Skip Gates and I and a Nigerian philosophy student we knew were the only Black people in our college. But I had white upper-middle-class high-school friends and upper-middle-class English cousins around, so I guess I didn’t feel that there was any question as to my right to be there, and I don’t think anyone else thought so either. (And I wouldn’t have cared if they did!)

As a young person in Ghana, many people I met in my daily life in my hometown knew my family, and knew why I was brown and not Black. They knew my mother was an Englishwoman (and white) and my father was Ashanti (and Black). And throughout my childhood in Ghana, the Asantehene, the king of Ashanti, whose capital was my hometown, was my great-uncle by marriage. (To those who didn't know me, though, I was a "*broni kokoo*," a "red [skinned] foreigner"; "*broni*" is often mistranslated these days as "white person.") So, in a way, the most interesting "problem" for me, having been in America and then an American citizen for much of my adult life (since 1997), has been how to figure out a Black identity having come from two places where my color had a very different significance.

One of the things that I have always been most grateful to this country for is the sense of welcome I have often felt from African-Americans as a person of African descent. There's no necessity about this: my ancestors—and not so many generations back—were in the business of capturing and selling other Black people into the Atlantic slave trade (and some of my mother's kinfolk back then were no doubt in the business of buying and shipping them). So one thing that race does in the world is bring Black people together in spite of these divided histories. But I suppose that the main effect of my being Black has been to draw me to Black subject matter, Black issues, and to give me an interest—in both senses of the term, an intellectual engagement and a stake—in pursuing them. Without this connection to the world of Africa and her diaspora I would just be someone else.

**G. Y.:** One central premise or conviction of cosmopolitanism, which you wrote about in your book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, is that all human lives matter. Yet in 2015 we continue to witness the need to declare "Black Lives Matter." Has America failed to embrace this conviction when it comes to Black people and other "strangers"?

**K. A. A.:** No society has yet lived up to the principle that everybody matters. Our American failures have indeed been around race and gender and religion and sexual orientation and disability, but we mostly move in the right direction over the long haul, though too slowly for anyone who cares about this principle. It ought, by the way, to worry morally serious conservatives that conservatism has been on the wrong side of so many of the struggles around these issues, even when they have eventually come round. Our defections are particularly scandalous, I think, because we *began* with the proposition that we're all created equal.

It is just preposterous that in 2015 we have to be in the business of insisting that Black Lives Matter. It ought not to be necessary to say that the relative invisibility of Black suffering and the racially oppressive character of our institutions, especially as they face the Black poor, is a huge problem. But it is necessary, alas. And surely one of the greatest scandals in the world today

is the fact that the “home of the free” has more people incarcerated per capita than any other nation—OK, except the Seychelles islands—and while less than half of our prisoners are (non-Hispanic) Blacks, you’ve got to believe that the general indifference to this vast prison population has something to do with its racial composition. What kind of person would want to live in a society where half the male population has been arrested at least once by the time they’re in their mid-twenties, which is the situation for African America? (Actually, what kind of country has arrested more than a third of its male population of any race by that age?) I think the general tolerance for the level of poverty in this very rich country is probably connected with the association of poverty with Black people as well. So, as Du Bois pointed out a long time ago, among the victims of American racism are many of the white poor. My blood pressure literally rises in indignation whenever I think about the depraved indifference of too many of our politicians and too much of our media to these problems. I’ve argued (in *The Honor Code*) that patriotism is above all about having a stake in the honor of your country. So let me put it this way: on these questions, we Americans should be ashamed of ourselves.

**G. Y.:** I’m sure you are aware that the South Carolina police officer Michael Slager has been charged with the murder of Walter Scott, a Black male, after a video of Slater shooting Scott in the back as he fled surfaced on the Internet. Some see this as a kind of turning point in the situation between white police officers and Black people in the United States. Do you?

**K. A. A.:** We’ll see. Certainly, the response of the authorities in the town has so far been exemplary. But this was a very extreme case. An independent witness filmed the whole thing. The murder involved shooting a man in the back, a man who posed no threat because he was clearly running away. Officer Slager seems to have lied about what happened, and appears, in the video, to have planted evidence. So, of course, it’s a good thing that he will be charged and tried—and, of course, his trial, just to be clear, should start with the presumption of innocence—but I don’t know that the evidence will be so overwhelming the next time something like this happens. Without that iPhone video, it might just have been another case where the cop claimed self-defense. So who knows if a prosecutor or a grand jury would have believed him.

Of course, we’ll never know for sure what would have happened. Maybe the bullets in the back fired from a distance would have worried the coroner, but there have been more than two hundred shootings of suspects, both Black and white, by police in South Carolina in the last five years; only a few have been investigated, and there has not been one conviction of an officer. Still, one story often helps people to understand what a whole lot of argument doesn’t. So, let’s hope that this story helps people understand why too many Black people are right not to trust too many police officers. Then, perhaps, we can develop the political will to do something about it.

## NOTES

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, with introductions by Nathan Hare and Alvin F. Poussaint (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, [1903] 1982).
2. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*.
3. W. E. B. Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, and David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Macmillan, 1995).
4. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Lines of Descent: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).





# Clevis Headley

**George Yancy:** At what point in your philosophical training did you realize that race was an important philosophical concept that needed to be clarified?

**Clevis Headley:** I first came to the realization that race was an important philosophical concept in need of clarification after I became disillusioned by the complacent declarations by philosophers and other intellectuals that the concept of race is both semantically and ontologically illegitimate. Among other things, I came to realize that these thinkers were uncritically invoking various problematic assumptions about meaning and reference. Indeed, while employing naïve realist convictions about the relation between language and the world, those in the grips of this uncritical realism glibly denounce the concept of race, arguing that the term 'race' fails to designate an independent entity in the world. Accordingly, they argue that, since the concept of race is ontologically vacuous, it is also semantically empty. It was this kind of uncritical philosophizing about race that led me to the realization that it is important to develop an approach to concept formation and use that is favorable to socio-historical/cultural concepts such as race. Put differently, formal, abstract analyses of the concept of race distort and render invisible the historical, existential, and experiential features of the concept of race. Any philosophical analysis or approach to race that is blind to its historical, existential, and experiential realities is philosophically derelict.

It should be noted that there are some courageous philosophers who actively pursue other approaches to race. These philosophers, convinced about the philosophical relevance of race, provide stimulating and insightful examples of concrete and existential phenomenological studies of race and racism. Two of these outstanding philosophers are you and Lewis Gordon.

**G. Y.:** Do you think that professional philosophy is still resistant to treating race and racism as legitimate philosophical concerns? If so, why? I recall that

as an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh, there was no philosophical treatment of race. So, perhaps there is something specific about the philosophical legitimation practices in analytic philosophy that avoids race.

**C. H.:** Yes, I do believe that professional philosophy is still resistant to treating race and racism as legitimate philosophical concerns. There are a number of reasons for this resistance. First, within professional analytic philosophy, there exists the ideological contention that “real philosophy” deals only with perennial philosophical problems. Since the concept of race is not a perennial philosophical problem, analytic philosophers do not consider it to be a legitimate philosophical concern. In other words, to the extent that race is, among other things, a historical and cultural problem, those analytical philosophers who are philosophical purists do not involve themselves with race. Second, analytic philosophers have not promoted a “race industry” in philosophy because of the long-held conviction that the concept of race is a vague concept and one that is so obviously flawed that there is nothing of philosophical significance to be gained from philosophical studies of race. Third, analytic philosophers are also inclined to resist treating race and racism as legitimate philosophical concerns because of their uncritical loyalty to liberalism. An unthinking allegiance to the liberal mantra that society is an aggregate of autonomous, atomistic, rational, and free individuals has led many philosophers to conclude that, since individuals are socially and ontologically primary, all that is necessary is to extend to all individuals the same sets of rights. This conviction has led to a full embrace of color blindness as a norm. In turn, the norm of color blindness has enabled philosophers to argue that race or racial determinations are philosophically irrelevant, in so far as they do not capture the true essence of individuals, namely rationality and autonomy. Again, both race and racism are considered analytically and theoretically exhausted as determined by the liberal paradigm. Thus, race and racism do not qualify for any special philosophical attention, since liberalism has already supplied the vocabulary and conceptual framework for dealing with race and racism. Any philosophical interest in race and racism is thus not considered to be bona fide or pure philosophy but mere applied philosophy, at best.

**G. Y.:** What must be done at the level of rethinking the Western philosophical canon in order to trouble the philosophical biases against race as a philosophically rich phenomenon?

**C. H.:** In order to trouble the philosophical biases against race as a philosophically rich phenomenon, a number of strategies must be pursued: (1) We need to radically rethink traditional notions about ontology. Instead of grounding our ontology upon notions of permanence, sameness, identity, and so forth, we need to embrace ontological assumptions that are historically informed, that are sensitive to time, process, development, and change. (2) Rather than embrace the traditional conviction that our ontology must be consistent with

classical Aristotelian logic, we need to investigate the philosophical merit of the Hegelian notion that logic and ontology are complementary. (3) We need to rethink traditional assumptions about the meaningfulness of concepts. Thus, on the traditional view, a concept is legitimate if its application does not violate the law of the excluded middle or the law of bivalence. (4) Rather than denouncing concepts whose application violates these laws as being vague, we need to better understand the ways in which vagueness is not a defect of socio-historical/cultural concepts. (5) We also need to cultivate a greater appreciation for the pragmatic, contingent, and historical character of concept formation and use. In other words, instead of viewing concepts as naming transcendent essences or as being legitimate when they satisfy the norms of scientific usage, we need to focus more on the complex practices of concept construction and application, from the perspective of actual human existence. To this end, our analysis of concepts should develop either a philosophical morphology or, from a different perspective, a chemistry of concept formation, and (6) the sort of philosophical naturalism championed by John Dewey would create an atmosphere in which philosophers could pursue the sorts of interdisciplinary activities that would enable philosophers to escape the obsession with a priori methods so often incapable of capturing the dynamic reality of race.

**G. Y.:** Given that the professional field of philosophy continues to be largely white and male, do you see a connection between this demographic, on the one hand, and the resistance to or silence regarding race as philosophically relevant, on the other?

**C. H.:** If one subscribes to the view that racial, gender, class, and other so-called contingent factors are irrelevant both to being a person and to the discipline of philosophy, then one would have to deny the existence of any connection between the predominance of white males in philosophy and the resistance to race as philosophically relevant. I hold the view that individuals are neither disembodied beings, totally removed from culture, nor totally determined by cultural, racial, or historical factors. Rather, individuals must critically negotiate with a socio-historical/cultural world. They must critically interact with the socio-historical/cultural world, in which they find themselves, and this world in turn influences individuals. This kind of inescapable dialectical exchange entails that the biographies of individuals are not existentially irrelevant. Indeed, the existential structure of their biography influences their philosophical interests. Again, because of the complex narrative histories that shape and facilitate individuals' efforts to make sense of their existence, this kind of narrative intelligibility cannot be mechanically erased when one becomes a philosopher.

It seems then that philosophy is the kind of discipline that should embrace and aggressively promote epistemological pluralism. If, as Wilfrid Sellars

maintains, “the aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term,”<sup>1</sup> then it follows that philosophy would be better served by the kind of demographic diversity that could guarantee the posing of new and different questions, as well as the creation of novel research agendas by persons from different narrative traditions. Hence, epistemological pluralism is not a call for philosophical fragmentation or for the end of philosophy; rather, it is a call for the flourishing of plural epistemological paradigms. Demographic pluralism should encourage the kind of epistemological pluralism in which philosophers could creatively and imaginatively interact by seeking cross-fertilization of philosophical practice, questioning, and investigation. Epistemological monism encourages philosophical illiteracy regarding race and racism. A literate pluralism, on the other hand, would create conditions for the cultivation of meaningful knowledge about race and racism and, in the words of Lewis Gordon, would put an end to the current “disciplinary decadence”<sup>2</sup> that encourages lost knowledge concerning race and racism.

**G. Y.:** I agree with your critique of society as *not* being an aggregate of autonomous, atomistic, rational, and free individuals. I tend to stress the heteronomous, the socially embedded nature of who we are. As someone who teaches courses on race, how do you engage students, especially white students, who tend to have already been seduced by the Horatio Alger narrative, to rethink their identities in ways that trouble a neoliberal, atomic understanding of the white self?

**C. H.:** First of all, since people find it difficult to discuss race, I always attempt to put my students at ease. Indeed, the effort to unsettle the notion of being a self-sustaining individual entails debunking aspects of a social mythology concerning, among other things, the ways in which one fulfills one’s ambitions. The challenge to invite students to rethink their identities in ways that trouble a neoliberal, atomic understanding of the white self requires that one turn to history. I explain to students that although they did not participate in the original decision to use race as a category of exclusion and inclusion, and as a basis for political, social, and economic participation, they, nevertheless, were born into a world structured on the basis of race. The fact that they played no role in the original creation of what Charles Mills calls the racial contract does not mean that they can arbitrarily opt out of the racial contract. One can easily nullify the terms of a legal contract if one has good reasons to believe that it is not in his/her interest to uphold the terms of the contract. However, an individual cannot simply opt out of the racial contract simply by declaring that he/she does not believe in race and does not want to be considered as being white. Objectivities, such as racial identities, do not easily lend themselves to isolated individual protestation and elimination. As I referenced above, I emphasize the importance

of critical negotiation in terms of how one must deal with realities not of our own choosing.

Hence, the turn to history is necessary in order to enable white students to understand that although white individuals are represented as race-less, whiteness is an identity, that is, a historically constructed identity. To be more specific, I utilize history to establish that the significance of whiteness is not exclusively biological or for that matter metaphysical, but ontological in the manifold sense of whiteness as property, a very suggestive metaphor pioneered by Cheryl Harris. Here Harris emphasizes, among other things, the historical fact that the possibility of accumulating property required that one first be recognized as white. This phenomenon was made possible by constitutional fiat, not by biology, by nature, or even by God. Again, the retreat to history is to make clear to students that dominant narratives about self-made individuals are decontextualized constructions that distort the historical background of how and why certain groups enjoyed abundant success and why other groups are confined to situations of subordination.

**G. Y.:** How do you respond to white students who argue that they didn't own slaves and therefore can't be responsible for perpetuating racial injustice? I imagine that the atomic conception of the self is also operating within such contexts.

**C. H.:** It is indeed true that the atomic conception of the self is immediately invoked by some whites in protestations against any possible charges of responsibility for racial injustice. As a matter of fact, even the very notion of responsibility is contaminated with the ontological pretensions of atomistic individualism. The argument goes: if it is true that individuals are responsible only for their actions, then only the concept of individual responsibility makes sense. Consequently, if an individual did not directly participate in slavery, he or she has no responsibility for the historical consequences of slavery. Only perpetrators of harm are responsible for compensating the victims of the harm. Since current whites did not own slaves, they are not responsible for the racial injustices of slavery.

Alternatively, while adamantly invoking individual responsibility, students often express their support for the idea that it is impossible for there to be any coherent notion of collective, generational, or historical responsibility. Since the notion of collective, generational, or historical responsibility is incoherent, the only viable sense of responsibility is individual responsibility. Accordingly, one can hide behind the notion of individual responsibility to nullify individual responsibility for the actions of the distant past even if one lives in a society that functions in a way that accords one benefits resulting from historical injustice.

From another perspective, denying any responsibility for perpetuating racial injustice is possible if one actively embraces the phenomenon of

blindness to history. Blindness to history not only explains why individual whites view themselves as not culpable for perpetuating racial injustice but also the fact that they are the beneficiaries of past racial injustice. Hence, I attempt to enable students to acknowledge and to appreciate the extent to which history is real and how it effects the present and shapes the future. Of course, my attempt to reach students, as you know and already appreciate, is not a matter of promoting absurd views. Rather, the goal is to get them to critically confront the past or use the past to illuminate the present. The challenge then is to help white students to become ethically aware such that they can think critically about how they can transform the world for the better. Here taking responsibility for the past is a matter of seeking to obtain a greater understanding of how the past inserts itself into the present. It is also a matter of appreciating that a failure to understand the persistence of history is not a sign of liberation and autonomy but, rather, of rendering oneself a prisoner of the past, even becoming vulnerable to the possibility of suffering blindness to history as a terminal existential condition.

**G. Y.:** I've also heard from white Americans who say, "Look, I have no power. I'm poor." How do we address such claims while also trying to make the case for white privilege?

**C. H.:** While clearly understanding that there are differences of class between Blacks, as well as differences of class among whites, the simple response to claims of common victimhood or parity of suffering is to point out the complexities of unjustifiable differences in treatment between Blacks and whites as they respectively interact with and negotiate the dominant institutions of society. For example, we know that because of the phenomenon of implicit bias, a white single mother is more likely to be viewed as deserving of assistance than a Black single mother.

A second response is to utilize the notion of "false equivalence" to explain the mistaken attempt to locate all individuals on the same social and political plane, all in the name of formal equality. There exists abundant empirical evidence indicating that persistent differences separate a Black society from a white society. Here I am thinking about Andrew Hacker's *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*. Hacker points out that being white is a major privilege in American society and that despite how degraded the life of a white individual, that white individual would not seriously consider voluntarily becoming a black individual.<sup>3</sup> Hacker intimates that most whites attribute great value to their whiteness and would not easily surrender their whiteness. Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* chronicles the severe racial inequalities perpetrated by the criminal justice system. And, finally, we learn from *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*, by Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, the extent to which race plays a vital role in shaping the views of

white Americans on outstanding political matters. Again, it is necessary to keep in mind that blind faith in or uncritical allegiance to individualism prevents people from understanding the extent to which the complexities of the political, economic, and social world cannot be semantically reduced to mere individual initiative. We know that the neighborhood that you are born into determines the quality of one's early education, and we know that one's early education will determine one's success in college and ultimately one's professional success. However, since whites and Blacks live in segregated communities and since white communities have greater access to more resources than do Black communities, individual initiative is not potent enough to consistently overcome these structural barriers. Some scholars have used the term 'hoarding' to explain why whites tend to have greater access to resources and opportunities than Blacks. In other words, our residential patterns facilitate the ability of whites to hoard opportunities and resources, hence exposing the idea of there being total racial equality.

I want to end my response to this question by introducing the notion of an epistemology of ignorance that some philosophers have used to explain why whites would see themselves as not having power and as being just as poor as Blacks. Many thinkers have interpreted the notion of an epistemology of ignorance as an attempt by whites to claim not to know what they should know or deliberately refusing to unlearn certain things in order to maintain power. In other words, a white individual can believe that racial discrimination does not exist and that whites and Blacks are treated equally in society. However, when confronted with evidence concerning the great disparities in wealth, education, income, and so on, between Blacks and whites, the white individual can declare ignorance of these facts or even refuse to be epistemologically impacted by them. Although the notion of an epistemology of ignorance can explain certain trivial aspects of the daily lives of both Blacks and whites, it remains to be seen if the appeal to this notion is sufficiently adequate to coherently explain the persistence of Black racial subordination and the survival of white privilege. Among other things, a certain question emerges: what does it mean for whites to either not know or feign ignorance of the daily racial realities of American society when it is analytically assumed that their very identities are shaped by these realities?

**G. Y.:** Why would white folk even want to admit to their racial privilege, to challenge it? To do so seems counter to their own interests. So, how does one make the case that it is in their "best" interest to dismantle their white privilege?

**C. H.:** It is probably the case that there are whites who have a genuine desire to dismantle white privilege. The problem, however, is that the basic theoretical assumptions, ontological presuppositions, and analytical devices of the law, political theory, economic theory, social philosophy, and so on, are



all grounded on the primacy of individualism. Consequently, even if certain whites desire to dismantle white privilege, they lack the vocabulary and theoretical tools that would allow them to gain a fair hearing in society. Indeed, we all use the common vocabulary of liberalism to discuss matters of race. The problem is that this vocabulary works by translating historical and group-related issues into issues of abstract individualism. As a matter of fact, notions such as group rights or collective responsibility, when viewed from the perspective of dominant narratives, are unintelligible. The general point is as follows: that those whites who view themselves as mere individuals and as race-less, and who are opposed to notions of group rights or collective responsibility, will argue that they are entitled to what they have because they have earned it. For example, the courts will judge in favor of white individuals who challenge efforts to extend opportunities to Blacks precisely because, again, the law recognizes individual rights not group rights. So, although there is much evidence to substantiate the idea of white privilege, any discursive practice grounded in individualism will be unable to dismantle white privilege. Finally, even if we were to focus on creating the appropriate vocabulary, it might not be possible to rationally convince many whites to surrender or dismantle their white privilege. We tend to invest a great deal of value in rational argumentation while denigrating the role of imagination, emotions, and affectivity in politics. However, as James Baldwin has intimated, perhaps we need to think more in terms of love and not the exhausted abstractions that offer us “false clarity” and invite us to erase the complexity and messiness of the actual world in which we exist.

**G. Y.:** I want to return to your point about epistemology of ignorance. I appreciate your point. Of course, it could be that whites are also persistently blinded to (or epistemically failing to see) their own relative successes vis-à-vis Blacks and people of color. Yet, I want to say, surely, they see this! You raise an important point here. For example, I’m thinking of the recent tragic killings in St. Paul and Baton Rouge. There seems to be something else going on other than an epistemology of white ignorance. What else is going on?

**C. H.:** It is extremely difficult to analytically discuss the institution of the police in American society, especially with regard to the relation between the police and race. Nevertheless, I will approach this issue from a philosophical perspective and not from the perspective of an activist or a social movement. Most people prematurely denounced the Black Lives Matter Movement because they uncritically interpreted this movement as a particularism that is opposed to the universalist view that all lives matter. The problem is that most people fail to realize that, although the slogan “Black Lives Matter” is a particularist statement, it is in fact an unabashed endorsement of the universal recognition that all lives do indeed matter. We live in a society that gives lip service to this universalist recognition but behaves as though Black

lives are irrelevant and are, therefore, excluded from the universalist position. Thus, the only way to include Black lives into the universalist position is to explicitly assert that Black lives matter. So, instead of being a negation of the universal recognition of the value of all lives, the slogan 'Black Lives Matter' is undeniably consistent with the universality of all lives as having value and as mattering. Accordingly, it expresses this recognition by calling attention to the fact that the universal declaration of the value of all lives is atrociously empty if the lives of Black people are not equally valued. If society remains largely apathetic to the killing of innocent Black men and women by law-enforcement officers, then the universal declaration that "All Lives Matter" is hollow. Hence, to correctly understand the ethical thrust of the statement 'Black Lives Matter,' at least as I understand it, does not and should be interpreted as condoning the denigration of the value of the lives of non-Blacks or police officers.

The difficulty of talking about the relation between the police and the Black community is made greater by the tendency of the media to sensationalize this particular issue. There is also the risk of being accused of encouraging violence against police officers. And then there is the unquestioned assumption that Black people cannot dispassionately discuss this issue without becoming excessively emotional. Of course, even the institutionalized discursive practices that go by the name of 'criminal justice' are burdened by a theoretical concoction of descriptive generalizations that masquerade as solid science.

So, back to your question: What else is going on other than the epistemology of ignorance? The discussion concerning the police and the Black community is almost always severely decontextualized, continuously removed from the history of the society. We can solve this problem by contextualizing this discussion. That is, by carefully situating it within the multiple layers of history that are relevant to this issue. In other words, any discussion concerning the relation between the Black community and the police should be contextualized relative to the history of slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, the "law and order" debate of the 1960s, the phenomenal escalation of the prison industrial complex, and the war on drugs of the 1980s and 1990s. The common thread variously connecting these historical events is the use of state power to monitor and discipline Black bodies. You have brilliantly discussed this issue in your book *Black Bodies, White Gazes*.

So, instead of reducing tragic incidents of unarmed Black people being shot by the police or dying under suspicious conditions while in police custody to isolated cases of individual culpability, we need to do a better job of understanding that individual police officers do not function in a historical void. Rather, they are operating within an institution of policing that is tainted by the historical and structural denigration of the lives of Black people. Even white police officers who are not compromised by implicit racial bias and who hold no racist animus toward Blacks may, nevertheless, become complicit

in supporting policies and engaging in practices that have horrendous racist impact. It is not then simply a matter of better training police officers or improving race relations, even if these initiatives are helpful; we need to critically evaluate and modify the persistent structures that support and sustain the institution of policing in American society. This approach should not be interpreted as being against the institution of policing but, rather, should be seen as a manifestation of our active support of democracy, as well as a realistic embrace of the institution of the police.

Finally, another reason why there is so much confusion and misinformation concerning the relation between the institution of policing and the Black community is a failure to properly contextualize the political status of the police in modern democratic societies. The mainstream debate regarding the police and the Black community is often translated into a certain philosophical vocabulary. Most people feel confident in what they construe as the neutral and patriotic support of the police because they assume that the police are ontologically prior to the citizenry. Put differently, they seem to assume that the institution of the police is a transcendental condition of the possibility of civil society. It seems to me that this ontological ordering is misleading. Consistent with social contract theory, the citizenry is ontologically prior and the institution of the police is ontologically secondary, meaning the possibility of the police is secondary to the prior agreement among free individuals to enter a social contract to establish society. Hence, the institution of the police is not the ontological equal of the citizenry but must answer to the citizenry; the police is a creation of free citizens. It is not the case that the people are dependent upon the police in order to recognize themselves as having rights. Clearly, then, it is not whether one supports the police, for there is no sense to be made of not supporting the institution of the police in a modern, democratic society. Rather, we need to do a better job of making sure that those hired by citizens to enforce the laws created by the representatives of the people understand that citizens always have a metalevel function to perform in holding agents of the state accountable. The use of force is not a unilateral matter outside the scope of critical scrutiny by the citizenry. And citizens must shoulder and recognize their responsibility for assuming the burden of sustaining civil society. This point is a corrective to the commonly held view that the police constitute a thin blue line separating civil society from the state of nature. Hence, triumphalist calls for law and order, when Black citizens lose their lives in unfortunate circumstances involving law-enforcement officers, is an unethical repudiation of our collective responsibility as citizens to subject the use of force by agents of the State to the strictest scrutiny possible.

**G. Y.:** What is it like for you (here I'm thinking about how Fanon engages the *lived* experience of Black people) to understand that your life within a white supremacist society *doesn't* matter relative to white lives?

**C. H.:** This is a very important question, the kind of question that any thinking Black person should take the time to critically work through, while avoiding the extremes of denial or acting out. I have two quick responses to this intriguing question—a question that infused and inspired so much of Fanon’s writings: First, I am reminded of Hannah Arendt’s idea of one being viewed as an “objective enemy” of the dominant society.<sup>4</sup> I think that this notion correctly connotes the sense of certain individuals simply by virtue of their birth being classified as guilty; in other words, their sin is having been born. Hence, the relative value of the life of a Black person in comparison to the life of a white person is an indication of this phenomenon of one’s existence as a crime, an existential mishap. Under these circumstances, that mutated existence, that life (Black life) that is considered a deviation from the norm is not valued as being of equal value as the life (white life), which is a representation of the norm. Consequently, in a white supremacist society, Black lives are less valuable than white lives. Second, I am reminded of a phrase that Marina Banchetti, my wife, shared with me: “Daseining while Black.” I interpret this phrase as the existential equivalent of the common phrase, “driving while Black.” So, the idea of “Daseining while Black” essentially connotes the dangers one confronts as a person “existing while Black.” The question presents itself in the form: what does it mean to exist while Black? What does it mean to be in-the-world while Black, especially when the world is skeptical of your existence?

I deal with the realization that my life within a white supremacist society *doesn’t* matter relative to white lives by adopting a radical existential attitude. By this I mean that I affirm the absurdity, contingency, and unpredictability of life. This approach is not a retreat into nihilism. Rather, it is matter of understanding that objectively speaking, the world has no absolute, objective meaning or purpose. Hence, to consider white lives as more valuable than Black lives in a white supremacist society is a matter of a choice, something decided by human beings. And although this choice is a reality, it does not follow that I am necessarily obligated to embrace or affirm this choice. I do not have to become complicit in the choice; I do not have to engage in the bad faith of assuming that Black life and existence are less valuable than the lives of others simply because these others believe that they are totally complete, or that they possess an exclusive rational faculty.

As a Black person I tend to focus on validating and affirming my existence by utilizing the amazing resources of the Black existential tradition, the resources found in the tradition of jazz, gospel, the blues, and reggae. For me it is not so much an issue of being obsessed with how I am perceived but, rather, with making sure that I put into practice the Black existential imperative of improvising, the importance of enduring suffering but not being crushed by the unfortunate events of life. As you know, that great novelist and existential philosopher Ralph Ellison dealt brilliantly with the issue of the value of Black

lives in a white supremacist society. Ellison, among other things, warned about the dangers of Blacks embracing the pathologies of existence that the dominant society always imposed upon Blacks. Baldwin also validated his existence by maintaining a vigil against the denigration of Black existence, the tendency of describing Black existence through the medium of statistics, graphs, and numbers. This kind of existential erasure through quantification is one way in which the devaluation of Black life takes place.

But even as Blacks must contend with their situation, they should realize that there is a flip side to this issue. To be more specific, there is an ethical challenge that they must pose to the white other. Just as Blacks must confront the devaluation of their lives in a white supremacist society, white individuals also must contend with the ethical implications of having to treat others as less than oneself. Put differently, what harm or damage is done to the white self when whites assume that their lives are, objectively speaking, more valuable than the lives of others? It seems to me that philosophers and other intellectuals must focus more attention on the existential damage of the assumption of the absolute value of the rightness of whiteness. We need to investigate the implications of what Du Bois called “the psychological wages of whiteness.”<sup>5</sup> Why would a group of people tolerate the indignities of economic injustice only to feel a sense of superiority because they are not Black but are white?

I want to conclude by suggesting that unlike those thinkers who have called for an elimination of white identity and Black identity in order to resolve the issue of white supremacy, I do not think that this idea is in any way an indication of deep, effective thinking. We should accept that white lives are considered as being more valuable than Black lives. Similarly, Blacks should not surrender the existential faith that is so deeply rooted in the Black existential tradition, nor allow themselves to become mesmerized by the illusion of absolute whiteness. What seems to me to be a more realistic attitude is to accept the persistence of whiteness. However, the challenge is to invite whites to critically work thorough their whiteness. For those whites who approach whiteness as metaphysical or transcendental, they most likely will view white lives as being more valuable than Black lives. However, those whites who understand whiteness as a choice, as a construction, as a historical project, will realize that whiteness can be critically worked through and that being white need not entail that one must automatically assume the “rightness” of whiteness. Rather, these whites can come to view whiteness as just another fragile identity among other identities, identities constructed by vulnerable human beings as they struggle in the dark to make sense of their existence.

**G. Y.:** Lastly, I want to return to your reference to love. As you know, Baldwin doesn’t mean anything like superficial Hollywood romance. What does love look like to you when operating politically?

**C. H.:** You are correct: Baldwin did not reduce love to romantic lust. He also refused to construe love in politics as an exercise in the pathology of the dialectics of recognition. Hence, Baldwin did not believe that Blacks were in need of paternalistic love from whites. Indeed, his reverence for love partly explains his condemnation of the cheap sentimentalism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Baldwin infused his conception of love with strong and abiding existential insights. Love, as he understood it, was not the superficial, good-feeling nonsense advertisers exploit to promote and encourage greater conspicuous consumption. Baldwin explained love in dynamic terms; consequently he framed it in terms of the realities of growth, courage, forgiveness, risk-taking, decentering selfishness, centering the other, and the importance of greeting others as a singular *Thou* and not an abstract *It*. Since I think that Baldwin has a very suggestive notion of love, I will use his position to describe what love looks like when it operates politically.

An essential element of Baldwin's existential conception of love pertains to the transformative power of love, specifically the ability of love to alter the state of one's existence. I interpret Baldwin as intimating the following: the individual who has the courage to truly love another person, the individual who earnestly dedicates his/her life to love, will be ontologically transformed into being a more ethically aware and authentic human being. This point relates to the redemptive affectivity of love. Love, Baldwin declares, actively contributes to growth, flourishing, and maturity.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the individual who is incapable of loving is existentially impaired. Baldwin explains that he used the word 'love' "not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile . . . sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."<sup>7</sup> He also adds in "In Search of a Majority," in *Nobody Knows My Name*, "Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is growing up."<sup>8</sup> In another context, in David Leeming's *James Baldwin: A Biography*, Baldwin declared that "love . . . means *responsibility to each other* [my italics]."<sup>9</sup> Baldwin also thought that love should be more prominent in our social and political thinking. He despised the tendency of social scientists to hide behind categories and abstractions, while ignoring flesh-and-blood human beings. Baldwin does not offer an alternative theory of social pathology; nor does he introduce a new method to facilitate the substitution of one individual for another, which would entail, again, not being required to confront concrete individuals. The answer, as far as Baldwin is concerned, is love. David Leeming sums up Baldwin's position as follows: "Without . . . love people are unable to learn to see real human beings behind the categories, labels, and prejudices created by the loveless and the horrible results of such blindness are evident in . . . history."<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, then, a politics of love, would be a call to surrender the comfort of hiding behind the mazes of pathologies, stereotypes, and monstrous

assumptions that enable the dominant society to promote as natural and normal what can best be described as a “friendly” and voluntary style of apartheid as an experiment in democratic living.

## NOTES

1. Wilfrid Sellers, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1963), 1.
2. Lewis Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
3. See Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), chapter 3.
4. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951), 426–427.
5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935).
6. James Baldwin, “Down at the Cross: Letter From a Region in my Mind,” in *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 95.
7. Baldwin, “Down at the Cross,” 95.
8. James Baldwin, “In Search of a Majority,” in *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 136.
9. David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2015), 322.
10. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 200.

## PART VI DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When Molefi Kete Asante discusses protests against police violence and the recent police shooting deaths of young Black men, he suggests that the most effective mode of demonstration is one that bears “the threat of violence, not violence itself.” Demonstrating that one has “the potential of competing for power” is the best way, he explains, to shake the foundations of current power structures and demand changes in the system as it exists. A demonstration that implies an actual threat of violence, though dangerous for people of color, seems to be one manifestation of “the collective fightback of sustained compassion in the face of sustained catastrophe,” that is, Cornel West’s notion of “Black prophetic fire.” Those who cause violence and destroy property are not demonstrators at all, explains Asante, but in fact they undermine demonstration because they require the state to intervene by force. Such behaviors might also be prohibited when one is filled with “Black prophetic fire” because that “fire has to be lit by a deep love of the people.” Yet we cannot ignore that it is the (alleged) *perceived* threat of violence that results in innumerable killings of people of color, especially



young Black men. Bill E. Lawson underscores this point when he cautions, “People concerned with racial justice have to know when to act and when not to act. In other words, don’t be stupid!” Is it currently possible to support the threat of violence, driven by West’s “Black prophetic fire,” without taking unnecessary risks, or risks that are too likely to harm demonstrators? In what ways is the “threat of violence, not violence itself” compatible with Cornel West’s notion of “Black prophetic fire” as manifested in the philosophies and actions of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, and Ida B. Wells, among others?

2. One of the difficulties in taking seriously the reality of racism and the importance of racial discourse in the United States is the problem of responsibility. Clevis Headley explains that many people appeal to individual responsibility to account for their innocence. Whites born in the twentieth century did not hold slaves. Because they did not themselves directly buy, sell, or forcibly breed Black bodies for profit, they think they have “no responsibility for the historical consequences of slavery.” Simultaneously, Headley points out, they deny the possibility of collective responsibility, effectively eliminating all related concepts other than atomistic individualism. This naturally contributes to the continuation of an epistemology of ignorance on the part of whites and the limitation of discourse of race to the vocabulary of liberalism that in turn supports blind faith in individualism that allows white people to avoid “the complexities of the political, economic, and social world” that are necessary in discussing race. At the other end of the spectrum, Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses the meaning of *Volkgeist* in Du Bois’s work. Appiah offers a modification of Du Bois’s notion of a “collective soul” that is whole and homogenous across a people, but that can take different directions depending on the forces at work for each individual person. Lucius T. Outlaw Jr.’s claim that “all folks ‘white’ have not, do not, take up ‘being white’ in the same ways” seems consistent with this view. Could some notion of a “collective soul” that allows for some individual difference or other shared identity overcome the strong inclinations toward atomistic individualism in the United States? To what extent might this be a way to improve racial discourse or possibly improve a discussion vis-à-vis some notion of shared responsibility?





PART VII

*Race Beyond the United States*



## Fiona Nicoll

**George Yancy:** Provide a sense of the origin of your interest in critical race and whiteness studies, especially given your identity as a white woman.

**Fiona Nicoll:** There are three formative moments in this origin story. The first was a deep sense of rupture from everyday whiteness at the age of thirteen when my parents—practicing Christians—decided to take a year away from Australia “in mission,” as teachers at a Protestant denomination senior school in a remote part of Papua New Guinea. The year was 1980. This was five years after the nation had gained independence from Australia, but where I was located there seemed to be a significant continuation of colonial relations. As white people, we were spatially and culturally separated from the Indigenous people. They were called “nationals,” while we were called “expatriates” or “expats” for short. As white children, my sister and I studied via correspondence, while “nationals” lived and studied in the school. I completed my correspondence subjects within the first six months; after this my mental health began to suffer because I was socially isolated with nothing much to do. I asked my parents, who subsequently asked the white principal, if I could study with the nationals for the second part of the year. My request was granted, and I had the unusual experience of being the only white student in a school of around three hundred students.

**G. Y.:** What was the impact of that experience?

**F. N.:** This revived my interest in life generally, and I became aware of a whole other world to which I had only partial access as a white child. I also became cognizant of race as a mode of colonial power; it was the white expats in the remote island who occupied most of the positions of control at the school, and it was the Chinese traders who owned most of the stores on the small island. I actually found it quite traumatic when I returned to Australia because being white had ceased to feel “natural” in the same way as it had been prior to my

leaving. I simultaneously experienced a welcome opening to a wider world of human experience and a lack of confidence in the unexamined white race privilege conferred on me through birth as a white Australian citizen. It's hard to describe this experience except to say that I was no longer able to *believe* in whiteness in the way that I had prior to leaving the country; I also became aware of the way that most of my peers, friends, and teachers accepted whiteness as a fundamental trait connected with *being Australian*.

The second origin story explaining my interest begins eight years later in 1988 when I took a year out from my university studies and travelled around Australia. This was the bicentenary of Australia's origins in a British penal settlement in 1788, and there was considerable Indigenous activism from all over the continent, converging in large protests in Sydney. Somehow I got hold of a paperback book entitled *We Call for a Treaty*. Written by a group of prominent non-Indigenous Australian public servants, academics, and writers, this book explained the precarious standing of my nation within international law both during the time of British declaration of sovereignty and through to the late twentieth century. It was only many years later that I realized this book was, in part, a response to the successful human rights advocacy of Indigenous people from the nineteenth century onward. And, most specifically, it was a response to the Aboriginal men and women who established an Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of the national parliament house in Canberra in 1972. A highlight of my career a few years ago was being invited to contribute to an edited book that included writings and archival material from activists of that era. It was a privilege to interview Michael Anderson, one of the original group of men who established the Tent Embassy who has dedicated a lifetime as a lawyer and grassroots community organizer to agitating for the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty both in Australia and in international forums.

The third story relating specifically to the creation of a critical race and whiteness studies association in Australia was my meeting with Aileen Moreton-Robinson. A lifetime activist, brilliant academic, and superior strategist, Aileen brought critical race studies to Australia in the late 1990s with her sociological work on how the subject position of 'middle-class white woman' was formative of antiracist discourses limited by unrecognized white race privilege. After reading her early work, I was able to understand why, in spite of the very best intentions, white supporters of Indigenous rights struggles rarely achieved the changes we purported to seek in our national political life. I began to suspect that our good intentions were part of the problem. We became close colleagues when we formed, together with a small group of other people writing on whiteness and race, the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association (ACRAWSA). Aileen was the founding president, and I was the founding vice president and editor of the inaugural Association journal. Through conferences, a website, and an academic journal, we aimed to

generate new conversations about race in Australia, from the starting point that “whiteness” was a problem that needed to be known, owned, and worked through by scholars from all disciplines.

Other formative thinkers for me at this time were Sara Ahmed, Ghassan Hage, and Cheryl Harris. Sara demonstrated the centrality of whiteness to the way that embodied others appeared as “strangers” in postcolonial encounters, while Ghassan highlighted the racial work of the liberal value of “tolerance” in debates about migration in a multicultural Australia. Through Cheryl Harris’s pioneering work on whiteness as a form of personal property protected in law, I began to understand embodied intersections between state and subject formation in settler-colonial contexts.

**G. Y.:** What were some of the philosophical and personal challenges that you faced as you began to pursue such issues?

**F. N.:** One philosophical challenge is the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of this work for me as a middle-class, white Australian woman. The epistemological challenge is to engage with Indigenous Australia both materially and ontologically while attending to the difficulties of this project. For example, ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ are terms that *unname* human ways of knowing and connecting to the life of this continent over tens of thousands of years. But at the same time, they are terms to which histories of struggle, of loss, of pride, of creativity have been attached by individuals since the British took possession. A potent expression of this is the Aboriginal flag designed by Harold Thomas in 1971. As a non-Indigenous Australian, I cannot appropriate this Indigenous history as my own national story; but I must equally articulate an ethical and authentic relationship to it. Otherwise whiteness will remain at the ontological and epistemological heart of what Australia means and of what it means to be Australian. The most important philosophical contribution to working through these quandaries is the book *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier: Manifesto for a White Australian Philosophy of Origins* by Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos. The authors demonstrate how the construction of Australia as a container for particular kinds of immigrant subjects has historically precluded negotiation of Indigenous sovereignty, and they argue persuasively that this is required for the nation to become itself.

**G. Y.:** And what of the more personal challenges?

**F. N.:** There have been many personal challenges in this work. The academic environment into which critical race and whiteness studies entered was heavily infused by poststructuralism and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, which tended to be critical of approaches where identity was interrogated rather than problematized as such. As an aspiring queer theorist, I was at once embedded in this environment and attuned to its limitations for scholars positioned outside the scope of normative white assumptions about knowledge formation

and dissemination. As an early-career academic working in Australian universities, I would be continually struck by other white academics' indifference toward or dismissal of the subtle work of theorists of whiteness like Moreton-Robinson, Ahmed, and Hage. Their work was dismissed as "essentialist" or as driven by "political" rather than "intellectual" agendas. It wasn't until I read Cheryl Harris's penetrating study "Whiteness as Property" that I began to see how the discontent of white academics with critical race and whiteness studies was structured by a possessive relationship to knowledge. Indigenous and nonwhite scholars were welcomed into the academic community with the proviso that their views should be "tolerable" rather than unsettling to business as usual. Racial ways of seeing, doing, and being in the academy became increasingly evident as part of my everyday working life through my active involvement in different projects connected to critical race and whiteness studies. After being explicitly and implicitly warned off from deepening my involvement in this area, there were two paths available to me. I could accept that my privileged position as white required me to perform a kind of "professional" distancing from knowledge and knowers seen as marked by their racial difference and/or "political" agendas. Or I could get in deeper. At the risk of appearing (and being disciplined) as excessively willful, I chose the latter.

After I completed my PhD, my first academic job was to deliver an academic course on contemporary Indigenous art. This began my experience of working together with Indigenous people to produce new knowledge for *all* university students and researchers rather than delivering knowledge about *them* for and by people like *me*. In concrete terms, this involves resistance to two kinds of more or less explicit demands that hold whiteness in place institutionally. I refuse to speak *for or on behalf of* Indigenous people and positions even when it would be professionally rewarding for me to do so. I refuse to *contain the scope* of Indigenous projects on which I collaborate as a non-Indigenous researcher, curator, or project manager. While diligent in fulfilling all that is required from funding bodies and auspicing institutions, I am not prepared to contain *perceived* risks of Indigenous proximity to students, staff, and other stakeholders. I strongly believe that unless white Australians are prepared and allowed to experience some discomfort or disorientation as we connect with Indigenous Australians, the best-intentioned projects will fail to achieve transformation within established fields of social power.

Life is too short for projects that are merely decorative or documentary; I hope to see meaningful treaties negotiated between Indigenous nations and the communities where they are located in my lifetime. Two related dangers that haunt the kind of work I do are failure and overcommitment. Failure comes from getting involved in projects that I am ill equipped to contribute to or from weakness within networks of participants, while overcommitment comes from a belief that I am uniquely qualified and committed to follow through every aspect of a project. Having pulled off some significant

collaborative projects including two major exhibitions in my career, I feel the need to invest more in cultivating distributed leadership among white people and in developing digital communication infrastructure to facilitate ongoing outcomes of collaboration.

My sense is that for changes to hold on the ground of racially structured power relationships, collaborative processes are more important than individually determined and owned outcomes. Of course this can pose personal challenges to the degree that academic institutions only count individual inputs and outputs. I have been part of universities where one or two senior leaders have found ways to count collaborative work as well as universities where this work is seen as extraneous—and potentially hostile—to their business model. Another challenge I've experienced is the way that individuals within white institutions can be rewarded for playing one Indigenous individual or group against another to achieve their own objectives. This strategy is as old as colonization itself and requires careful ethical negotiation by anyone who considers themselves a “white ally.” This ethical negotiation should not be confused with or performed with reference to values of “objectivity.” It can involve a *refusal* to masquerade as neutral or uninvested in outcomes of conflict staged between Indigenous people. And it demands transparency about who you are standing with and why in any given conflict. Unless we “go there,” as white Australians, significant social transformation of the colonial relationships will be forever deferred. In my research and pedagogy, I always try to remember that we cannot stand aside or beyond the issues that afflict Indigenous people; we are a constitutive element part of these issues, whether we acknowledge it or not.

**G. Y.:** What does Indigenous sovereignty theory look like within the context of Australia?

**F. N.:** In Australia, Indigenous sovereignty theory is significantly structured in response to a legacy of dispossession that was retrospectively justified by colonial administrators through a legal doctrine of *terra nullius*: the racial proposition that the people living on the continent at the time the British declared sovereignty were not—in a meaningful sense—owners of their countries. Part of the task of Indigenous sovereignty theory is to demonstrate that *terra nullius* is not just a failure of cross-cultural understanding with devastating and continuing impacts on Indigenous people, but is symptomatic of *racial* ways of seeing, thinking, and acting through which white Australia produces Aboriginality as a subhuman condition. The Crown is a key concept for Indigenous sovereignty theory in Australia because it is the site from which authority flows both historically and symbolically. For example, colonial practices included the designation of particular Indigenous individuals as “queens” and “kings” through the use of brass breastplates. Colonists would deal with these individuals in the process of land acquisition and settlement. Another



component of British sovereign power was the spectacular public punishment of warriors who organized armed resistance to invasion. I would also include more recent dimensions such as delegations of Indigenous leaders to meet Queen Elizabeth II, to discuss various matters including ongoing sovereignty claims and requests for the return of human remains held in British institutions. I am curious about whether the recent decision of a not-so-United Kingdom to leave the EU will alter the agenda for these ongoing discussions. Another significant aspect of Indigenous sovereignty theory is the reclamation by Indigenous people of their countries, their languages, and naming rights as lawful and regenerative practices in everyday life. Indigenous sovereignty is not only about a process of grieving for the many lives taken and destroyed over nearly 250 years of colonial occupation; it is equally about knowledge passed along through generations and the capacity of subsequent generations to value and transform this knowledge so it remains relevant and imbued with political agency.

Another important focus of Indigenous sovereignty theory in Australia is identity. My understanding of Indigenous identity is that *connection* lies at its heart. This identity is not “prehistorical” or narrowly “cultural,” but rather it is embodied, familial, and takes the elements, plants, and animal life as aspects of what it means to be human rather than being opposed to it as “nature” available for expropriation. So an important political struggle is to ensure that Indigenous knowledge (of plant properties for example) is not simply approached as a resource for transnational knowledge corporations (including universities) to “rediscover” and package for sale as commercial Intellectual Property.

**G. Y.:** How do you understand the concept of Indigeneity in the twenty-first century? I’m thinking here in terms of its epistemological and empowering implications for Indigenous people in Australia.

**F. N.:** Very broadly. I think that the concept of Indigeneity as a site of political struggle concerns the right to name and resist the containment of being on the part of those people around the world who encountered European imperial expansion from the seventeenth century. However, there seems to be a difference between nations where Indigenous people signed onto treaties with colonial powers and those, including Australia, where this is yet to occur. In New Zealand, for example, Indigenous sovereignty theory and practice is linked to the politics of the Waitangi Treaty as a foundational national document. The problems that Maori people face there seem linked to debates over the terms of the Treaty and to continuing social disadvantage and marginalization. The fragile legal situation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia seems to allow their citizenship rights to be more easily overlooked. In 2007, for example, remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory were targeted for a Federal government “Intervention”. This included global bans

on alcohol and pornography and compulsory sexual health checks for all children. And in 2015 the Western Australian government threatened Indigenous people living in basic conditions on their remote countries with closure of basic services including electricity and water. Whereas in Australia the struggle to claim Indigenous identity as both valuable and rights bearing remains a site of activism, the struggle in nations with treaties seems more focused on what this identity means today and on aligning rights with social justice principles rather than settling for the bare minimum of resources that white settler states are prepared to grant to their “domestic nations.”

A common thread in the literature on Indigeneity is the insistence that Indigenous people should not be approached as containers of a feared or fetishized cultural “difference” but, rather, respected as embodying a living and evolving presence that is more or less reckoned with by various nation states. This has important implications for epistemology insofar as Indigenous people have been historically defined as objects of Western knowledge systems that, in turn, stake powerful claims for universality. Indigenous academics from different nations around the world have mounted powerful challenges to such claims. One way they have done this is to demonstrate how local Indigenous terms and ideas can generate new understandings of an array of global problems, from poverty and illness to global warming and housing. In Australia, the concept of Indigeneity is used through practices of education, language revival, arts, and political activism to produce a visible and legible social presence with which Australian governments may ultimately form treaties. One way that this concept is countered by white Australians possessively invested in ownership of the nation is by assuming the right to define who is or is not “authentically” Indigenous. Considerable cultural work is expended in policing the boundaries of acceptable Aboriginality—on the one hand—and suspect or “inauthentic” Aboriginality—on the other. For example, several years ago an Australian commentator attacked the legitimacy of awards granted to several high-achieving Indigenous people. He argued that, since they could plausibly “pass” as white, their recognition came at the expense of their darker-skinned counterparts. Indigenous opportunity was presented as a zero-sum game in which only the suitably embodied should be eligible to participate.

**G. Y.:** There are specific ways in which whiteness in the US gets expressed through unarmed Black bodies being killed by mostly white police. In fact, in the US, we are currently mourning the deaths of the killing of two Black men, Philando Castile in St. Paul, Minnesota and Alton Sterling, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There are also the five officers in Dallas who were sadly killed. Talk about the ways in which Black bodies in Australia are treated by law enforcement.

**F. N.:** As with the current situation in the US, violence against Black bodies by law enforcement is a significant problem. Rather than incidents

involving shootings, the main problem in Australia is discriminatory policing and Aboriginal deaths in police custody. Having lived for a short time in New Orleans in my twenties, I'm aware of the ways that race in the US is powerfully registered through the spatial demarcation of cities. Together with the criminalization of petty offences, in particular those involving drugs or vehicle registration and maintenance, hostilities between law enforcement and specific Black communities seem to be reproduced and exacerbated in more overt ways than in the Australian context, where Indigenous people are a more or less visible minority. Racial violence in Australia often has a more secretive character, and this is linked, in my view, to the ongoing force of *terra nullius*, whereby ways of seeing and acting toward Indigenous people in particular render them sub- or not-quite human. There has been organized protest about police violence and deaths in custody for over three decades. Government responses include a Royal Commission in 1990 and a decade-long process of "reconciliation" from 1991–2001. Yet Indigenous people continue to be brutalized and to die in police custody at horrendously high rates. If police shootings in the US could be described as racial crimes of commission, Aboriginal deaths in custody are often crimes of omission. Examples that come to mind in recent years include an elderly man dying while being transported hundreds of kilometres in temperatures of close to 50°C (122°F) in an airless van without air conditioning; a young woman, ignored after complaining of feeling ill and asking for hospital treatment, and dying a few days later; a man arrested for being drunk who passed away in a holding cell because officers forgot to make regular checks on his welfare.

In addition to physical harms inflicted by law enforcement, there are many examples of psychological and cultural violence against Indigenous people while in custody. My partner, Sandi Peel, an Indigenous woman from South Australia, wrote a song entitled "Living Hell" based on the experience of one of her neighbors. This young woman, a member of the 'stolen generations', was taken into custody and before being locked in a cell she was stripped of all her clothes. When she asked the custodial officers why she had been stripped, they claimed it was a protective measure to prevent suicide. The chorus of Sandi's song is powerful:

*Lying, naked in a cell.*

*The hurt, the pain, the shame, this is a living hell.*

*Stripped of her clothes, her culture and her dignity.<sup>1</sup>*

**G. Y.:** That's powerful. You know, many in the US have no sense that indigenous Black bodies in Australia are also marked, oppressed, and brutalized. Talk about some of the *specific* similarities and differences between white Australian racism and white US racism.

**F. N.:** I've discussed the similarities above to some extent, but two areas where I see specific difference can fall under the headings of "guns" and

“euphemisms.” Guns make a difference because of their power to anchor crime and law enforcement in threats and acts of lethal violence. They also significantly increase the risk of innocent victims being killed by misattributed identity or in crossfire. There is a deep cultural attachment to guns in the US and this makes it very difficult to remove them from equations about racial violence. In Australia, while lethal force is to some extent an issue because firearms are legal for police and there have been police shootings, other kinds of injuries and inexplicable ‘suicides’ of Indigenous people in custody are more common. Images of juvenile offenders, many of them on remand, being brutalized and restrained in the Northern Territory, were revealed in an investigative media report in late July of 2016. Several young men were tear-gassed inside the detention center building while others were strapped to chairs for hours with their heads covered with hoods, allegedly to prevent them from spitting at guards. While the Prime Minister rightly expressed his outrage about these images and called immediately for a Royal Commission to ascertain types and levels of the abuse of young Indigenous people in detention, events that followed this call demonstrate the power of whiteness to reproduce *terra nullius* in everyday life. The man appointed to lead the Royal Commissioner was a former Chief Justice of the Territory (where the abuses had occurred), and no Indigenous leaders were consulted about the terms of reference or invited to serve as co-Commissioners. This demonstrates a disturbing failure to acknowledge how existing institutions contribute to the brutalization of Indigenous people and to imagine that Indigenous people might have a fundamental role in making these institutions more humane. In this context I have argued elsewhere that Carl von Clausewitz’s famous formulation about war being the continuation of “policy by other means”<sup>2</sup> needs to be inverted to account for race and sovereignty issues in Australia. When it comes to Indigenous Australia, policy and its institutions of enforcement have long been charged with the prosecution of an undeclared war.

I think this is partly because the Australian Constitution still enables separate laws to be passed that specifically target them. And this means that racial values are hardwired into the nation-state in ways that profoundly shape experiences of everyday life. For example, I have heard direct reports from tourists of local white people discouraging them from giving money to Indigenous people in Alice Springs “because they’re like pigeons. If you give them some, they’ll come back with all their relations and ask you for more.” I’ve also heard white people in remote areas refer to Indigenous people as a separate “species” who are uniquely unable to tolerate alcohol. This dehumanizing terminology has disturbing origins in early processes of colonial settlement on the East Coast of Australia; armed parties of white men, often relying on the navigational skills of Aboriginal “trackers” or “native police,” would go on expeditions and kill entire clans in reprisal for attacks against settlers or

their property. The purpose of these trips was sometimes euphemistically referred to in local newspapers as “dispersing” a group of Blacks.

A common thread linking historical racism against Indigenous bodies to current manifestations in law enforcement is the myth that Indigenous people represent a “prehistoric” or “uncivilized” state of existence and that the only way to stop the violence is for them to accept assimilation into the wider Australian society. Certain white politicians and public intellectuals, together with a small handful of Indigenous spokespeople, have promoted the view that Indigenous rights activism is somehow linked to poor outcomes across social indicators such as unemployment, incarceration, and poor health. Implicit in their arguments is the notion that letting go of the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty will lead to more social acceptance and greater prosperity for individuals and their families. There is a disturbingly performative element of this kind of talk; those Indigenous people who refuse to accept the prescribed quiescence are often treated as “trouble-makers” and their views are disregarded. To conservative Australian politicians and media commentators, Indigenous sovereignty claims appear (and are represented) as a travesty of the “civilized” political system held in place by *terra nullius* and racial conceptions of “British” values. This can create problems for Indigenous public intellectuals, as supporting treaty and sovereignty claims is quickly framed as being nationally “divisive.” Stan Grant is one prominent public intellectual, an internationally successful Indigenous journalist swayed by the coverage of the custodial treatment of young Indigenous people that I related above to call for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and lend his support to a Treaty rather than settling for the constitutional “recognition” of Indigenous people.

Relating his response to the filmed scenes, he said,

This week I have struggled to contain a pulsating rage. . . . I have moved from boiling anger to simmering resentment; but the feeling has not passed, nor have I wanted it to. . . . What offences we’ve seen this past week.

How can I stand here and speak to the idea of our place in an indissoluble Commonwealth, when this week my people have been reminded yet again that our place is so often behind this nation’s bars? This week, my people know what Australia looks like. This week, Australia is a boy in a hood in a cell.

Treaty, even unattainable, sings to the heart of Indigenous people here in a way that recognition cannot. We need to infuse it with the urgency of now. It needs to speak to substance, not symbolism.

It needs to speak with hope to the hooded, beaten boys in dark prison cells.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most frustrating aspects of the work we do in ACRAWSA is the slow pace of social and political transformation. Because we engage with controversial issues discussed above but also others such as the incarceration of

asylum seekers offshore and legal and social practices that target Muslim communities, our critique targets powerful and sometimes litigious individuals and institutions. In the academy, it sometimes feels as though we are repeating ourselves in the face of those who would love to see us “move on”; as Sara Ahmed observes, racism and sexism are sites of pressure in academic debates which often approach them as “overed.”<sup>4</sup> Having noted this, genuine rewards come through the satisfaction of creating and fostering innovative work and discussions and when our students “get it” and become energized by a passionate determination not to reproduce the prevailing racial order. I accept that the way they “get it” will be unique to the racialized context of their everyday lives. My own experience of white embodiment in the “postcolonial” context of Papua New Guinea where I was neither normal nor invisible, together with my reading of a book calling for a treaty with Indigenous Australians, altered the course of my life. So I must trust that students’ encounters with the creative and research projects I’ve delivered with Indigenous Australians will alter the course of their lives in ways that are impossible to predict.

## NOTES

1. Sandi Peel, “Living Hell,” 1998. Reproduced with permission by Sandi Peel.
2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham (London: Penguin, 1982), 402.
3. Grant, cited in Christine Kearney, “Four Corners: Stan Grant Speaks of ‘Boiling Anger,’ ‘Simmering Resentment’ over Detention Abuse Videos,” *ABC News*, July 30, 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-30/stan-grant-speaks-of-boiling-anger-over-detention-footage/7674778>.
4. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 179–80.



## Paul Gilroy

**George Yancy:** In a review of the 2013 movie *12 Years a Slave*, you critiqued neoliberalism as that which “decrees that racism no longer presents a significant obstacle either to individual success or to collective self-realisation. . . . Racism is presented as anachronistic—nothing more than a flimsy impediment to the machinery of colourless, managerial meritocracy.”<sup>1</sup> I certainly agree with your critique of neoliberalism, especially as neoliberalism interprets racism as anomalous, something that stems from a few “bad apples” as opposed to the reality that racism is systemic and constitutes the very fabric of our polity, where racism is business as usual. Events like the killing in April, 2015, of Walter Scott, a Black man who was shot in the back eight times by a white police officer in Charleston, South Carolina, and so many other incidents like this one, show us that there is nothing anachronistic about American racism. It is alive and well. From your perspective in Britain, how do you understand events like the Scott killing within the context of American race relations?

**Paul Gilroy:** I don’t come to the United States very often, but I happened to be visiting when Walter Scott was shot by another trigger-happy police officer. I was angry and upset. I hope I don’t need to emphasize that I am a firm supporter of the movement that has arisen in response to this sequence of killings exposed by the ubiquity of the cameraphone and the communicative resources of social media. Britain isn’t a gun-loving or toting nation. Racism in our country doesn’t operate on the same scale as the racial organization of law and sovereign power in the United States, but our recent history also includes a long list of Black people who’ve lost their lives following contact with the forces of law and order. Similarly, our police and their various private proxies have never been held to account for those deaths, so this is very familiar ground. Police in many polities can kill with impunity, and racial hierarchy augments their essentially permissive relationship with the law. The officer in



this case was charged with murder. We will have to see whether he is found guilty. That would be a very rare outcome indeed.

Of course, to say that neoliberalism presents racism as anachronistic was not to say that racism *is* anachronistic. Confronting racism is a timely, urgent matter. The casual killing of Black people appears to be a pursuit that originated in an earlier phase of American history. In his epochal analysis of historical and cultural process, the prolific Welsh novelist and academic Raymond Williams drew an important distinction in the way that social and cultural formations develop. Drawing upon him, we can say that we live with neoliberalism but it might not yet be fully dominant. There is certainly worse to come. Neoliberalism could still be emergent, while what appears to be the casual habit of murdering people who come into contact with the police might belong to its prehistory and could be considered either dominant or residual depending on your point of view.

What was especially interesting to me when I was here in April was how the video of Walter Scott's death was being replayed continuously on television (and certainly shared innumerable times on the Internet) as if, by sheer repetition, it would disclose a hidden or secret detail that might make it somehow legitimate. Perhaps the iteration was a means to deaden spectators and drain the spectacle of its full horror? Perhaps there are obscure pleasures in those patterns of identification, for both Black and white viewers of this racial pornography. The replays were often accompanied by neurotic speculation as to what the killer's courtroom defense might be. I'm almost as concerned by the constant, compulsive replaying of the event as I am by the event itself. There is a complicity in that gesture that is also part of the way that racism becomes culture.

**G. Y.:** You've written about the Middle Passage, about that tragic transportation of African bodies across the Atlantic. Violent disciplining of the Black body, rendering it docile, was one mechanism at work during that passage. What ways do you think contemporary Black people in the United States or in Britain continue to undergo forms of violent discipline?

**P. G.:** There are many connections between the ways that we inhabit and reproduce the contemporary racial order and the period of slavery. However, we are not slaves. It's important not to let slavery slip into being a metaphor and blur the difference between our condition and the predicament of the slaves. The racial *nomos* has changed since the eighteenth century. How racial hierarchy and the exploitation it sanctions and the terror it requires link the past to the present needs to be understood very carefully. I know I am stepping away from the political liturgy or code used in American discussions of race and politics, but I don't care for Manichean styles of thought. Abstract and reified magnitudes like "whiteness" aren't, in my view, very helpful in interpreting what is now going on around us. Racial categories have to be de-natured. We

have to see, for example, how that whiteness is assembled and brought to actual and virtual life. What are its historical, economic and social conditions of existence? How does it become articulated to juridical, scientific, medical, aesthetic, military, and technological forms of expertise? These are concrete problems that open whiteness up to multilayered struggle.

**G. Y.:** I certainly understand your point. Yet Black people in America understand that, in so many instances, they are being shot and killed by white police officers who are sworn to protect them. They understand how white life matters differently. And even if that life is poor, it is still white. And they understand the reality of white privilege. Isn't there a way in which this is a real phenomenon to be reckoned with? Black people, it seems to me, are not responsible for creating a racial Manichean reality of "us" (Blacks) versus "them" (whites).

**P. G.:** In *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon speaks powerfully about the need and the difficulty of getting beyond this Manichean perspective. He describes how the Manicheism of the colonizer creates the Manicheism of the colonized. That reaction cannot be avoided, but it is also a bad place to get stuck. You speak of privilege here. I know this is now the language many people use to talk about racial hierarchy, but I'm not comfortable with that as a shorthand term for capturing the complex machinery of inequality. It makes power simply a possession rather than a relationship.

**G. Y.:** It's my understanding that there are also fewer than one hundred Black professors in Britain. Of course, there is also the problem of not having a department of Black British Studies comparable to Black Studies or Africana Studies here in the United States. Within the context of the manifold problems in higher education, how does racism play a role in sustaining such realities there?

**P. G.:** Britain's educational system is failing at every level. Its betrayal of Black people is part of a much more comprehensive betrayal. It is being regimented, privatized, and cut so that it operates as a mechanism for deepening inequality and reducing opportunity across the board. Drafting in more Black professors is not going to fix it! Of course we need more Black professors, but we must be fiercely realistic about what we can expect that to achieve. These days, neoliberalism loves diversity. Corporate multiculturalism speaks to the needs of globalized capital hungry for new markets and investors. The decorative presence of Black professors, like that of Black cops, guarantees nothing at the level of institutional outcomes.

I have dreamed for years of building an institutional home for something like a multidisciplinary Black studies initiative in Europe, a place for archiving our histories, for indulging our curiosity, and honing our critique that could combine academic research with public advocacy. There seems not to be an opening for that sort of development at the moment. Our universities are

beleaguered public bodies, not privately endowed operations. They estimate—and they might even be right—that there is no money to be made from anti-racist commitments. What is more, the younger Black people who do make it into the world of higher education mostly want to get their MBAs and start making money like everybody else. I recall during my years in the United States that there was a whole lot of culture/identity talk on our campus, but when it came to actual enrollments in African-American studies the numbers were disappointing. Perhaps the recent campaigning around these killings has changed that.

I wrote a lot about the cultural forms of British racism—how they connected with nationalism and the exclusionary impulses that resulted. It's only very recently that our political landscape has changed to the extent that Blacks are not expected to "go back home" whenever the problems we represent were identified. Nominally we were citizens, but we had to fight long and hard to be recognized as belonging to our country. That's quite different from the American situation where you've had to fight to make your citizenship meaningful but there are whole swathes of the country where African-Americans are the majority population. I've been to Alabama.

The wars of recent years have made Muslim into a racial category. That too has altered the kind of racism we have. It's often oriented by our burgeoning securitocracy. At the same time, the Black population of Caribbean heritage is declining. It is being replaced by a variety of different African peoples divided by language, faith, and nationality, and what counts as Blackness is clearly in transition.

Talking about the Middle Passage or the history of struggles against slavery cannot mean the same to people who have migrated or fled from Somalia, Nigeria, or Ghana. They have their own distinctive history and relationship to the political order of the British Empire that has brought them here. There are large numbers of Francophone Africans in London busy escaping from the problems they face in France. One result of all these developments is that there is a much greater reliance upon what I call *generic* racial identity. It's often created from the fantasy version of African-American culture that's been exported to the rest of the world. That blackness derives in large measure from the dreamworlds of global consumer capitalism. It is heavily mediated by the Internet and social media, and its dismal effects are compounded by the general crisis of political imagination.

**G. Y.:** In what ways do you see Black people in the United Kingdom and Black people in the United States as struggling with the same racial and racist issues? And how might they create new forms of solidarity and collective activism that confront anti-Black racism?

**P. G.:** Some of the issues are similar; some are different. We all have to face the problems of structural and institutional racism: the fact that our lives are

valued differently, that we are vulnerable as a result of being consigned on racial grounds to inhumanity. Solidarity is an altogether trickier thing. It has to be made rather than assumed on racial grounds. The effects of racism are insufficient to maintain solidarity. I'm glad that people can act in concert across national boundaries, but the routine effects of the online network are often mistaken for the stirrings of an actual movement. The movement from virtual to actual solidarity isn't automatic or even easy.

Let me raise a couple of difficult examples to illustrate the organizational and conceptual problems that we face in antiracist organizing. A couple of years ago, after the killing of Trayvon Martin, his mother came to Britain for a heavily publicized meeting with Baroness Lawrence, the mother of Stephen Lawrence. Her son was murdered by racists in a horrible, tragic case that has dominated the field of our racial politics for many years. The grieving mother whose loss has been compounded by the failure of the criminal justice system to bring redress is a very potent symbol. But when Anuj Bidve's parents came to Britain from India after his murder by racists in Manchester, I don't recall them meeting with anybody except the police and the mainstream politicians who were hungry for a photo op. The crisis of political imagination has real, disabling consequences.

Last autumn, many activists were so busy protesting against a white South African artist's exhibit at London's Barbican Center that the police shooting of forty-year-old Dean Joseph in Islington, a mile or two away, passed them by entirely. I don't know all the details of that case, but it was telling that it could be so comprehensively overlooked while there was so much antiracist energy crackling in the air.

What should and could be solidarity can lapse into a kind of mimicry. Circulated through the ether by phenomena like #Blacktwitter, American racial codes, rhetoric, and interpretations can begin, wrongly, to trump locally based analysis and priorities.

## NOTE

1. Paul Gilroy, "12 Years a Slave: In Our 'Post-racial' Age the Legacy of Slavery Lives On," *Guardian*, November 10, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/10/12-years-a-slave-mcqueen-film-legacy-slavery>.

## PART VII DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Police violence directed against Black bodies recently has become a highly visible phenomenon in the United States. The use of social media to broadcast and replay footage of the violent police encounters both raises

awareness in making the events visible, but may also serve to “deaden spectators and drain the spectacle of its full horror,” as Paul Gilroy suggests. In the UK, he explains that social media appears to have contributed to the uneven if not misguided attention paid ad hoc to racist acts. Though people have access to information about racial violence, some incidents are completely missed. This problem is frightening when considered alongside the fact that, Gilroy explains, “police in many polities can kill with impunity” and they have “never been held to account” for the police killings of non-white persons. Fiona Nicoll suggests that racial violence against Indigenous people in Australia is more secretive than racial violence against nonwhites in the United States, specifically in the abuse and death rates of Indigenous people in police custody. At the same time, she explains that the violence appears to be “hardwired” into Australian policy, law, and culture, which are highly public and visible. Discuss the dual-capacity of visibility both to aid in the process of identifying and eliminating racial violence, but also to undermine those processes. What alternative or additional measures should be taken to help make progress with respect to racial violence in places like Australia?

PART VIII

*Race and Religion*

At the Intersections



# Charles Johnson

**George Yancy:** Talk about some of the creative ways in which your identity as a literary figure and as a philosopher intersect.

**Charles Johnson:** Both philosophy and literature offer interpretations of our experience delivered through language and a reasoning process specific to each discipline. I attempt to explain the reasoning process in both disciplines in my book, *The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling*. Moreover, philosophers are not just thinkers; they are also writers. And our finest storytellers, the ones who transform and deepen our understanding of the world, are not just writers; they are also engaged in the adventure of ideas, to borrow a phrase from Alfred North Whitehead.<sup>1</sup> As a philosopher, as a writer of stories, and as a visual artist, I find that these activities are concerned with two things—the process of discovery and problem-solving. Both philosophy and literature begin with wonder, in an interrogative mode. As you can probably tell, my Western philosophical orientation is phenomenology even as my spiritual practice is Buddhist and also informed by other Eastern philosophies.

**G. Y.:** Link your literary and philosophical identity with your being a Buddhist. By the way, I don't assume that any of these identities are separate for you.

**C. J.:** No, none of them are separate. They are streams that flow from the same source—the lifelong love of goodness, truth, and beauty. Buddhism is many things: a philosophy, a 2,600-year-old religion, a spiritual practice. As a way of life, it is nonmaterialistic, nonviolent, and nondualistic. It is “radical” in the sense of that word meaning a going to the root of things. As Paul Tillich once observed, it is one of the world's most competitive of religions precisely because it is noncompetitive. Buddhism is concerned, first and foremost (like phenomenology), with understanding consciousness and the operations of the mind. For many artists, the Buddhadharama has offered a liberation from



our calcified ways of seeing, from our social and intellectual conditioning, and with what we call Beginner's Mind. It provides a fresh encounter with phenomena, a liberation of perception. That, of course, is what every artist strives for.

**G. Y.:** In what ways have literature, philosophy, and Buddhism helped you to elucidate the complex subject of race or racism?

**C. J.:** When creating philosophical works such as "A Phenomenology of the Black Body" (1975) or *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988), a philosophical slave narrative like *Oxherding Tale* (1982), or short fiction such as "The Weave" (2014), my concern is always with discovering the freshest profile (meaning) I can for the subject I'm investigating. In our conscious experience, when one profile or appearance (of an object or subject) is called forth, the others recede from view. Thus to reveal (a meaning) is also to conceal (other meanings). To describe an object (to *say*) is also to *show*. But that saying or showing renders other things unseen or "invisible." What that means in terms of my body of work is that I've attempted to show as many profiles (meanings) as possible, always after setting aside my presuppositions, assumptions, prejudices, and judgments about a subject. The first step, as a Buddhist and phenomenologist, is always to get "me" out of the way. We know, of course, that the field in which meanings unfold has an ever-receding horizon. In other words, we shall, as historically situated beings, never be able to describe all possible profiles or meanings for anything.

That is the approach that gave birth to my 1980 article in *Obsidian*, "Philosophy and Black Fiction," where I stated that:

Our experience as black men and women completely outstrips our perception—black life, like all life, is ambiguous (it means *too* much) and a kaleidoscope of meanings rich, multisided, and what the authentic black writers does is despoil meaning to pin down the freshest interpretation given to him or her. This creates fiction of the highest order. And it is also hermeneutic philosophy in the sense the writer is an archeologist probing the Real for veiled sense.<sup>2</sup>

As a Buddhist and philosopher looking at racism, I described what I think are some of the invariant characteristics of racism in an interview conducted by poet E. Ethelbert Miller that appeared in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Here is that description:

Because most people live in Samsara, or the realm of ignorance and delusion, they will experience the world in terms of their fragile ego. Now, the ego wants to maintain its existence. It identifies with the physical body, with its sense of race and gender, and with its endless desires. Furthermore, the ego is always measuring itself against others because such measuring is how it survives and

avoids what it perceives to be dangerous or a threat to its continuation. It is forever wondering if it is inferior, equal, or superior to others. Always wondering, “Is mine bigger than yours?” Obviously, it prefers to feel bigger, superior to, and better than others—smarter, more beautiful, wealthier, more gifted, moral, etc. Something the ego especially dislikes is feeling itself to be in an inferior or subordinate position to (and here I’ll use a troublesome black phrase we hear too often these days) “someone who doesn’t look like you.”<sup>3</sup>

Such an ego—or monkey mind—is the root and fruit of racism. It is enormously difficult for most people to overcome, regardless of whether they are white or Black, Hutu or Tutsi, Muslim or Christian, male or female because the ego and its errors reside right at the center of the *I* and what we call personal identity or the self, which for a Buddhist (and David Hume) is an empirically unverifiable social construct. What saves me from despair about this very human situation? It is simply the fact that while I am not *blind* to damage caused by the lived illusion of race, neither am I *bound* by it. And I know others need not be bound by it, too.

**G. Y.:** To entertain the loss of the “I” can be so fearful. Yet, I imagine that part of that fear grows precisely out of the structure of the “I.” White supremacy is certainly predicated upon a “mine is bigger than yours” ideology. How do we get whites who are invested in white privilege and superiority not to fear loss of that fictive supremacist “I”? And while not a Buddhist, it seems to me that Martin Luther King Jr. was all too aware of how the white supremacist “I” can be morally destructive.

**C. J.:** King was acutely aware of the ego’s role in racist thought. Nowhere does he express this more eloquently than in his powerful sermon, “The Drum Major Instinct.” Most people live in fear of losing their “self,” the ego or the *I*, because that means living without a safety net; it means a freedom (and uncertainty) most people are afraid to face. We know, obviously, that there are no safety nets. Buddhists understand this. In Sanskrit, the word ‘Nirvana’ is composed of *nir* (“out”) and *vāna* (“blow”). It literally means to extinguish self-will, ego, and selfish desire. I often think of Nirvana in terms of a visual image—someone blowing out a burning candle and experiencing awakening and liberation. And the most complete state of freedom that any individual can imagine. A freedom even from Buddhism after one reaches a certain stage of development. This is captured in the old Buddhist trope of how we use a boat to cross the sea (of suffering). But once we reach land, we don’t carry that boat (rules, precepts, concepts, intellectual tools, etc.) around on our backs, because it has served its purpose and is no longer needed. More than anything else, Shakyamuni Buddha wanted us all to be *truly* free. And let me dare to ask: Isn’t freedom what we, as Black Americans, say we want?

Based on what I've just explained above, I will say that I believe the culmination of the three-hundred-year-old Black liberation struggle will be found in what Buddhists call the Three Jewels or Three Refuges: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

**G. Y.:** So, as one of the two best-known Black male Buddhists in the US (Lama Choyin Rangdrol being the other), say more about how these Three Jewels are linked to Black struggle.

**C. J.:** You use the phrase 'Black struggle' without defining it or giving examples, assuming I know what it means. I hate to make assumptions for, as the old saying goes, if I assume I know how you are using these terms or what they mean, I make an ASS out of U and ME. As a philosopher, you know we have to define our terms in order to have a dialogue that has substance and is meaningful.

**G. Y.:** I agree. Voltaire says, "If you wish to converse with me, define your terms." So, by 'Black struggle,' let's limit the question to two social phenomena. How might the Three Jewels have importance in terms of addressing shootings of unarmed young Black men by police and their proxies? And how might the Three Jewels be of importance to the Black Lives Matter Movement in terms of its specific attempt to bring attention to those killings?

**C. J.:** I think the answer to your question is contained within the "Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism," as expressed by Thich Nhat Hahn in his book *Interbeing*. Five of these, which are particularly relevant, I've provided below beginning with number 9.<sup>4</sup>

9. Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.

10. Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

11. Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.

12. Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

13. Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

**G. Y.:** Black bodies are feared in virtue of being Black. They are profiled in truncating ways. You powerfully demonstrate this in your essay, “A Phenomenology of the Black Body.” How do we re-educate police officers, for example, to engage in a kind of *epoché* or bracketing so that the rich and fluid meanings of Black bodies can become the foreground of perception? And might not the phenomenological *epoché* have deep ethical implications?

**C. J.:** Yes, Husserl, the father of phenomenology, well understood that the *epoché* was a radical first move in any investigation of phenomena, a move that clearly had ethical implications. The real question, it seems to me, is how do we get everyone—not just police officers—to approach others with a sense of what I call epistemological humility and egoless listening?

**G. Y.:** Say more about how you understand both epistemological humility and egoless listening.

**C. J.:** It’s simple—it’s all about getting yourself, your ego, out of the way. One way to think about this is to see that whatever it is you are dealing with, it is *you*. I’ll say more about this in a moment.

**G. Y.:** What do you say to those who might argue that Buddhism is too passive, that it involves a kind of apolitical navel-gazing?

**C. J.:** I would say those people don’t understand a damned thing about Buddhism. They do not understand—and probably never heard of—the Bodhisattva vow of Mahayana Buddhism, which is devoted to working toward the happiness and liberation from suffering of all sentient beings (and not just humans). They have probably never heard of the “engaged Buddhism” advocated by Thich Nhat Hahn and others in the world-wide sangha. Or the Edicts of King Ashoka. Or Nagarjuna’s advice to King Udayi Shatavahana.<sup>5</sup> As a lay Buddhist, an *upasaka*, my entire day is devoted to living at the white-hot center of Samsara and helping as many others as I can and in every possible way. As Buddhists, we give and ask for nothing in return. I am not an especially political person because politics as we practice it is drenched in dualism, in a Them vs. Us partitioning of the world and our experience, and often the intention of “our” side is winning at any cost, even if that means behavior that is unethical or immoral. In my novel *Dreamer*, I reminded readers that Henry Adams called politics “the systematic organization of hatreds.” In *Middle Passage*, Capt. Ebenezer Falcon sums up the consequences of dualism this way: “Mind was made for murder.” I was raised as a cradle Christian, and a saying I’ve never forgotten from my childhood is this: “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” Just look at the people, Republican and Democrat, running in 2016 to be president of the United States. Look at their speech—the lies, falsehoods, inflammatory rhetoric, their lust for power over others, their insults, their reliance on logical fallacies, and playing fast and loose with facts. This is Wrong Speech (the

opposite of Right Speech in the Eightfold Path). No, anyone who tries to make a lame accusation that Buddhists are not involved every day in trying to make the world a better place is a brainless fool.

**G. Y.:** Given what you've insightfully delineated above, the uprooting of the ways in which politicians border on losing their souls as they gain the world would require an entire reconceptualization of politics, yes? What would that look like? I imagine that a Buddhist-inspired Donald Trump (or Hillary Clinton) would entail forms of "political" relationality that we have not seen before.

**C. J.:** Actually, it is something we have seen before. In various publications, I have described Martin Luther King's idea of "the beloved community" as a "sangha by another name." Taking that a step further, in my novel *Dreamer*, I isolated King's vision in terms of three ideas important to his fourteen-year public ministry: The values he asked us to live by place an emphasis on (1) nonviolence as a way of life; (2) integration as the life's blood of being; and (3) agape.

Putting aside the first two ideas for a moment, let's look more closely at agape, which traditionally is understood to be the unconditional love that God has for human beings. King put this into practice in much the same way that Gandhi did with his implementation of *satyagraha* ("soul force"). He knew the British had to leave India. But he understood that they must leave as a friend, not an enemy. His goal was to win over the hearts and minds of his opponents. See, this is the kind of love that a mother or father has for their children. There may be days, especially when a young person is going through growth at puberty, when the child is willful, defiant, and confused, when a parent loves that child but can't say he or she *likes* them on a particular day. But agape is, as I see it, a teleological love. It loves the potential in what we know that child can become—an enlightened, compassionate being. For example, George Wallace in the 1960s was not an especially loveable person. But by the 1970s he changed. Agape acknowledges that we and others are not nouns but verbs; not products but processes. So in what we as Black people are fond of calling "the struggle," we do not alienate others or attempt to defeat or humiliate or destroy them. Rather, and as we do with our children, we abandon the Us vs. Them mentality, deal with them always with respect, and provide the space for them to grow beyond their moment of confusion and one day enter into the beloved community.

I believe it's important to understand that politics is merely the skin of our social lives. It operates, conceptually, on a high level of abstraction and reification, one several stages removed from the immediacy of our daily, lived experience. That is where we really live on the ground of daily practice. I was a Marxist (in my early twenties), one you probably would not have liked because I was so argumentative and dogmatic. (My master's thesis was on the

influence of Marx and Freud on Wilhelm Reich, and as a philosophy TA in the doctoral program at Stony Brook University, I taught a course entitled Radical Thought, which covered Marxist thought from the 1844 *Manuscripts* through Chairman Mao.) But Marxism is an ideology, as Marx himself understood—and political, economic, gender, and race ideologies find it difficult to change based on new evidence or counterexamples; indeed they cannot do this by examining their presuppositions and fundamental premises. So I'm saying all that to say this: If we judge someone to be a racist, a homophobe, a sexist, a bourgeois, a proletarian, we have allowed codified language to present a single profile of them; we have employed language and concepts to essentialize their being, to do violence to their multifaceted and prismatic being. As a Buddhist, I am very suspicious of the narratives or stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others. Ironically, as a writer, I am even suspicious of words, their power to distort our experiences. I don't trust them, and therefore I can't—and won't—base my actions on reified language. One might, for example, describe my wife as a Christian. (Or me as a Buddhist.) But what has that word given us? I've known my wife for forty-eight years, forty-six of those years as husband and wife. I have seen her change over almost half a century. I know her as a friend, mother, confidante, spiritual seeker, former teacher, and social worker. I know her medical history and results of her DNA testing. I know her birth in Buddhist terms to be a blessing unknown to either gods or hungry ghosts. But I can never know all her thoughts, feelings, and experiences even after a lifetime spent together. Do we ever truly "know" another well enough to define or judge them when each of us is, ontologically, a ceaseless play of patterns—physically, emotionally, perceptually, and in respect to consciousness? I think not. This is what I mean by epistemological humility. To some degree, the Other remains a wonderful mystery—even George Wallace or Donald Trump—that ever outstrips our concepts, feelings, and perceptions of him or her. My wife is, therefore, always new and surprising to me. We can say the same about ourselves. And in the face of such a mystery, as we contemplate ourselves and others, the Buddhist approach is to do so with egoless listening to how the Other presents herself, phenomenologically, to us moment by moment. (Her meaning is like the horizon, something we shall never arrive at.) We listen without attachment or desire or self-righteousness. Another name for such selfless listening is love.

Something I've never forgotten, that has stuck with me for decades, is a story I read once about a Westerner who described the horrors Hitler had created to a group of Buddhist nuns, who lived in a remote place and knew nothing about him. The Westerner expected them to say they hated a man whose actions were so monstrous. Instead, they quietly listened to the description of Hitler, and said they pitied him for his ignorance and delusion and the great harm he had caused. Hate, in their practice, was not an emotion they cultivated.

**G. Y.:** Are there specific challenges when it comes to being a Black male Buddhist in the twenty-first century?

**C. J.:** The challenges are simply human ones—the challenge of being compassionate toward all sentient beings. The challenge of being humble enough to understand that our knowledge is limited and always provisional. Physicists tell us that 27 percent of this 13.8 billion-year-old universe consists of dark matter, and 68 percent is dark energy. That means the cosmos that we can measure and observe—what we can experience—is only 5 percent of what is out there. The challenge of loving truth strongly enough that we do not accept prefabricated thinking, ideology, intellectual kitsch, or uncritically take the judgments and interpretations of authorities but rather work—each of us as individuals—to confirm what is and is not true in the depths of our own experience. The challenge of knowing that, in the practice called *vipassana*, thoughts and feelings pass through our consciousness, but we are not those thoughts and feelings, just as we are not our bodies. The challenge of knowing how to observe and examine our thoughts and feelings dispassionately, letting go of those that are wrong or harmful, and returning to those that potentially will bring happiness and freedom from suffering (the two things that all human beings want) to others and ourselves.

**G. Y.:** You mention that you are suspicious of words. As a writer, how do you negotiate this, that is, how do you communicate with words about which you are suspicious, and, yet, for which I imagine you have a “love.” One remarkable piece of advice that you give potential writers is to read the dictionary.

**C. J.:** As I say in the new book, *The Way of the Writer*, in the chapter entitled “Words,” I see words as being the flesh of thought. Furthermore, words are the crystallization in language of thousands of years of experience across numerous cultures and civilizations, each word being the almost tangible skin in which thought is the tabernacle. Phenomenologically, the word is the Other. Language is a record of human experience. There is literally a word for every object, material or immaterial, every relation, and every process that human beings have experienced. As writers, words are our most basic tool. So, yes, I am a lover of language and read dictionaries—English and Sanskrit—for both personal pleasure and professional reasons.

But at the end of the day, and especially when I practice meditation, I accept the fact that words are only tools. In a classic Buddhist formulation, they can be “a finger pointing at the moon,” but they are not—and cannot be—the experience of the moon itself. They cannot be a substitute for that. Ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya* in Buddhism) is a nonconceptual and nondiscursive insight into ourselves and the world. Nirvana means letting go of all notions, and concepts to experience phenomenon with freshness.

I’m really delighted that you asked me a question about words, i.e., language, a question that directly relates to literary art, to storytelling and



aesthetics, because that has been my primary field of study and focus for the last forty or fifty years, and the basis for my formal education as a philosopher and literary artist. I'm not a politician, a race writer, or even a political writer—just a storyteller, visual artist, and philosopher.

**G. Y.:** Most certainly. And you tell stories in ways that are philosophically rich and that engage phenomenology, Buddhism, and other powerful lenses. How do you characterize “a race writer” and why don't you consider yourself to be one?

**C. J.:** I've written about “race” for decades—since the late '60s, and usually because editors ask me to. They figure a Black writer or artist has an understanding of the subject that whites do not have. And they're right. As Black artists and philosophers, we can clarify race questions better than whites based on personal experience and study. And as one of my agents said to me, “Race sells.” But there is a trap in this that every serious Black creator and thinker should think about avoiding, one I discussed at length in “The Role of the Black Intellectual in the 21st Century,” which is in my book *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*. I consider “race” to be a phenomenologically *lived* illusion (like the belief in an enduring self) that has caused immeasurable human suffering. Predictably, even progressive whites grant to Black intellectuals authority over this single territory—race—while they reserve for themselves the rest of the universe of subjects to explore and examine (including their own take on race). The result is that Black thinkers and artists become ghettoized, pigeonholed as one-trick ponies and never asked their understanding of, say, science or nonracial subjects. This has always felt to me to be like keeping Black artists and intellectuals “in their place,” *i.e.*, only talking about themselves. Of course, since the 1970s whites will applaud a Black artist/thinker who so limits himself or herself, pay them handsomely, and offer them endowed chairs in the Academy. I've known many Black thinkers and artists who found this lure of self-limitation—and its social and professional rewards—to be an offer and opportunity they could not refuse, but I'll mention no names. I think, sadly, that this stunts their growth intellectually, artistically, and spiritually. Personally, I'm simply unable to limit my intellect, curiosity, and my talents in this or any other way.

**G. Y.:** Indeed! Returning to King, we should keep in mind that even as he put into effect the power of “soul force,” he was murdered. For example, it's hard to tell people who are being slaughtered by their oppressors that a teleological love will eventuate in some sort of transformation of their oppressor. What are your thoughts on this?

**C. J.:** My thought is that while both King and Gandhi were murdered, the belief in “soul force” was what motivated them their entire lives. But we should not forget that both King and Gandhi were both profoundly religious men. They were men of unshakeable faith. They did not despair. When imprisoned by the



British, Gandhi had his followers read to him the *Bhagavad Gita* (a book I love), and King, as we know, was a Baptist minister who saw God as a power higher than the unjust laws of men. It might be interesting if we “flip” this question and ask if an atheist or someone with no spiritual practice would have this kind of faith in human beings, and in social and racial progress. Indeed, we might well ask if someone with no spiritual practice will be effective in “the struggle.” Any kind of struggle, personal or political.

**G. Y.:** That is a powerful flip to consider. While I’m a hopeful theist, my guess is that an atheist can be sustained by faith in human beings and their potential to become fundamentally changed. I wonder if any of us is completely without some level of spiritual practice, broadly construed. Speaking of our potential to change for the better, do you think that America, given its history of classism, racism, sexism, and militarism, will ever achieve a beloved community?

**C. J.:** I don’t have a crystal ball so I can’t see into the future. But there are beloved communities that exist, here and there, in America today—the sangha is one example, and I consider myself blessed to belong, as an *upasaka* (or lay Buddhist) to the ever-evolving, multiracial sangha in this country. Will all three hundred million Americans ever constitute such a community? That may be asking for too much, based on what we know about human beings, the ego, and the monkey mind. As a wise abbot I interviewed in Thailand in 1997 said to me, some people will understand the Dharma after just seven days. Some will understand after seven months. Some after seven years. And others will still be struggling to understand this wisdom after seventy years.

## NOTES

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967).
2. Charles Johnson, “Philosophy and Black Fiction,” *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review* 6, no. 1–2 (1980): 55–61.
3. E. Ethelbert Miller, “Black Coffee Buddhism,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Fall 2016, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/black-coffee-buddhism/>.
4. Thich Nhat Hahn, *Interbeing* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987).
5. See Charles Johnson, “The Dharma of Social Transformation,” in *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories, and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2014), 23, for more on this.

## Traci C. West

**George Yancy:** What were some of the motivating factors that shaped your deep interests in theology and ethics?

**Traci C. West:** I cannot imagine answering this question about motivating factors without pointing to the person who had the earliest and therefore most formative impact on my understanding of Christianity and its engagement of the world: my mother. My mother had a dynamic personality, highly articulate style of speaking, and rigid understanding of strict parental control of her children. The air that I breathed every day in my family life was comprised of her unique amalgam of evangelical faith and justice-oriented racial politics.

I was thoroughly socialized by her spiritual and intellectual leadership. It combined public and private habits. She exhibited a vigilant antiracist engagement of the world in her routine interactions with whites, Latinos, and Blacks as a teacher's aide in public schools. This was combined with contemplative prayer and Bible study at dawn each day. I relished this time without my siblings that I was able to spend alone with her. Also in my household, daily family viewing of network television evening news was mandatory. I have vivid memories that deeply influenced my later vocational interests of watching embattled civil rights leaders on the nightly news, particularly Martin Luther King Jr. My view of these events was fed by my mother's emotional articulation of admiration and respect for what she understood as the civil rights leaders' divinely guided mission. She also organized a Sunday afternoon family and friends book reading group of Black power texts in which we (the children) were required to participate. This emphasis on reading Black power texts occurred simultaneously with active weekly involvement in our predominantly white local church that she chose for our family. Some of my most enduring questions and interests in theology and ethics were spawned by her

complex example. Throughout my childhood I learned about the power of articulate, bold, Christian-faith-informed expressions of racial justice in public life by a poor, Black single mom.

**G. Y.:** Your mother had a powerful and beautiful impact on your life. How might she be said to have embodied a Black womanist or Black feminist ethics?

**T. C. W.:** I am intrigued by this question. But my response may seem somewhat surprising. I do not think that my mother embodied Black womanist or Black feminist ethics. I do not want to place the label of womanist or Black feminist on her ethics, nor on my description of her impact on my interests in theology and ethics. I find it specious to impose a political identity on historical figures when they did not claim this identity for themselves. Indeed there are contemporary Black women intellectuals who have significantly contributed to the birthing of my Black feminist commitments in religious scholarship and activism. They include leaders outside of the academic study of religion such as Audre Lorde, Michelle Wallace, Angela Davis, and bell hooks.

But the audacious Christian ethics that my mother embodied seems somehow devalued or shrunken if its worth can only be recognized by its embeddedness in Black feminism or womanism. I have inadequately described her influence if I have portrayed her as mainly having inspired an interest in making the primacy of Black women's subjectivity an essential aspect of my theology and ethics. Of course, my motivation for and the stamina of my Black feminist scholarly research and writing cannot be separated from her formative, disciplining social and Christian values. But how do I convey a broader understanding of her influence that makes it clear that her particular example of Christian faith and antiracism did not merely nurture interests that mirrored her particularity? I want to avoid a common form of white supremacist entrapment wherein the invoking of Black identity narrows rather than expands what one imagines it is possible to learn from Black women's subjectivity. But it may not be possible to do so.

**G. Y.:** Talk about some of the influences on your theology while a student at Union Theological Seminary. I ask this in light of the sociopolitical consciousness of so many of its scholar/teachers—Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Delores Williams, James Cone, Cornel West, and many others.

**T. C. W.:** One of the biggest influences was of course my academic adviser, Beverly Wildung Harrison, a white lesbian feminist pioneer of feminist Christian social ethics. I was inspired by the boldness of her vision in her Marxist-influenced social theory and iconoclastic critique of patriarchy in Christian thought and history, as well as her complex Christian theological conceptualization of abortion rights. Okay, you might wonder why I find the intellectual boldness of Harrison and other thought-leaders I met at Union to be so deeply inspiring. Note that I am not pointing to a self-aggrandizing boldness intended merely to shock or create a buzz in the media. Instead I am

referring to a kind of boldness that courageously steps into those cultural spaces of fearmongering political and religious manipulation and then persistently, creatively refuses to acquiesce. We know all too well that fear is very effective in silencing dissent from our tolerance for violence against and suppression of poor people's rights, bodily freedoms, and dignity in public life, especially socioeconomically poor Brown and Black women. But fearfulness can hold great sway in academic discourse as well. Too often, a stifling fear reigns even among liberal or progressive academics, that is, a fear of having a voice that sounds too passionate or has too much of an association with messy realities and choices of women's everyday lives rather than well-worn traditional paths of so-called neutral categories of inquiry.

I also had the privilege of being a student in one of the first womanist theology courses ever offered in a seminary in the United States. The pioneering womanist theologian appointed to the Union Theological Seminary faculty, Delores Williams, was the professor. She also served on my dissertation committee. One of the many things I learned from Delores Williams was the importance of cultural critique as a core aspect of theological work. I recall one course with her where she assigned conservative cultural critiques that included ideas about race with which I vehemently disagreed. She consistently required her students to develop political theology and ethics with nuance and breadth attached to our political assertions. We had to account for cultural narratives that preserved white supremacist epistemologies and assumptions in public policy in our theological claims, but only after we had studied those who concertedly authored them.

I learned liberationist methods from these and other faculty mentors as well as an assertive community of Black women student peer activist-intellectuals. A few of those student peers constructed some of the earliest Black queer scholarly interventions in longstanding expressions of black Christianity. Because of the encouragement of certain faculty and student radical Christian innovators, I had the opportunity to experiment with crafting theological language and moral claims that took seriously women's bodies, histories, voices, and choices.

**G. Y.:** How do we change the violent forms of academic discourse that overlook or, indeed, deny, the importance of Black women's bodies and their concerns?

**T. C. W.:** That's a challenging question because of its scope and complexity related to the varied disciplinary and ideological traditions that would need to be carefully incorporated into an adequate response. A couple of ideas come to mind, but I readily admit that they are merely starting points for a much more in-depth conversation that is needed.

In any reflection upon "violent forms of academic discourse", I make the preliminary assumption of a degree of blurriness in the lines conventionally drawn between academic discourse and public discourse. I think that

the questions academics choose to investigate and human conditions they deem worthy of study are deeply informed by dominant narratives of our broader sociopolitical ethos. Too often denial of the significance of how certain distorted characterizations of Black women's bodies and personhood are reflected in our sociopolitical practices can be cyclically reiterated in academic classrooms and texts.

To uproot violent victimization supported by language, symbolic metaphors, and conceptualizations, we must recognize the political relationship between particular and universal moral claims about human worth and dignity. That is, we must recognize how the particular and universal are indelibly imbricated in, for example, the manner in which broadly framed religious practices and moral values can nurture tolerance of violence against US-American Black lesbians and transgender women. An understanding of the particular experiences of stigma and dehumanization that incubate a disregard for their safety and freedoms facilitate and expand our understanding of universal moral life and truths about US society. Other starting points I would suggest for dismantling "violent forms of academic discourse" would include a commitment to exploring questions of empathy and protest. What kind of academic discourse engenders the possibility of empathy and solidarity? Antiracist critiques of the sexist and heteropatriarchal influences of Christianity could be a means of inciting empathy that counters and unseats tolerance of the violence. What are the imaginative or narrative rhetorics and dialogical, transdisciplinary, or memory-work methods that might enable it? In addition, academic habits that nurture a tolerance for violence reside in seemingly benign and even well-meaning scholarly studies and theoretical analyses. We must consciously develop academic discourse that insistently protests simplistic monolithic narratives about Black women's subjectivities as well as theological and ideological shibboleths superficially asserting common interests and shared power, glossing over the violence nurtured by inequalities.

**G. Y.:** At what point did you come to realize that race plays such a significant role in theology and that it raises all sorts of important ethical questions?

**T. C. W.:** In my work in religion, particularly on Christian faith and theology and violence against women, I became increasingly frustrated. Too often the racial dynamics that contributed to the perpetuation of intimate violence and its consequences were assumed to be negligible. Instead of attention to issues of race, I found that certain supposedly universal truths about the experience were asserted. Or in analyses of intimate violence that did incorporate some consideration of issues of race, I became frustrated with a frequent, generalized, almost rote, rejoinder expressing some version of "and for Black women this is worse." For a victim-survivor who is coping with the crisis of abuse or assault, her experience of racial identity and racism cannot be isolated from her experience of spiritual anguish, faith community support or

lack of it (if she has such a community), or sexist interpretations of Christian biblical teachings that routinely seep into popular views of women and girls in our Christianity-dominated US American culture. The emphasis on God's expectation of self-sacrifice so centrally taught in Christian theology represents one example of many I could cite. It is preached and taught as standard criteria demonstrating authentic faith in Jesus Christ. For a Christian Black woman victim-survivor, this theology can conjointly reinforce justifications that may be articulated by her abuser, indicating that she has a "racial-loyalty-obligation" to endure his violence that results from the racism he encounters in the world as well as Black communal expectations that she should self-sacrificially refuse to report her Black male abusive partner to police and potentially subject him to racist policing tactics.

In short, I could find few theological resources that took seriously the role of race and racism in the experience, consequences, and prevention of intimate violence. Without an appreciation for the intricate manner in which issues of race and racism can infuse every element of the crisis of the varied forms of gender-based violence, we will have a greatly diminished ability to recognize how those issues exacerbate the harm to those victimized as well as to our broader, collective moral life.

**G. Y.:** Why is the question of race so important theologically? There are some who might argue that theology concerns itself with deep metaphysical and divine issues and thereby is free of something as mundane as race.

**T. C. W.:** Well, who conceptualizes the theological claims about metaphysics and divinity? All such theological ideas are produced within some identifiable cultural context. It is precisely because theology attempts to offer the most expansive representations of divine, creaturely, and natural existence possible for our human imaginations that we must understand how particular cultural conditions such as race and racism discipline those attempts. To ignore the cultural locatedness of all theological endeavors undermines the seriousness of the theological project's quest to be truthful. All such theological ideas are produced by human bodies, birthed by a woman, physically abled in certain ways, sexually desiring in certain ways, emotionally in need of relational connection in certain ways, and so forth. Racial politics calibrates the worth and dignity of such embodiedness. Attending to embodiedness emboldens theological vision and narratives that can challenge dehumanizing calibrations.

**G. Y.:** At the moment, our country is experiencing a deep sense of mourning, anger, and violence over the killings in Baton Rouge, St. Paul, and Dallas. Much of this is deeply racially motivated. How might theology, one deeply informed by context and history, speak to this crisis?

**T. C. W.:** You have named the heart of crisis that so many Black and Brown people are experiencing. Their mourning, anger, and frustration are directly related to the acontextual and ahistorical understanding of the racism that

prevails in the United States. The multiple forms of public erasure of historical patterns of white dominance and institutionally reinforced assumptions of white superiority form the context for incendiary dynamics we are witnessing in both the tragedies that make the headlines and those that do not. Liberationist Christian theological voices are uniquely equipped to speak to those in Christian faith communities and beyond who are directly impacted by this crisis of violence because we are so thoroughly invested in a tradition centered on God's intervention in history through the Jesus movement in the first century, on the side of those the state executed and violently repressed. For liberationist Christian theologians and ethicists, we are enabled in speaking to the dynamics of this crisis by our identification with a gospel tradition where the Roman state tortured and executed Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, to send a message to rebellious Jews. And a divinely empowered movement of Gentiles and Jews flourished in defiance of such forms of state terror and humiliation aimed at reinforcing social hierarchies.

**G. Y.:** So much attention is focused on unarmed Black males who were killed and continue to be by the police and their proxies. Yet, it is Black mothers who we see weeping in the media. I often think of Mamie Till-Mobley and her pain and courage after her son Emmett Till was brutally murdered in 1955. What message do you have for Black mothers who suffer the loss of their sons through state violence?

**T. C. W.:** Before I attempt to formulate any kind of message to the mothers, I want to mention a few preliminary thoughts that your question provokes.

You rightly point out that so much attention has been focused on "unarmed Black males who were killed and continue to be by the police and their proxies." Unarmed Black and Brown women and girls have also been targeted in killings and assaults by police and citizens acting as their proxies. These incidents include victims such as Miriam Carey, Mya Hall, Alexia Christian, Meagan Hockaday, Renisha McBride, and others. Why has there been less attention and public outrage about these assaults? I commend the work of the African-American Policy Forum based at Columbia University Law School for their ongoing refusal to allow these crimes against women to be ignored.

As I struggle with the idea of crafting an appropriate message to the mothers, a barrage of related historical dynamics come to mind. When you mentioned these Black mothers and their pain and courage glimpsed in the media, I am reminded of cultural and academic debates on the moral significance of Black motherhood that date back to the nineteenth century. W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "the mother idea" portrayed Black mothers as Christian martyrs and a symbol of survival, dignity, and strength that represents the entire race of Black peoples. This idea was a defense of Black motherhood in the face of common assaults in American literature and discourse characterizing them as insatiably sexually promiscuous, broodmarish breeders of Black laborers,



asexual Mammies for white children, or some other dehumanized caricature. Moreover, Black single motherhood has been excoriated as a sign of pathology in Black communities by influential scholars such as Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and white sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, as well as nationally elected political leaders who were architects of late twentieth-century welfare-reform policies. But I do not want to respond to the Black mothers who have suffered the loss of their sons or daughters through state violence as symbolic representations of Black peoples who need to be defended or disciplined.

When you mention that the mothers have been seen weeping in the media, I can barely contain my anger about how little attention is paid by the media to the content of their advocacy that accompanies those tears. Their public witness also summons our recollection of the historical legacy of Black women's antiviolence activism, such as the leadership of media journalist and public intellectual Ida B. Wells that was centered on protesting brutal, widespread lynchings of Black men by white men. But I feel like it would be an extremely unfair burden to craft a message that praises these contemporary mothers in any way that expects them to offer the kind of self-sacrificial extraordinary leadership Ida B. Wells offered to our nation.

So I think that if I were to offer a message directed to the mothers of men and women who have been killed and assaulted by state violence in the US, I am not certain exactly how, but I would want to avoid trivializing clichés and patronizing advice-giving about what they must do for themselves or in behalf of the memory of their sons and daughters or for the sake of the moral health of US society imperiled by its white racism and violence. Instead, I would offer my support and care for them as they struggle with their grief in all the forms it takes. I would want to linger in the space and time of lament crucial for acknowledging the specificity of each mother's loss and mourning process. I would also want to address the racialized pressure some may experience to exemplify some version of the strong Black mother. I would seek words or actions that attempt to convey my belief that the fullness of their subjectivity and dignity must be honored in a manner that recognizes their entitlement to feel weak, lost, angry, bitter, to weep, to depend on others to hold them up, to be strong, bold, assertive, to offer persevering leadership or whatever response they choose and need in the wake of these devastating murders and societal betrayals.

## **PART VIII DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Traci C. West says that she was inspired by the boldness of Beverly Wildung Harrison's ability to develop complex, rich theological frames of reference to ground her cultural critique and defense of various rights. She demonstrates West's concept of "a kind of boldness that courageously steps into



those cultural spaces of fearmongering political and religious manipulation and persistently, creatively refuses to acquiesce.” Though some may think that Buddhism is too passive to be useful in confronting racism, Charles Johnson suggests that the ego is “the root and fruit of racism.” Underlying racism and its violence is the fear most people share of losing the “self,” or the “ego.” The kind of freedom pursued in Buddhism is one that “literally means to extinguish self-will, ego, and selfish desire.” As such, Buddhist ethics requires that the individual always interrupt injustice without self-concern. To what extent does Johnson’s “epistemological humility and egoless listening” contribute to the self-surrendering embedded within Buddhist ethics? How does this kind of self-surrender compare to the kind of boldness that West discusses?

2. West points out that “unarmed Black and brown women and girls have also been targeted in killings and assaults by police and citizens acting as their proxies,” but they receive significantly less media attention than victims who are Black and brown men and boys. Women of color are more readily included in the media as the grieving mothers of these men and boys, but even then their presence and their very identity is distorted. They are presented as having only deep hurt grounding their words, such that the “content of their advocacy that accompanies their tears” is ignored. How might the central ideas of Buddhism and West’s account of Christian theological ethics restore the experience of Black and brown women from what West calls “multiple forms of public erasure”? The rift between what is experienced in this case and what is reported might be accounted for in the lack of what Johnson calls “teleological love,” in which one’s love for another is directed at the potential within every human being to become “an enlightened, compassionate human being.” Can teleological love help to narrow the schism between the experience and perspective of women of color and their portrayal in the media? If so, how can we cultivate teleological love to redress this massive failure to appreciate the ongoing struggle and endlessly undervalued subjectivity of women of color?

## SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTIONS

1. Lawrence Blum establishes “rules for engagement” before discussing race in his classes, and has noted the success in this practice for making people aware of the impact their words have on those around them, particularly in emotionally charged discourse. Rules in this context are an effective way to get students speaking productively on a difficult subject. They are also effective in creating space for rational argumentative progress in logic, and meaningful and playful interaction in games. Can the use of “rules” help

bring together the element of playfulness discussed in bell hooks with the engagement of difficult and emotionally volatile subjects?

2. The treatment of enslaved Black people and indigenous peoples in the early history of the United States is indisputably morally reprehensible. Yet there persists intentional ignorance and denial such that, in the words of Peter Singer, “Perhaps the most appalling contemporary myth is that none of this happened.” The problem of dehumanization discussed in Part IV is reflected by the inability or unwillingness of whites individually and the United States government in general to recognize that atrocities that have been sanctioned and carried out by the United States government against indigenous peoples and other nonwhite peoples, and how the effects of those policies have benefited and continue to benefit white people. To what extent might the problems of continuing racism, sexism, and other dehumanizing practices be attributed to this lack of recognition? As such, is a memorial for the dehumanized and atonement on the part of the United States government a necessary first step before lasting progress can occur?
3. Linda Martin Alcoff explains that philosophy has a methodological flaw insofar as it aims for the most general, universal theories that account for human experience. To attain generalizability, philosophers sacrifice the context in which human experiences occur, especially experiences relating to embodiment, including gender and race. Clevis Headley returns to this idea throughout his interview insofar as discourse on race continues to fail because it is almost always engaged in without regard for historical context. Decontextualized, ahistoric perspectives on race necessarily involve abstraction that distorts and “[renders] invisible the historical, existential, and experiential features of the concept of race.” How can we develop the tools to keep history and context present in conversations about race, and what might those tools look like? And what are the implications for Western philosophy’s tendency toward abstraction and ideal theory?
4. Molefi Kete Asante emphasizes that victories can be claimed even in the worst moments. “The key,” he explains, “[is that] one must claim space or take space, intellectually or physically, in any situation however difficult or dire it may be seen.” Individuals need this space to “become subjects of [their] own narratives.” The creation and maintenance of space is also important for Linda Martin Alcoff. She explains that “carving out, and regularly nurturing, those spaces—journals, professional societies, conferences—in which all who are interested in the subfield of critical race philosophy can develop our work within a constructively critical community” is likely a good strategy in substantially and meaningfully diversifying philosophy. Is there currently adequate space in daily American life to sustain a more robust discourse on race and substantial improvement for the lives of the excluded and oppressed? How might we make more space,

especially a space that has not been compromised by various forms of hegemony?

5. The interviews with Lucius T. Outlaw Jr., Bill E. Lawson, and Clevis Headley all suggest that philosophy should be deeply informed by other disciplines to make headway on the problem of race both as a subject of philosophical inquiry and as an inequity needing redress in the discipline itself. Is Western philosophy's inability to see its own flaws a self-evident refutation of, as a paradigmatic example, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or the more general reputation of Western philosophy to see the "big picture"? Why is Western philosophy so resistant to self-knowledge and the project of determining it overlooks?
6. What is the relationship between narrative as a process of identity development and as a process of self-obfuscation?
7. Is it possible to focus on narrative to access the injustices done to groups of people without abandoning all hope for some notion of "truth" that stands apart from narrative?
8. Can love of truth be liberated from the white supremacist drive for absolute, transcendent, objective truth?
9. What is the difference between narrative, myth-making, and intentional ignorance?

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