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FROM THE EDITOR

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INTRODUCTION

This issue begins with our "Footnotes to History" section. Stephen Ferguson and I shine our spotlight on the Black "proletarian intellectual" Hubert Harrison. Harrison was a brilliant and influential writer, orator, educator, critic, philosophical materialist, and political activist in Harlem during the early decades of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, Harrison's materialist philosophy has not been the subject of any studies by African American philosophers.

Stephen Ferguson and I are proud to present an unpublished talk, "COVID-19, Capitalism, and Death: How and Why Black Lives Matter," by John H. McClendon III. McClendon was one of the keynote speakers at the Fourteenth African American Intellectual Thought Symposium at Fresno State University. We would like to thank Professor Thomas Ellis, the coordinator of the Africana Studies Program, and Ms. Chelsea Beeson for her hard work behind the scenes in organizing the symposium. A special appreciation goes to Dr. Malik Simba, the visionary founder and creator of this long-standing and vital thought-provoking series of conversations.


Lastly, we have a review of George Yancy’s Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America by Adebayo Oluwayomi.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

The APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience is published by the committee on the status of Black philosophers. Authors are encouraged to submit original articles and book reviews on any topic in philosophy that makes a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors welcome submissions written from any philosophical tradition, as long as they make a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors especially welcome submissions dealing with philosophical issues and problems in African American and Africana philosophy.

All article submissions should be between ten and twenty pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between five and seven pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author. Please send submissions electronically to apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com.

DEADLINES

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FORMATTING GUIDELINES

• The APA Newsletters adhere to The Chicago Manual of Style.

• Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use italics instead of underlining. Use an “em dash” (—) instead of a double hyphen (---).

• Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:


FOOTNOTES TO HISTORY

Hubert Harrison (1883–1927)

Born April 27, 1883, in Concordia, Danish West Indies (now St. Croix, Virgin Islands), Hubert H. Harrison was a brilliant and influential writer, orator, educator, critic, philosophical materialist, and political activist in Harlem during the early decades of the twentieth century.
decades of the twentieth century. He played unique, signal roles in what were the largest class radical movement (socialism) and the largest race radical movement (the New Negro/Garvey movement) of his era. Labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph described him as “the father of Harlem radicalism,” and historian Joel A. Rogers considered him “the foremost Afro-American intellect of his time” and “one of America’s greatest minds.” Following his death on December 17, 1927, due to complications of an appendectomy, Harrison’s important contributions to intellectual and radical thought have been neglected.

Born to parents of Afro-Caribbean descent, Harrison emigrated to the United States in 1900 as a seventeen-year-old orphan and lived in New York City. He completed his secondary training at DeWitt High School, graduating with honors as the top student in Latin and history. Financially unable to attend college, he passed the Civil Service examination and worked in the postal service.

While working at the post office, he continued his studies independently and extensively read sociology, literature, history, economics, and philosophy. His philosophical study comprised reading Herbert Spencer, Henry Thomas Buckle, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Karl Marx, and V. I. Lenin. But it was his studies of Marx and Lenin that inspired him to join the Socialist Party where he worked closely with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Bill Haywood, and Morris Hilquitt. Harrison’s articles in the International Socialist Review, The Call, The Modern Quarterly, and The Truth Seeker represented some of the earliest efforts at a materialist analysis of the African American experience. [See, for example, his brilliant critique of the mythology surrounding Abraham Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator.”]

The racist character of the Socialist Party led Harrison to the “Race First” doctrine. He founded his own Black Nationalist organization, Liberty League, and was editor of its journal, The Voice of the Negro. He later became editor of The Negro World, the organ of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Harrison was most known not for his publishing and writing, though he was extensively engaged in that arena, but for his tremendous oratory. Harrison’s major influence stemmed from his street orations during lunch hour at Wall Street, in Madison Square, and especially evenings, first at West 96th Street off Broadway and later on Lenox Avenue. A pioneer of the soapbox tradition in Harlem, crowds would listen for long periods to the broad range of lecture topics he would present and his penetrating analysis. His ability to make complex subjects clear and simple, and the power of his logic and presentation mark him as the quintessential proletarian intellectual of his day.

Despite his lack of formal degrees and training, The Truth Seeker compared his intellectual ability with such thinkers as Mark Twain, Luther Burbank, Thomas Huxley, Moncure P. Conway, and Ernest Haeckel.

REFERENCES


ARTICLE
COVID-19, Capitalism, and Death: How and Why Black Lives Matter

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INTRODUCTION
Our topic, “The Coronavirus and the Virus of Racism: Race, Class, and Gender,” is not only the subject matter of our discourse. More importantly, it essentially frames
the very format for our discussion at this juncture. Rather than the conventional symposium comprising face-to-face encounters, we have no other choice than to meet under the circumstances of online technology, in the manner of virtual exchange. For not to do so, essentially becomes a matter of life or death. Here a paradox arises wherein matters in the most pedestrian fashion (communication at an academic symposium) become crucially adjoined to concerns about life and death.

Undeniably, this concern is a stark imperative but also an objective (material) reality that all living beings must face in the challenge for survival. As human beings, we uncover that this “challenge for survival” transpires in a unique way. It is invested with values, social meaning, political-economic foundations, with ancillary social institutions, relations, and practices. It is particularly noteworthy that all of the above facets—concerning our unique human (social) configuration—ultimately emerge from the prevailing concrete mode of production. In the present instance, it is the capitalist mode of production.

In the essay, “Capitalism, Coronavirus, and the Road to Extinction,” Eren Duzgun writes about the destructive impulses of the capitalist mode of production in connection with COVID-19.

Billions of people who could be fed and housed are subjected to immense doses of insecurity, living their lives under the constant threat of joblessness, homelessness, loss of status and starvation. In a similar fashion, the environment which could be protected is systematically destroyed for profit, and killer viruses which could be contained are unleashed. Undoubtedly, Covid 19 has become the archetypal example that lays bare “the destructive impulses of a system in which the very fundamentals of existence are subjected to the requirements of profit.”

The fact the coronavirus is a pandemic simply means that it is global in character. Correspondingly, we must acknowledge the capitalist mode of production is a world-system. Thus, this involves global labor migration and international commodity exchange markets under the control and power of the largest corporations in the world. A significant dimension to corporate capitalist operations concerns the management of the international labor force and commodity exchange by means of effective communication channels.

Subsequently, the required telecommunications apparatus of the international capitalist system mandates reliance on the most advanced tech companies. We unearth that these tech giants are nonetheless capitalist corporations with tremendous power over communication and their position of power successively leads to immense wealth. Likewise, it follows that issues of everyday recourse are also concretely linked to questions about power and wealth—the primary context for meaningful deliberation on race, class, and gender—which occur within the capitalist political-economic social order.

Today, we all had to link into Zoom for this symposium—an instantaneous example of our present dependence on online technology—as a protective measure against disease and death. Simultaneously, it really enhances a very profitable venture for Zoom. COVID-19 has greatly benefited Zoom as a corporate-capitalist interest. In an article, “Zoom Turns Record Profit Thanks to Coronavirus Shutdowns,” NPR reporter Shannon Bond informs us Zoom reported higher sales and profit in the three months from May through July [2020] than it did all of 2019. . . . In the second quarter, sales more than quadrupled from a year ago to $663.5 million, well above $500 million that Wall Street analysts were expecting. Profit ballooned to $185.7 million from just 5.5 million in the same quarter last year. . . . The company has seen a big surge in use of its free service and has been pushing to convert many of those users to paying customers.1

In the midst of increased economic instability for workers, adjoined with drastic upsurges in coronavirus infections and deaths, the prosperity that Zoom now experiences is typical in the domain of the largest corporations. In just the first six months of the pandemic, Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway gained $56 billion in profits and still managed to lay off more than 13,000 of its employees. The coronavirus pandemic proved quite fruitful for the Walton family of Walmart and its shareholders. Despite doling out over $10 billion to its investors, 12,000 workers at Walmart were laid off. As reported in the Washington Post, “America’s Biggest Companies are Flourishing during the Pandemic and Putting Thousands of People Out of Work.”4

This article reports that Jensen Huang, Chief Executive of Nvidia (a company producing graphic chips), remarks, “With all that’s happening around the world, it’s really unfortunate. But it’s made gaming the largest entertainment medium in the world.” Data for Nvidia’s sales revenue from 2019 to October 2020 show a marked increase of +46 percent.5 Still, the picture presented by Nvidia’s growing sales revenue is not simply an indicator of how the capitalist economic world is all fun and games. It is estimated that at the minimum, 100,000 small businesses closed in just the first two months of the pandemic. In April, the unemployment rate reached 14.7 percent, the highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s. On December 10, 2020, the Economic Policy Institute recounted, “Unemployment Claims Hit the Highest Level in Months.” Although capitalists were raking in immense profits, we should not ignore the grim circumstances confronting the working-class. Nearly 26.1 million workers were either facing unemployment or experiencing a drop in hours and pay because of the pandemic.6

Moreover, latest findings indicate that “COVID-19 has killed 1 out of every 800 African Americans. . . . One study using data through July of 2020 found that Black people ages 35 to 44 were dying at nine times the rate of white people the same age. . . .”7 Citing another recent study, Liz Theoharis states, “Indeed, the myth of scarcity, like other neoliberal fantasies, is regularly ignored when politically expedient and conjured up when the rich and powerful need help. The pandemic has been no exception. Over the last nine months,
the wealth of American billionaires has actually increased by a third to nearly $4 trillion. . . . “Theoharis continues, “more than 400,000 Covid-19 cases are associated with the lifting of eviction moratoriums, forcing people out the safety of their homes.” She aptly summarizes this situation, “As COVID Rages, We are Experiencing Mass Abandonment Amid Abundance.”

ON THEORY AND METHOD: EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION GUIDED BY PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

From the onset, one can plainly see that our discussion has been fortified with statistical indicators. It is mandatory we bring into our examination empirical data in order to facilitate the description of the actual state of affairs and confirm generalizations that serve as first approximations. But at the crux of our deliberation are broader philosophical considerations, which require our undivided attention. And only in that way, we will avoid the risk of falling into vulgar empiricism. Wherein, we are caught in merely describing what is most apparent and neglect what remains as most essential to the topic under review. Throughout the discussion, the following questions form the conceptual background directing the course of our investigation.

We must ask: Is racism a system within itself? Does it operate as an autonomous system? If not, what is the systemic structure that grounds and anchors racism? Is the same course of analysis applicable regarding such categories as class and gender? Can one make sense of the contemporary idea of “class” or “class contradictions” as a tangible reality, standing apart from present-day capitalism? Or are we confronting ideological phenomena such as “classism” and “gender bias”—wherein the solution resides in training initiatives that bring the perpetrators of classism and gender bias to another level of consciousness? Must we conclude that the capitalist system—the dominant (material) force influencing the lives of white and male segments of the working-class—essentially orbits around misconceptions pertaining to race, class, and gender? In contrast, does capitalist exploitation—with its attendant ruling class interests—foster misconceptions about race, class, and gender? Successively, how can we best characterize and sequentially define the notion of false consciousness? Finally, what can best serve as our method of investigation?

For the investigation on race, class, and gender, our methodological approach starts from the analytical framework that the given aforementioned factors are not merely correlated in terms of some kind of subjective notion about intersectionality. Instead, it is argued that the systemic foundations grounding racism in its connection to gender oppression in reality emerges from the material conditions attendant with capitalist exploitation and its subsidiary bourgeois culture and ideology. It follows that class is not just as a single factor residing within the triad of race, class, and gender.

Rather, class is conceptually subsumed via the elaboration of how class relations are in accord with capitalism and its structural function as the definitive mode of production under review. Subsequently, race, class, and gender are not autonomous factors having equivalent value on the spectrum of theoretical significance as well as practical outcomes affixed to empirical indicators. Philosophically this means our examination is built on the standpoint of dialectical materialism, which necessitates the employment of a political economic critique of capitalism in its relevant implications.

ON THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN DEATHS AND THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC: WHY CAPITALISM AND RACISM ARE MORE THAN RISK FACTORS FOR DYING OF COVID-19

For a great number of Black people, racism is a relentless material condition of life. This creates multiple stressors that have an immediate effect on the quality of health, especially in poor Black working-class communities. The multidimensional nature of stress caused by racism inevitably impacts the quality of both physical and mental hygiene in the African American community. In her book Good Health for African Americans, Barbara Dixon provides an account of how day-to-day life for African Americans is a continual matter of coping with racism.

As racism persists, Black rage seethes and grows. Studies have shown that people who have the most control over their lives experience the least stress. Thus, the president of a car company suffers less stress than the assembly-line worker, and not just for obvious financial reasons. The more control you have over your life and its circumstances, the less stress you feel. And racism deprives people of control.

Dixon continues, [The] low-end job where you receive less respect than coworkers, the salesperson who waits on a white person when you were in the store first, the waiter who is rude or ignores your presence—all make you feel powerless. A burning anger slowly grows in you. Every Black person has experienced this, and you and I all know what it means. Scientists have always intuitively felt that anger is linked to the unusually high rates of hypertension and other diseases in blacks.

It is widely known that certain underlying health conditions are indicators for the greater risk of coronavirus infection. These preexisting conditions include an assortment of ailments and illnesses such as cancer, hypertension, heart disease, kidney and respiratory ailments, along with diabetes. In the penetrating “How COVID-19 Hollowed Out a Generation of Young Black Men,” Elliot Robbins notes, Black people have much higher rates of hypertension, obesity, diabetes and strokes than white people do, and they develop those chronic conditions up to 10 years earlier. The gap persisted this year [2020] when the Brookings Institution
examinined COVID-19 deaths by race; in each age category, Black people were dying at roughly the same rate as white people more than a decade older.11

Due to its institutional nature, the process of declining health conditions emerges as intergenerational and begins early in life. For illustration, there is a probability that children birthed by women with diabetes will develop a greater propensity for the disease. Born into such conditions is just the first step. If one lives in a poor Black family with inadequate health insurance, it follows that the cost of medicine and frequent visits to the doctor become hurdles that ultimately accelerate diabetes into the more dangerous condition of kidney disease. The allocation of medical service for kidney disease respecting racial demographics additionally complicates the situation.12 As Lizzie Presser explains,

Even clinical care can work against them [Black patients]; doctors estimate kidney function using a controversial formula that inflates the scores of Black patients to make them look healthier, which can delay referrals to specialists or transplant centers. . . . Black Americans are 3 to 4 times more likely than white Americans to reach kidney failure. Even at the final stages of this disease, they are less likely to get a transplant. When patients get to dialysis, they enter a system in which the corporations that stand to profit from keeping them on their machines are also the gatekeepers to getting a transplant. DaVita and Fresenius, its main competitor, control about 70% of the dialysis market.13

Clearly, the systemic manner of exploitative capitalist social relations, combined with contagious racist institutions, collectively inhibit healthy life opportunities for Black people. The shadow of death remains as a tenacious stranglehold on Black lives. The critical problems of unemployment, homelessness, disease, and death are not only the results of how capitalism (in the perverse context of COVID-19) maintains its conventional cycle of reproduction, accumulation, and expansion. But it also entails multiple forms of ruthless repression. This includes relentless assaults on Black workers that fight back about hazardous work conditions due to coronavirus. The National Employment Law Project conducted a survey in June 2020, which reveals,

The COVID-19 epidemic has shined a light on the unsafe and abusive conditions many workers endure. Many workers—especially Black workers—go to work even though they believe they are seriously risking their health or their families’ health. Workers do so because their employer has not adequately responded to their health and safety concerns or, even worse, they fear that their employer will retaliate against them for raising these concerns. For Black workers in particular, these beliefs are grounded in the reality that structural racism has made them especially vulnerable to contracting the virus and suffering serious complications or dying.14

Now I will begin by outlining what are the pivotal issues surrounding the analysis of “The Coronavirus and the Virus of Racism.” It is immediately transparent that the presupposition concerning “The Virus of Racism” is an analogy based on the natural elements affixed to the coronavirus as a pathological agent. It follows that the latter (racism) is truly a social designation, which by way of analogy, correspondingly assumes the form of natural attribution. Consequently, this signifies that racism is an impending danger to a healthy social life.

African American philosopher William R. Jones was among the first to advance that racism—as a form of oppression—analogically constitutes a virus.15 With the suitable methodology or grid of oppression, Jones argues that one can frame a theoretical structure, which outlines the necessary liberation strategies centering on economic, social, and political conditions. Accordingly, despite being a pernicious virus of oppression, racism is predictable and hence subject to the requisite antidote or vaccine. Dr. Jones further elaborates,

Methodologically, the virus-vaccine design comprises two phases. Phase one gives dedicated attention to the infectious agent—the “virus of oppression”—acquiring as much knowledge as possible about its composition and vital processes—in other words, an accurate phenomenology (grid) of oppression. Phase two develops a specific vaccine or antitoxin that neutralizes or destroys the noxious agent. It is important to note that phase one controls the entire enterprise in that the products of phase two are customized to fit antithetically the constitution of the virus that phase one uncovers. Obviously, the efficacy of the vaccine (the therapy) depends upon how accurately we map the virus’s survival mechanism. If the findings in phase one are inaccurate, phase two will be hit or miss.16

Jones contends that our critique of oppression must be explicitly substantive in detailed and comprehensive in scope. Issue-oriented reactions are insufficient means for developing systemic analysis. While the virus of oppression assumes multiple forms, they remain integrally linked together. It is a constant fact, when we start our inspection with police violence via state terrorism and proceed to racist medical malpractices, which are attached with the lack of insured health-care, we unearth that in all of these cases—death looms large on the landscape of Black lives.17

We readily understand how recent movements such as Black Lives Matter can possibly facilitate radical social transformation, specifically respecting African American survival and the impending dangers attached to both State Terrorism and COVID-19. Relating to State Terrorism, let us review a 2018 article published in the Journal of the National Medical Association. In this detailed study, “The Relationship Between Structural Racism and Black-White Disparities in Fatal Police Shootings at the State Level,” the authors initially state,
Of all firearm homicides in the world, 82% occur in the United States. Of these firearm homicides, 59% of the victims are Black, even though Black people comprise just 14% of the population. Nationally, Black people are eight times more likely to be killed by a firearm than White people. This Black-White disparity in firearm homicide in the U.S. has been widely recognized and has recently gained public attention in the context of fatal police shootings. Although the striking disparity in firearm death between Blacks and Whites has been documented for decades and a similarly striking racial disparity in the shooting by police of unarmed people has been reported the underlying cause of these disparities is still unknown.18

After conducting research that chiefly examines social aspects including residential segregation, gaps in incarceration rates, educational attainment, economic indicators, and employment status, the authors concluded: “These findings suggest that structural racism is an important predictor of the Black/White disparity rates of police shootings of unarmed victims across states.”19 The conjunction of these social aspects, along with the merging of the twin coercions—State Terrorism and COVID-19—crystalized in the tragic murder of Breonna Taylor.

We must not overlook that Taylor was a frontline worker, employed as a technician in emergency care. Facing the direct and immediate threat of the coronavirus, Taylor risked her life each day as an essential worker. Nevertheless, her death resulted from a fatal shooting at the hands of vicious cops. On September 24, 2020, the National Medical Association issued the following statement:

The National Medical Association proudly stands with most Americans in affirming that Breonna Taylor’s life mattered. . . . Her life came to a premature end after an unnecessary and unprovoked encounter with police in her home. The unfortunate reality is that Breonna Taylor is dead most likely because she lived in a community where the families of the judges who issue No-Knock Warrants and the police who execute them do not live. To disregard the set of discriminatory circumstances that make Breonna Taylor’s death a reality is to ignore the structural racism that results in the death of so many African Americans on a daily basis.20

The NMA continued, “It is this systemic racism, deeply embedded both in our legal and law enforcement systems, in which African-Americans are too often excluded from well-established police protocols and judicial precedents while often being subjected to arbitrary and capricious behavior.”21 In responding to the Breonna Taylor killing and the other myriad of murders by the police, the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM) conducted mass demonstrations. Successively, BLMM faced the conundrum of violent police repression on the ground as well as the increased risk of COVID-19 infection. Thus, the very fight against racist oppression is a life and death struggle immediately connected to health.22 Therefore, we must ask why and how is racism a danger to healthy living? Does racism have a definitive relationship to actual (natural) viruses in any concrete material sense? If it is the case, how can we describe and define this connection? Can racism penetrate into standard medical practices and research procedures?23 Can we plausibly claim that racism is a deadly agent functioning in a comparable manner to COVID-19? Or more precisely, does racism in its social function have derivative health outcomes that are pathological? Is it solely racism that poses as the danger? Or is it how capitalist relations of production configure the precise social position of Black people within its class structure that ultimately results in greater exposure to infectious diseases and higher mortality rates?

Dr. Camara Phyllis Jones, public health specialist and Black physician, insightfully conveys the following analysis.

What should not be neglected is that capitalist real estate interests profit from such “divested” communities. Likewise, supermarket food chains profit from these distribution procedures, and polluted air derives from industrial concerns in pursuit of profits, which originate at the expense of maintaining sustainable environments. Concomitantly, health care is first and foremost a for-profit undertaking, which is integrally tied to corporate pharmaceutical interests.

In response to questions about selling remdesivir for fighting coronavirus, the CEO of Gilead, Daniel O’Day, declared, “we could have charged $48,000 per dose.” Then he followed with “we have decided to price remdesivir well below this value” to “ensure broad and equitable access at a time of urgent global need.”24 He quoted a price of $3,120 for each treatment.25 Rolling Stone writer Matt Taibbi states,

Gilead even undercut the prediction of the Institute for Clinical and Economic Review. . . . A watchdog that calculated a fair price for remdesivir at $4,500 per course of treatment. When Gilead announced a price below that level, it caused a tremor on Wall Street, as its share price fell. The company had already offended the Gods of Capitalism by donating hundreds of thousands of existing doses of remdesivir to the government. What self-respecting American corporation voluntarily undermines its own market?”

Then, Taibbi explains,

Not Gilead, as it turns out, and really, not any pharmaceutical company. What Americans need to understand about the race to find vaccines and treatments for Covid-19 is that in the U.S., even when companies appear to downshift from maximum greed levels and it’s not at all clear they’ve done this with coronavirus treatments the...
production of pharmaceutical drugs is still a nearly riskless, subsidy-laden scam. Of special note, corporations like Johnson and Johnson "targeted Black women, and particularly overweight Black women, for marketing its powder while knowing it contained carcinogenic asbestos. They also hid that information from regulators and the public." Herein the notion of gender specific concerns of Black women's health is immediately linked to corporate capital. In view of the above scenario, the end-result materializes in the oppressive settings attendant with life circumstances typically found among Black working-class communities. The principal lesson from these circumstances is that human misery, disease, and death is only one side of the capitalist coin. The other side is the correlative and necessarily perverse reality that under capitalism dire conditions create immense markets for accumulating profits.

BLACK WORKERS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: WORKING FOR A LIVING CAN MEAN DEATH

In June 2020, the National Employment Law Project in their survey, "Silenced About COVID-19 in the Workplace," stated the following:

Our results suggest that virus transmission in the workplace may be exacerbated by employer repression and that the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black communities may be related to greater exposure of Black workers to repressive workplace environments. These findings are especially important now, as more businesses reopen and the dangerous implications of penalizing workers for raising health and safety concerns will only grow.

The survey continues that it was discovered that some 38 percent of workers continued to work despite serious concerns about the health risks to them and their families. Among Black workers, the rates are even qualitatively higher. "Three out of four Black workers (73 percent) have gone to work even though they believed they may have been seriously risking their health or the health of family members." Dr. Camara Jones goes on to emphasize how the precise class position of Black workers (within the US capitalist system) is specifically menacing and destructive in terms of sustainable health conditions. Therefore, when assessing the coronavirus impact on Black women and men, it is the precise capitalist class relations in play that actively grounds race and gender outcomes. Jones notes,

We are more exposed because of the kinds of jobs that we have: the frontline jobs of home health aides, postal workers, warehouse workers, meatpackers, hospital orderlies. And those frontline jobs—which, for a long time, have been invisible lives and undervalued in terms of the pay—are now being realized as essential work... It is tied to residential and educational segregation in this country. If you have a poor neighborhood, then you’ll have poorly funded schools, which often results in poor education outcomes another generation loss. When you have poor educational outcomes, you have limited employment opportunities.

Capitalism performs a decisive role respecting the financial structure of educational institutions. One way is the transformation of public schools into private business enterprises. Viewed as small businesses, certain charter schools profited handily from the pandemic. The relief funds given to charter schools—via the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)—due to the coronavirus included Primavera online charter school in Chandler, Arizona. The school was the recipient of a $2.2 million forgivable loan, in spite of the fact in Arizona public schools were not subject to reduced funding related to the coronavirus. At the same time, "The school also shipped $10 million to its lone shareholder: StrongWind, an affiliated company owned by the Primavera’s founder and former CEO Damian Creamer."

Damian Creamer and others have effectively transformed public education into a private capitalist venture, receiving large sums of tax dollars, under the veil of the coronavirus pandemic. Though workers in need of immediate relief, confronting frontline dangers of disease and death, receive meager pay, while working in hazardous conditions. In view of these facts, the class question emerges as front and center in deciphering the political economy of COVID-19.

The brunt of the coronavirus on the African American working class has been accentuated by the fact that the countless number of Black employees in the service sector have direct contact with customers and other workers. While we unearth production workers—for instance in the auto industry, warehousing jobs, and meatpacking—work in close quarters. The great number of essential workers providing healthcare are immediately in contact with people infected with the coronavirus and other contagious diseases. "More than 2,900 US healthcare workers have died in the Covid-19 pandemic since March, a far higher number than that reported by the government... People of color have been disproportionately affected, accounting for about 65% of deaths in cases in which there is race and ethnicity data."

In addition to African American workers employed in nursing homes, a considerable sum of Black people are patients in these facilities. Employment with the federal government as airline screeners has resulted in more Black workers infected—with some even dying. Scores of Black workers find employment with penal institutions. And dare we mention the disproportionate number of incarcerated African Americans. This array of private and public sector jobs continues to be "hot spots" at this moment of upsurge in coronavirus infections and deaths.

The astute examination of the dominant material interests that control the operation of these institutions must become the centerpiece of our critical analysis. By dominant material interests we mean the objective class concerns affixed to
political economic decisions and actions. Thus, dominant material interests dictate that paying higher wages reduces profit margins. Likewise, expenditures on the maintenance of the workplace environment that concern health and safety are costs that ultimately negatively impact profits.

A graphic illustration of this principle is the meatpacking industry in Waterloo, Iowa. With their penetrating article, Michael Grabell and Bernice Yeung describe “The Battle for Waterloo: As COVID-19 Ravaged this Iowa City, Officials Discovered Meatpacking Executives were the Ones in Charge.” The impact of the world capitalist system on labor migration becomes evident in the instance of Waterloo and meatpacking, where the corporate power of Tyson Foods has hegemony.33

This multinational workforce also includes Black workers that migrated to Waterloo, from Mississippi, over a century ago. The historical formation of the present configuration of workers in Waterloo offers important insight into the power relations surrounding race and class, i.e., the material (class) interests that control the operation of meatpacking and the attendant problems about COVID-19 facing Black workers. Grabell and Yeung remark:

Some [African Americans] who settled in town found work in the most unsavory parts of a family-owned packinghouse. Then . . . meatpacking became a path to the middle class for thousands of Black workers from the South, and an avenue toward empowerment as their union led a historic fight for civil rights in Waterloo. But many of those hard-won gains disappeared as the meatpacking industry evolved.

Grabell and Yeung continue:

A new company, which would become Tyson, reconfigured the work, slashing wages and demanding faster labor in tighter quarters. When workers across the Midwest balked, the industry turned to immigrants and refugees from some of the most vulnerable parts of the world. . . . Few realized how the power dynamic had shifted until the Tyson Waterloo plant became the epicenter of contagion this spring, pitting a corporation with a community facing deep racial disparities.34

As COVID-19 ransacked Waterloo, the Peoples Community Health Clinic faced a flood of coronavirus infected patients of various nationalities speaking a multitude of languages. The source of this massive outbreak of sickness and contagion was none other than Tyson Foods. Grabell and Yeung note, “99% of the patients either worked at the local Tyson Foods meatpacking plant or lived with someone who did. Some patients said they’d come from a town two hours away where an outbreak had shut down another Tyson plant.”35 In Waterloo, Tyson’s reaction was steadfast against closing, despite the continuing spread of the disease among the families in this working-class community.

With the scale of the crisis growing, Black Hawk County Sheriff Tony Thompson, who heads the county’s emergency management commission, joined with other local officials to urge Tyson to close the plant. But they were rebuffed, not only by Tyson whose CEO would publicly blame communities like Waterloo for bringing the virus into its plants but by Gov. Kim Reynolds, who resisted virus restrictions and blocked local officials from shutting businesses themselves.36

Such unrelenting realities bring to the fore the pressing need for the philosophical critique of the conceptual terminology that frames our discussion on COVID-19 vis-à-vis race, class, and gender. For illustration, what does it mean that Black women employed in nursing homes—for meager wages and long hours—are suddenly designated “Essential Workers”? So far, they continue to receive the same low pay, while facing the greater risk for COVID-19.

Philosophically, we know the idea of “essential” denotes the fundamentally defining feature of a given entity, subsequently that connotes a certain importance on a scale of value. If one loses a pancreas, kidney, or lung, they are more essential to necessary physiological functions than losing our hair. Since hair is more apparent, we can readily observe the process of balding.37 However, more generally and as a matter of principle, “appearance” does not have the same value as “essence.” Likewise, the manner in which things appear can in fact occlude the essence of the reality behind the appearance.

The designation of “Essential Workers” unequivocally signifies they are fundamentally important to the operation of capitalism. But the logic that governs the capitalist system stands on antithetical grounds. Hence, we have the additional low wages of Black women working in nursing facilities. For the capitalist, a cardinal material interest comes into play, viz. the essential need for labor to exploit. In the coronavirus context if a worker is “Essential,” then such labor becomes compulsory. Compulsory labor means you have no choice; one must work. Hereafter, the risk of coronavirus is effectively discounted, if not dismissed. This material interest sequentially assumes an ideological form, where “Essential Workers” gain a measure of public acknowledgment and even praise, while continually receiving low wages for hazardous work. This philosophical critique leads to a political economic question.

Why has the present debate over $900 billion stimulus deal not included at least $1,200 stimulus check for low-paid workers and only $600 was the compromise number? Rep. Rashida Tlaib patently recognizes the contradiction: “I’m hearing as we try to debate this COVID relief package that we can’t afford to give the people another $1,200 stimulus check. . . . Well, guess what, I know exactly where we can get the money to pay for it. And I believe Jeff Bezos knows exactly where as well.” In fact, Tlaib proposed that the US fund another round of checks by reversing President Trump’s 1.5 trillion tax cuts passed in 2017. Trump’s tax cuts served the billionaire, CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos’s class interests quite well. Amazon did not pay federal taxes for both 2017 and 2018, although it earned $3.03
billion and $10.07 billion in those successive years. In 2019 Amazon earned $11.59 billion and paid federal taxes at approximately 1.2% percent. Even former US secretary of labor Robert Reich comments, "Bezos and Amazon, as well as every major employer in America, can easily protect their workers. And the richest nation in the world can easily provide every American adequate income support during this national emergency. But under Scrooge capitalism, they will not do so unless forced." 

Yet, despite what seems as a bold declaration, the question as to why it did not happen, Reich fails to ask. The question escapes Reich. He frames the fundamental contradiction in subjective terms, that is, the individual selfishness of capitalists. The issue continues as more foundational and fundamental than Bezos and others embracing the Scrooge ethos. In contrast, it is the capitalist system—in its monopoly finance stage—align with bourgeois state intervention on behalf of corporate interests. We uncover corporate capital’s wealth and power dictates the very course of how the entire system functions via the exploitation of workers.

This last claim is empirically supported by Congresswoman Tlaib’s assessment on the debate over the $900 billion stimulus deal. The argument that insufficient funds limits allocations to workers is not fundamentally an ethical issue about selfishness. Many Amazon workers, nonetheless, understand why the argument about insufficiency serves as an ideological ploy. At the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, Amazon warehouse workers demanded better safeguards for protection against infections related to working conditions. This included the needed shutdown at facilities where workers suffered from the virus.

The executive director of the Warehouse Worker Resource Center, Sheheryar Kaaooosji, notes, “Amazon has a consistent pattern of trying to block and hide information. This is not the kind of response the second biggest employer in the country should be making.” Unfortunately, Kaoosji does not understand capitalist class contradictions and conflict. Amazon’s response is quite consistent with preserving its huge profits, which are based on the callous exploitation of its workers.

Robert Reich adds, “Jeff Bezos is worth $180bn, making him the richest person in the world. . . . Bezos has accumulated so much wealth over the last nine months that he could give every Amazon employee $105,000 and still be as rich as he was before the pandemic. So you’d think he’d be able to afford safer workplaces. Yet, 20,000 US-based Amazon employees had been infected by the coronavirus.” Alas, Reich comments on Jeff Bezos and Amazon suffer from the same defect as we found with Kaaooosji. Bezos and Amazon are not concerned with the workers’ welfare; the bottom line, from the standpoint of capitalists, can be stated in the following question: At what cost does one reduce the profit margin?

Bezos is directly involved in class conflict with Amazon workers across the globe. Although Amazon workers have battled to form a union, they remain unorganized. Nevertheless, outside union support from the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) has facilitated worker demonstrations and strikes. From Staten Island to Italy, Amazon workers have fought for safeguards against the coronavirus.

In March 2020, Chris Smalls was fired (in retaliation) for leading a strike at the Staten Island facility over demands for better protection of workers against COVID-19. Smalls and others wanted Amazon to close and clean the site after a worker tested positive with the virus. Also, it took an 11-day strike for workers at one fulfillment center in Italy to win increased daily breaks, a detailed agreement on cleaning and sanitizing practices at the facility, and staggered break times and working distances.

Given Amazon’s refusal to document the number of coronavirus infections, the workers in turn countered by compiling “a crowdsourced database based on notifications at facilities across the U.S.” Only on October 1, 2020 did Amazon report that 19,816 frontline workers had been infected with COVID (including Whole Foods Market) which transpired between March 1 and September 19, 2020. Significantly, this accounting did not include “its network of third-party drivers, which handle a portion of last-mile deliveries.” At this time, California is conducting court proceedings due to Amazon’s failure in responding to outstanding subpoenas about not reporting on COVID-19 cases in the state.

When we move from a singular focus on Amazon as paradigmatic of corporate capitalist’s interests to the general results of the over $900 billion stimulus deal, the outcome is the brazen and shameless display of capitalist power and wealth. While millions of workers face diminished incomes, unemployment, hunger, homelessness, disease, and death, the COVID-19 relief bill offers $200 billion in tax breaks. An estimated $120 billion of those tax breaks will go to the richest 1 percent. . . . Included in this package are: “A $2.5 billion break for racetrack meals; 6.3 billion for business meals, i.e. the ‘three-martini lunch’ deduction; a new provision under the Paycheck Protection Program that allows forgiven loans to also be tax deductible, giving businesses the ability to ‘double dip’ into the program; The bill also creates an independent commission to oversee horse racing, at the behest of Mitch McConnell.”

It is from this capitalist political economic context where we can better grasp racism and national oppression in its material implications. Heidi Shierholz of the Economic Policy Institute perceptively declares, “Black and Latinx communities have seen more job loss in this recession and have less wealth to fall back on. The lack of stimulus hits these workers the hardest. Further, workers in this pandemic are not just losing their jobs—millions of workers and their family members have lost employer-provided health insurance due to losing their jobs in the downturn.”

If we comprehend that racism is not only attitudes and beliefs about the existence of superior and inferior races, but more importantly behavior and social institutions that provide material support for such attitudes and beliefs,
The concept of pre-existing medical conditions among African Americans cannot be reduced to the notion of “racial traits” or “race characteristics.” Nor can Black cultural patterns and African American lifestyles remain the solitary point of departure for uncovering the causes for the high rate of coronavirus infections in the Black community. Those of us seeking to defend Black lives must remain on guard against the ideological prop of “blaming the victims,” which in turns justifies relentless capitalist exploitation and its accompanying racist/national oppression.

THE INTELLECTUAL BATTLE TO DEFEND BLACK LIVES IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: CONCERN ABOUT INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH PRACTICES TRANSPIRES AS AN IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEGROUND

Black intellectuals, medical professionals, and public health experts must remain diligent in upholding a high standard of scholarly responsibility, i.e., providing critical and precise interpretation of the legacy of racism in medicine, health care, and scientific research. We cannot blindly follow the dominant institutions regarding their conventional medical practices with respect to Black patients, scientific research findings, and corresponding modes of collecting and interpreting the data. Given its racist moorings and legacy, historically Black people have been legitimately skeptical and fearful of the professional medical practitioners and institutions and more generally the health care system in the United States.

The urgent need for the organized response of Black intellectuals, medical professionals, and public health experts is imperative. The individual efforts of members of this cohort remain insufficient in light of the institutionalized nature of the health care system and professional medicine. For example, as recent as December 20, 2020, Black physician Dr. Susan Moore died of the coronavirus. She documented her racist treatment before her eventual demise. Moore had to literally beg for the specific medication of remdesivir—the COVID-19 medication that was previously mentioned in our discussion—and was left in a state of severe pain for hours before receiving the necessary narcotics.

In the New York Times article “Black Doctor Dies After Complaining of Racist Treatment,” John Eligon reports, “Susan Moore . . . said the white doctor at the hospital in suburban Indianapolis where she was being treated for Covid-19 had downplayed her complaints of pain. He told her that he felt uncomfortable giving her more narcotics... and suggested that she would be discharged.” Moore responded, “I was crushed,” she said in a video posted to Facebook. “He made me feel like I was a drug addict.” Eligon continues,

In her post . . . she showed a command of complicated medical terminology and an intricate knowledge of treatment protocols as she detailed the ways in which she had advocated for herself with the medical staff. She knew what to ask because she, too, was a medical doctor. But that was not enough to get her treatment and respect she said she deserved. “I put forth and I maintain if I was white . . . I wouldn’t have gone through that.”

What we can take from this tragic experience is that racist medical malpractice has to be confronted on a united and widely organized scale. The pernicious legacy of racism within professional medicine is deeply ingrained and the most effective means of fighting it requires our collective resources firmly presented in an organized fashion. Anything less permits the continuation of tragic deaths on the doorsteps of our African American communities.

Indeed, from the start, the American Medical Association’s Jim Crow policies excluded Black physicians as members. Subsequently, the National Medical Association was organized in 1895, one year prior to the infamous Homer Plessy decision by the Supreme Court. Racist practices and policies were institutionalized into the very foundations of the medical field and this has resulted in apartheid-like disparities. In no uncertain terms, Elliot Robbins pronounces,

For generations, public health experts mostly ignored the disparities. When they did pay attention, they invariably blamed the victims—their [that is African Americans] “unhealthy” behaviors and diets, their genes, the under-resourced neighborhoods they “chose” to live in and the low-paying jobs they “chose” to work. Their chronic illnesses were seen as failures of personal responsibility. Their shorter life expectancy was written off to addiction and the myth of “black-on-black” violence. Many of those arguments were legacies of the slave and Jim Crow eras, when the white medical and science establishment promoted the idea of innate Black inferiority and criminality to rationalize systems built on servitude and segregation.

What should not be overlooked is the historic African American resistance to slavery and the collective drive post-slavery for human liberation. The notion of Radical Reconstruction denotes the decade after slavery ended with the Thirteenth Amendment. In alliance with African Americans, white Republican politicians—representing...
sought to consolidate power over the Southerners who lost the Civil War. On the Reconstruction period and Northern "white allies," Dr. Malik Simba aptly states, "The freedpeople were doomed by the moderate Republicans and the Radicals, a true historical misnomer and false moniker, who were not radical enough and who could not move away from a conservative Constitutionalism." 56

In the aftermath of Reconstruction, the violent assault on Black lives worked hand and glove with dismantling the nominal legal gains obtained during the previous historical period. Dr. Rayford W. Logan aptly characterized this action "The Betrayal of the Negro." 57 From 1894 to 1900, approximately 1,045 Black people were lynched. In the middle of this "social pandemic" emerged two important yet infamous declarations: the Supreme Court decision Plessy v. Ferguson, alongside the Frederick Hoffman book on Race Traits and the Tendencies of the American Negro. The former affirmed the legality of white supremacy and the latter was an ideological rationalization for the former. 58

Hofman's work ignored lynching and racist social conditions. He claimed the high mortality rate among African Americans was due to a dominant racial characteristic of weak physical constitution among Black people. In turn, Hofman argued that slavery had protected Black people from early death and it was a benevolent institution that essentially improved Black longevity. Three decades after slavery, he claimed, Black people were not only falling behind white people regarding social progress, but African Americans were also rapidly dying and facing extinction. Clearly, Hofman's justification for this ideological rationale was firmly located in the pseudoscience on racial characteristics as natural dispositions. He was firmly in step with the rise of Social Darwinism.

African American intellectuals such as Professor Kelly Miller and Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois critically examined and challenged Hoffman's book. From a methodological viewpoint, Miller and Du Bois rejected the notion of intrinsic racial traits as an explanatory framework and surrogate for what were indeed oppressive social institutions and conditions.

From the onset in his text, Hoffman claimed that he was speaking strictly in a non-biased fashion on behalf of science. An immigrant from Germany, Hofman noted he did not have any particular interest in perpetrating racism. Nevertheless, African American sociologist Kelly Miller offers a sharp critique of Hoffman's claim of racially neutral treatment. Kelly states, "freedom from conscious personal bias does not relieve the author from the imputation of partiality to his own opinions beyond the warrant of the facts which he has presented. Indeed, it was seen that his conclusion was reach from an a priori considerations and that facts have been collected in order to justify it." 59 As for Hoffman's thesis, Du Bois notes,

The work begins with a consideration of the numerical development of the race, and the author points out that here the Negro has lost ground in comparison with the white race, both north and south. His smaller rate of increase is connected with his larger death-rate which threatens is extinction. This death-rate, which is largest for constitutional and respiratory diseases, is traced by the author to the influences of certain "race traits and tendencies" rather than to the conditions of life. . . . [Hoffman] believes that along with a progressive improvement in the physique of the white American has gone a deterioration in that of the black... The author finally concludes that the cause of the failure so many people's and the struggle of life is the lack of those race characteristics for which the Aryan is pre-imminent; and the Negro shows evidence of the same fatal shortcomings. 60

Du Bois concludes, "To sum up briefly, the value of Mr. Hoffman's work lies in the collection and emphasis on a number of interesting and valuable data in regard to the American Negro. Most of the conclusions drawn from the facts are, however, of doubtful value, on account of the character of the material, the extent of the field, and the unscientific use of the statistical method." 61

Nevertheless, given Hoffman's professional status as an employee of Prudential Life Insurance Company, the book had an immediate impact on how insurance policies were rendered regarding African Americans. The most immediate outcome was the conclusion that African Americans were a high risk when it came to insurance policies. According to Hoffman, since African Americans were naturally disposed toward poor health and shorter lifespans, offering insurance involved greater risks for capitalist investment. It was all a matter of natural traits rooted in supposed forms of racial makeup. Therefore, Hoffman's research—on behalf of the American Economic Association—served as a powerful ideological weapon in the defense of the exploitation and oppression of Black people.

What are the lessons gained from this confluence of actions issuing forth from violent attacks, legalization of white supremacy, and pseudoscientific claims on race for us today? How can this historical legacy account for the present plight of African Americans, especially in face of this current pandemic?

For one, capitalist institutionalization of insurance policies—particularly health insurance coverage—remains a primary source for why African American working people rank higher among the uninsured than whites. Regarding health coverage, for 2017, while non-Latino whites were at 5.9 percent regarding the uninsured rate, African Americans were at 10.5 percent, nearly twice as many. Additionally, for African Americans under the age of 65, approximately 12 percent were without health insurance. Sofia Carratala and Connor Maxwell continue to report, "The United States is home to stark and persistent racial disparities in health coverage, chronic health conditions, mental health, and mortality. These disparities are not a result of individual or group behavior but decades of systemic inequality in the American economic, housing, and health care systems." 62

What Carratala and Maxwell ignore in their analysis is that what they describe as "systemic inequality in the American
economic system” is more accurately the exploitative class structure of the US capitalist system with its attendant forms of racial and national oppression. It is this capitalist system that frames how housing and health care really functions. But there are two main points of significance concerning their analysis. One, the examination of disparities uncovers the effects of systemic causes. Two, the causal factors are systemic capitalist class exploitation along with racial and national oppression and not something endemically associated with African American behavior such as designated “race traits.” Already, current research has publicly disclosed the real danger resides in the design and application of requisite technology, which identifies how medical services must be allocated on the basis of designated racial demographics. Erin Brodwin discloses, 

In the case of the hospital algorithm, for example, the system used cost to prioritize patients’ medical needs—which proved to be problematic, because health spending for Black patients was less than for white patients. [Tech’s] shortcomings on addressing racial disparities in health is also the product of disparities within tech companies themselves. The staff and leadership of many major tech companies remains overwhelmingly white—potentially impacting everything from product design to decisions about what types of health research are worth investment.  

As recent as November 30, 2020, the CDC had to revise previously undercounted data on African American death rates from COVID-19. The CDC initially reported that the death rate for African Americans was twice the rate for whites. Yet, Ishena Robinson reports,  

An adjusted data report published by the agency this week now shows that Black people are actually dying from the coronavirus at almost 3 times the rate of their white counterparts. The change came after Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) requested that the agency account for the disproportionate age breakdown in Covid-19 deaths experienced by people of color for different racial demographics. . . .

As Black physician Dr. Adewole Adamson warns, “If your decision-makers all look the same, you’re going to come up with some biased tools.” He also remarks, “It’s just like with Covid-19: We didn’t know there was an issue until we started collecting data on race and ethnicity.” The imminent dangers adjoined to health and mortality become saliently an issue of how social institutions, relations, and practices are organized and governed. In sum, who owns, controls, and manages hospitals, clinics, and medical research facilities, sequentially determine how they make the key decisions about policies relating to medical care and research which vitally impact Black people’s lives.

In the same respect, administration over how policing is conducted remains with those vested with police power, which is sanctioned by the state and not by the African Americans that are victims of state terrorism. In view of the kind of hegemonic power that circumscribes African American survival, we can disclose the very import of “Black Lives Matter” in all of its manifold and complex dimensions. 

In the month of December, the BLMM emerged in Columbus, Ohio, to protest the killing of Casey Goodson Jr., shot by a county sheriff deputy. On Tuesday, December 22, another Black man was murdered by Columbus police. It is reported that the 47-year-old Andre Hill had a cell phone in his hand, which police claimed was a gun. In the prior Goodson case, though he was a licensed gun owner, the sheriff’s office reported he was a dangerous threat to public safety. Nonetheless, the evidence from this shooting indicates he was shot in the back while entering his home. The Black Lives Matter Movement now must gear up again and take to the streets.

ON CAPITALISM AND DEATH: WHY THE BLACK WORKING-CLASS STRUGGLE MATTERS

When we transition directly to the political economic matter of profitability contra mortality—under capitalism—the fundamental contradiction becomes most apparent. Şahan Savaş Karataşli argues, 

The real problem is that under capitalism any strategy or form of action that could potentially save millions of lives is immediately rejected if it has the side effect of temporarily halting or slowing the pace of capital accumulation. It is crystal clear that the class character of capitalist relations is deeply at odds with the state’s manifest aim of protecting citizens’ lives. Government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic reveal once again that when rulers around the world realize that they need to make a choice between risking either capital accumulation or human lives, most opt for risking/sacrificing the latter without much hesitation. 

The current empirical data consistently supports the political economic analysis of capitalism presented by Karataşli. “When Apple announced its quarterly earnings in the spring, chief executive Tim Cook eagerly shared all the company was doing to combat the coronavirus, from manufacturing and distributing face shields to donating $15 million to relief efforts in the earliest days of the pandemic. But those investments stood in stark contrast to the $50 billion Apple said it planned to spend on stock repurchases—an amount so closely watched by Wall Street Journal that one analyst asked why it appeared slightly lower than previous years.”

Karataşli further demonstrates how the contraposition between capital accumulation and state regulations fostering rational policies come into conflict and are not just apparently issues concerning ineptitude in public health policy:

Interestingly, what appears at the first sight as ‘ineffective government responses’ to the Covid-19 pandemic—turn out to be more beneficial than its alternatives. Proposed strategies such as flattening the epidemic curve by means of ‘social distancing’ and ‘slowing down’ [business activity] are indeed
counter-productive for capital accumulation for most sectors. . . . This is why, as far as capital accumulation is concerned, it is more rational to let the disease spread and wait for it to disappear on its own than to prolong social distancing and slowing down, which would eventually exacerbate the existing economic stagnation and crisis in the capitalist world economy. 

This last point is most instructive. Karataşli effectively dismantles the ideological justification for the specious idea of “herd immunity.” When re-examining this statement, “as far as capital accumulation is concerned, it is more rational to let the disease spread and wait for it to disappear on its own,” we clearly uncover why the idea of “herd immunity” continued as a frequent reframe of the Trump administration. The rationale for “herd immunity” is not about medical science, rather it is a blatant effort at preserving capital accumulation. Given that Dr. Anthony Fauci is an apolitical health care bureaucrat, he has remained rather frustrated on the grounds of his commitment to medical science. Although working on behalf of the bourgeois state apparatus, Fauci cannot comprehend the full ramifications aligned with the political economy of capitalism vis-à-vis COVID-19.

Dr. Clarence Spigner insightfully remarks,

The United States’ market-oriented healthcare system has proved to be a breeding ground for COVID-19, especially among poor people who could not afford healthcare. . . . African Americans and others with underlying or pre-existing conditions exacerbated by social inequalities suffer and die at disproportionately higher rates under our present healthcare system. That reason, rather than race, underlies the explosion of COVID-19 in African American communities across the nation.

Spigner makes transparent that the “market-oriented healthcare system,” which is no more than health care for capitalist profits disregards the needs of poor Black and other working-class families. Despite lacking comparable resources and technology available in the US, Cuba not only provides free health care for all of its citizens, but has implemented comprehensive and systematic coordination measures for addressing COVID-19. Not to mention, Cuba per capita outcomes far surpasses the dismal policies of the Trump administration. Additionally, Cuba also trains African American students (and others from around the world) to become physicians. As for the African Americans at Cuba’s Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM), the main goal is in mind rest on serving Black people under threat of the coronavirus due to preexisting conditions.

In conclusion, when I visited Cuba, I heard the slogan, “Socialism or Death.” The Cuban people know very well the history of capitalism in Cuba. How it harshly repressed and indeed attempted to brutally destroy the very existence of Cuban social and cultural life. Embarking on the road of socialism, toward a new social order, is not only possible but an imperative for the Cuban people.

The lesson learned, the stark battle between socialism and capitalism is essentially about the choice between life and death. Our present crisis with the twin evils of State Terrorism and COVID-19 are clearly death sentences. We are disproportionately situated amid those killed by police and also among the over 300,000 coronavirus fatalities. Compromise with capitalism on the grounds it is the only game in town is not only a failure of vision, respecting the future, significantly, it is the utter disregard for the historic struggle that encapsulates “How and Why Black Lives Matter.”

NOTES

1. I want to extend my gratitude to Professor Thomas Ellis for the invitation to participate in the 14th African American Intellectual Thought Symposium at Fresno State University. Ellis is the current Coordinator of the Africana Studies Program at Fresno. In addition, I would like to thank Ms. Chelsea Beeson for her hard work behind the scenes in organizing the symposium. And, lastly but definitely not least, my special appreciation to Dr. Malik Simba the visionary founder and creator of this long-standing and vital thought-provoking series of conversations. While I have been fortunate to participate in all the previous sessions, our meeting today is particularly unique.

In addition to Professor Thomas Ellis, Ms. Chelsea Beeson, and Dr. Malik Simba, I must thank my MSU Undergraduate Research Assistant, Ms. Fatima Konare, and Fourteenth AAIT co-panelist, Dr. Clarence Spigner. Special gratitude to Dr. Stephen C. Ferguson II for the invitation to publish this paper in the American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience.


5. Ibid.


13. Ibid.


15. For a similar analogy using cancer as a trope, Amilcar Cabral in his eulogy of Kwame Nkrumah states, “The African peoples and particularly the freedom fighters cannot be fooled. Let no one,
and tell us that Nkrumah died from cancer of the throat or any other sickness, No, Nkrumah was killed by the Cancer of betrayal, which we must tear out by the roots in Africa, if we really want to liquidate imperialist domination definitively on this continent.


17. Aldina Mesic, Lydia Franklin, Alex Cansever, Fiona Potter, Anika Sharma, Anita Knopov, and Michael Siegel, "The Relationship Between Structural Racism and Black-White Disparities in Fatal Police Shootings at the State Level," Journal of the National Medical Association 110, no. 2 (April 2018), http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnma.2017.12.002. For a view on medical malpractice that develops from the application of racially skewed research, see Sharon Begley, "Racial Bias Skews Algorithms Widely Used to Guide Care from Heart Surgery to Birth," STAT News (Boston Globe Media Partners), June 17, 2020, https://www.statnews.com/2020/06/17/racial-bias-skews-algorithms-widely-used-to-guide-patient-care/. Regarding health coverage, for 2017, while non-Latino whites were at 5.9% regarding the uninsured rate, African Americans were at 10.5%, nearly twice as many. Additionally, for African Americans under the age of 65, 12.1% were without health insurance. See Sofia Carratella and Conny Maxwell, Health Disparities by Race and Ethnicity, Center for American Progress, May 7, 2020, https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2020/05/07/484742/health-disparities-race-ethnicity/

18. Mesic et al., "The Relationship Between Structural Racism and Black-White Disparities in Fatal Police Shootings at the State Level."

19. Ibid.


21. Ibid.


26. Ibid.


29. Ibid.


33. Michael Grabell and Bernice Yeung, "The Battle for Waterloo: As COVID-19 Ravaged this Iowa City, Officials Discovered Meatpacking Executives were the Ones in Charge," ProPublica, December 21, 2020.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Our illustration about hair has a unique twist linked to capitalism and hair care. Although facial hair is biologically useless, Clark and Bryant cite a New York Post article about men paying up to $8,500 in acquiring facial hair transplants. Josh Clark and Chuck Bryant, "Facial Hair is Biologically Useless: So Why do Humans Have It?" Wired, December 20, 2020.


45. Ibid.


50. For an excellent example of the kind of research that effectively challenges racist scholarship in public health policy and medicine, see Clarence Speigner, "COVID-19: The Myth and


53. Ibid.


61. Ibid., 133.


68. Whoriskey et al., "America’s Biggest Companies Are Flourishing During the Pandemic and Putting Thousands of People Out of Work." 9

69. Karațişli, "Pandemic’s Lesson: Global Capitalism is Uneven and Dangerously Particularistic.”


71. For an excellent account on African American physicians trained at Cuba’s Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) and their assessments on COVID-19 health care policy, see the *STAT News* presentation, “Cuban Trained Doctors—Confronting COVID-19” Published on September 13, 2020. Produced by Ed Mays, Private Television.

BOOK REVIEWS

**A Welcome Leftward Turn to Marxism: Ferguson on the Philosophy of African American Studies**


Reviewed by John H. McClendon III

**MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

Philosopher Stephen C. Ferguson II forges an intellectual breakthrough with his dialectical synthesis and critical analysis respecting the philosophy of African American Studies. To date, Ferguson’s area of inquiry—philosophy of African American Studies—has not received the same attention within the field of African American Studies. We discover, for example, that history, literature, the arts, and social sciences as disciplines have received far greater treatment than philosophy as objects of investigation. Concurrently, philosophers have for the most part found that doing the philosophy of race is a sufficient nod in the direction of African American Studies.

For those partisans in African American Studies, perhaps the reason for this lacuna resides in the fact that the philosophy of African American Studies inverts the process of analysis, wherein African American Studies become of the very object of inquiry. Thus, the philosophical question of theory and method in African American Studies become the driving force in Ferguson’s treatment. Ferguson employs the dialectical and historical materialist (Marxist) method of analysis to African American Studies. Ferguson’s Marxist philosophical analysis of the Black experience has two immediate outcomes. First, class struggle is integral to the examination. And, secondly, the idealist metaphysical constructions and mystical formulations on Blackness/African identity are subject to critique.

Unlike most philosophical inquiry, Ferguson’s book is a philosophical work that effectively explores the historical—material—context of African American Studies. In his introduction, Ferguson demonstrates how contending conceptual frameworks and ideologies were manifested...
in the early stages of African American Studies (AAS). Black nationalist (Afrocentric) ideology was one of many voices and thus not the only current in AAS. Consequently, the philosophical treatment of Blackness or the Black experience was not limited to nationalistic review. At the center of its critical materialist insights and dialectical approach is the crucial methodological problem of locating the meaning of Blackness or defining what is the Black experience. Ferguson is explicitly detailed about this issue. He steadfastly rejects any approach that relies on metaphysical abstraction or mystical constructs that attempt to define the nature of Blackness. Moreover, he eschews resorting to methods of analysis that presumes some kind of Black philosophical prespective or African worldview. From the onset, Ferguson informs us that Blackness (i.e., the Black experience) is the object of investigation/subject matter of AAS.

**Philosophy of African American Studies: Nothing Left of Blackness** is the product of Ferguson being an astute scholar in both fields of study. Just as biochemistry demands expertise in biology and chemistry, the same holds true for the philosophy of African American Studies. I have observed African American philosophers that were not scholars in AAS as well as scholars in AAS that were not philosophers. The fact remains there are very few that wear both hats. Ferguson remains both a scholar of philosophy and African American Studies. Ferguson’s critical examination concerning the philosophy of African American Studies comprises the culmination of years of study and research aimed toward building a framework of unitary inquiry.

Ferguson’s unique locus enables deeply probing into African American Studies with a sharp philosophical lens. Simultaneously, he writes to a broad reading audience, inclusive of those within AAS and philosophy. Clearly, Ferguson appeals to a wide audience, nevertheless, he maintains a high level of erudition and penetrating insights. Scholars, students, and the general reader can grasp his arguments without fighting through a high degree of technical jargon, which we often find with academic philosophical works. Ferguson is not caught in the jungle of academic jargon nor the never-never land of neologisms.

What is exceptional about Ferguson’s position is not only his professional training and expertise but also (more importantly) his political locus as Marxist philosopher. As Marxist philosopher—in the intellectual tradition of C. L. R. James—Ferguson takes us on the road to “Dialectical Materialism.” Where James was concerned with “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity,” Ferguson makes a specification on this general proposition. Thus, we have “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Black Humanity” as represented in the discourse on African American Studies. From the philosophical standpoint of dialectical materialism, Ferguson grounds James’s pioneering efforts.

Another point of originality comprises how Ferguson highlights the material—on the ground—student-led struggle for African American Studies. With the apt phrase, “Class Struggle in the Ivory Tower” Ferguson conveys that African American Studies was not merely an addendum to the curriculum of higher education. Instead, the birth of African American Studies was strategically part of the radical movement. This movement sought to fundamentally transform the very foundations of the Ivory Tower.

Subsequently, the first chapter, “Class Struggle in the Ivory Towers: Revisiting the Birth of Black Studies in ‘68,” substantially comprises content that is historical in its character. Here the reader decipher that AAS is the direct product of struggle. More particularly, how the intensification of class struggle was situated in the specific context of fighting racism. The movement for AAS was based on the combined forces of the Black working-class community and its young African American students on white campuses, circa the late 1960s. In the wake of increased political agitation for changes in the academic environment for African American students, various working-class forces emerged in the vanguard. Among those forces were Marxist-Leninists and leftist elements that gave voice to the Black proletarian character of the student struggle.

For illustration, Ferguson informs us about the often overlooked Afro-American Institute at Antioch College. This exploration into the Marxist led program at Antioch is of no small matter. This Institute faced the full weight of state censure from the federal government; while correspondingly Yale University received capitalist (corporate) funding to sustain its burgeoning African American Studies program. Ferguson makes clear to the reader such differences were rooted in the class/ideological orientation of these respective programs.

The esteemed Marxist scholar Professor Robert N. Rhodes played a decisive role in the development of the Institute and the emergence of AAS more generally. A walking encyclopedia and genius of first mark, many students at Antioch and later Ohio University—not to mention community activists throughout the country—were beneficiaries of his broad wealth of knowledge. Unfortunately, Prof. Rhodes died in December 2014. Given the paucity of works that acknowledge Rhodes’s African American Studies contributions, it follows that his legacy remains virtually unknown to the general public. After Rhodes’s passing, his life summary appeared on the Ohio University website. It comes as no surprise that this obituary notice turned to Ferguson’s text for vital information on the Rhodes legacy. Ferguson’s thoughtful deliberations on Rhodes open a new window into not only Rhodes but also more generally the decisive impact of Marxist influences on the development of AAS.

However, the value of Ferguson’s text is not only in the fact that he identifies the left-wing activists of emergent AAS but also he outlines the historical process, which demonstrates how the left and specifically Marxist proponents were later marginalized within the field. Ferguson documents that the demise of Marxism and the ascendance of Afrocentrism are two sides of the same coin. This was philosophically expressed, in AAS, with the decline of the dialectical materialist outlook and the corresponding emergence of subjective idealism. The reader should take note how Ferguson keenly displays how this historical shift was
manifested as philosophical vantage points in AAS with idealism and dialectical materialism are contending worldviews.

Hence, Ferguson’s penetrating critique of the philosophical muddle surrounding Afrocentrism and the politics of African cultural identity sans a critique of capitalism. This is especially significant for those fellow students and scholars that are recently introduced to African American Studies. Ferguson offers a stringent philosophical critique of Afrocentricity, and chapters two through five become must reading for the student of AAS. Especially young students that aim to capture how the current philosophical state of affairs in AAS came into existence. Ferguson studiously uncovers that the present state of affairs is the product of intense ideological struggle.

In the contemporary intellectual milieu, where the Afrocentric paradigm is dominant, I think many will turn to Ferguson’s work to clarify their comprehension. He informs us that Afrocentricity is philosophically rooted in subjective idealism, along with its attendant pitfalls respecting the embrace of the “Utopian Worldview.” The bulk of his text—chapters two through five—offers the most thorough-going critique of Afrocentricity in AAS to date. For example, Chapter 3, “New Wine in an Old Bottle?: The Critique of Eurocentrism in Marimba Ani’s Yurugu,” is a critique of what a number of Afrocentrists view as the quintessential philosophical text of Afrocentrism.

Ferguson points out that while many credit Molefi Asante with pioneering Afrocentricity, Ani provides the most comprehensive elaboration on the Afrocentric critique of Eurocentrism. Ferguson tells us that Ani’s central thesis is the reduction of Eurocentrism to Plato’s architectonic. Although Ani majored in philosophy—as an undergrad—her grasp of the history of philosophy and even the fundamentals of Plato’s thought, Ferguson uncovers, is rooted in basic errors of an empirical and conceptual nature. For example, Ani argues that Plato was a materialist and his materialism is foundational to Western thought and its ancillary imperialist legacy.

Ferguson clarifies how Plato’s idealism contra materialism grew out of the particularity of his milieu and Ani’s reductionism misses the point about Plato’s locus in the history of philosophy. Ani’s attempt at grounding the legacy of Western imperialism in Plato’s “materialism,” Ferguson reveals, is an idealist subterfuge that distorts not only the history of philosophy but also our understanding of Western imperialism and white supremacy. Absent from Ani’s reflections is that the dialectical materialist philosophical viewpoint offers a critical perspective of capitalism.

In Chapter 4, “The Utopian Worldview of Afrocentricity” Ferguson continues critically dismantling Afrocentricity, while the fifth chapter, “What’s Epistemology Got to Do with It: The Death of Epistemology in African American Studies,” invites us to reexamine how the Black critique of the notion of “white ideology” in the social sciences fell into the trap of subjectivist idealism. From this development—circa the 1970s—Ferguson moves to tackle the more recent work of Patricia Hill Collins.

He especially addresses Collins’s principal notion about the configuration of Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Ferguson effectively demonstrates there is a concerted line of continuity from the “Utopian Worldview” to the “Death of Epistemology.” This becomes most evident as we witness Collins’s conflation of the sociology of knowledge with epistemology. The content of knowledge—epistemology—is effectively reduced to its context—sociology of knowledge. Wherein context transpires as a host of “lived-experiences” accredited to various groups of Black women. Instead of articulating how a materialist epistemology is relevant to assisting the liberation of Black women, Collins simply posits a subjective approach to the construction of a sociology of knowledge. By the demarcation of epistemology from the sociology of knowledge, Ferguson’s treatment of the “Death of Epistemology” in AAS transpires as a monumental contribution to the field and undoubtedly will aid students new to AAS.

Although Ferguson’s book is a serious work of scholarship, the conscientious reader is afforded the opportunity to actually enjoy a humorous moment or two, while working through the intricacies of philosophical inquiry, historical details, and social analysis of African American Studies. As a first-generation major in Black Studies, I was especially delighted at Ferguson’s keen attention to the historical details; particularly the theoretical and ideological complexities of this neoteric field and its ancillary political and ideological conflicts over the direction of African American Studies. With his book, African American Marxists and Marxism are no longer absent from the discussion of AAS and the philosophical fashion of Afrocentricity is readily exposed.

In conclusion, this book is the most significant philosophical examination of Black Studies to emerge in the past forty years. Ferguson provides both critical materialist insights and creative dialectical approaches to this important field of study. Ferguson’s Philosophy of African American Studies: Nothing Left of Blackness is a must-read for those who seek to utilize AAS as a weapon of liberation.

The Disposable Man—Grotesque White Fantasies of Black Male Death in George Yancy’s Backlash

George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2018).

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In Backlash, George Yancy examines what it means to be embodied as Black and to be the target of white racist hatred, as exemplified by the numerous racist messages he received for daring to write a “love letter” to white Americans requiring them to risk their white selves in order to dismantle the structures of white supremacy and
structural oppression. This work is courageous, to say the least, especially noting that it was written at a time when white ethno-nationalist rhetoric has become mainstream in national political discourse in the United States. Now, white people are no longer covert in their exhibition of racist attitudes or ashamed to blatant avow racist rhetoric. Through the mobilization of white fears, economic anxieties, and political worries by a coalition of white ethno-political platforms, right-wing media outlets, and complicit college administrators, many race-scholars have either been silenced or “forced” into exile. As the subtitle of this book shows, Yancy is one of the courageous professors who dared to speak honestly about racism in America. He dared “to love” in the face of vitriolic hatred directed at him by white people.

In this book, Yancy introduces the reader to the underbelly of the American imaginary as exemplified by the numerous responses he received from his widely read letter, “Dear White America,” which was published in the New York Times’ opinion column, The Stone, on December 24, 2015. This is why the book is appropriately titled—Backlash. Although the responses from white readers of this letter were varied in style, form, and tone, most of them shared a common feature: expressing the desire to cause death, bodily harm, or destruction to the bearer of such a daring message. It was a cacophony of raw desires to do something harmful, violent, or hurtful to the bearer of such an unsolicited love message that exposes the grotesque white fraternization with the destruction of the Black male body. Emotions like anger, disgust, contempt, and indignation were readily discernible from the tone and content of the white respondents who found Yancy’s letter as evidence of a Black male professor who has forgotten his place of subordination within America’s racially hierarchized society. The white respondents were especially united in their desire to harm him through violent means, including death. Their responses showed that “the struggle against racism is not just an intellectual struggle;” it is a struggle of life and death. From the vantage point of the white reader, Yancy was asking for too much or the near impossible—asking them to interrogate their whiteness and their complicity in structural racism in the United States. In White Identity Politics, Ashley Jardina describes what Yancy is requesting from white readers in “Dear White Americans” as a tough ask because it touches on the fundamental constitution of white identity and the privileges that comes with whiteness. It is a misstep that pushed them to come to terms with the tensions between recognizing their privileges and power as a group and how these advantages are systematically unfair or harmful to racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. Yet, Yancy hopes that this approach would force white Americans to have an honest and critical conversation about race.

Backlash consists of an Introduction and four chapters. This review will not summarize the Introduction since its contents are integrated throughout the four chapters. Rather, it will identify themes from the Introduction, particularly “taking risks, vulnerability, and growth,” as they arise in each chapter. In chapter one, “The Letter: Dear White America,” Yancy revisits where it all began—the “Dear White America” letter. He rearticulates his true intentions for penning this letter. He imagines this letter as a gift, though one that appeared to be a heavy burden for his intended recipients. Perhaps one of the most challenging and deeply penetrating aspects of the letter is where Yancy implores his white American readers to acknowledge that...
they are “racist” while at the same time asking them to accept this as a gift. It is important to state here that in the way Yancy crafts his reflections in his letter, he is not merely engaging in name calling. A more careful reading of it shows that he was interested in asking white Americans who benefit from structural racism to engage in critical self-reflection that would reveal how they are complicit in a social-political system that unfairly gives privilege to whites at the expense of people of color. Engaging in such critical self-reflection may lead to the possibly frightening realization that “to be white in America is to be always already implicated in structures of power.”

He hoped that such a realization could engender a new form of conscious reflection on the part of his white readers to get off their high horse of self-righteousness and self-absorption that prevents them from seeing how they contribute to the problem of racism in America.

In chapter two, “Dear Nigger Professor,” Yancy shares some of the visceral and violent backlash he received from his white readers for his “Dear White America” letter. It is the most difficult part of the book to read because of the sheer multitude of racial slurs and profanities directed at him by many of his white readers. Anyone who has respect for human dignity, irrespective of racial or ethnic affiliations, would struggle to read this chapter. Many of the white responses that Yancy features in this chapter were vile, gloomy, and filled with bile, anger, and violent threats including bodily mutilation and death. The white respondents were clearly offended by the “audacity” of a Black male professor calling members of a white community racists when they cannot even imagine Black people being in a position to chastise them about anything, much less a well-educated Black intellectual doing so. The following excerpts from the book, depicting some of these responses, are instructive. One white respondent, for instance, writes, “This belief that niggers even reason is blatant pseudo-intellectualism.” Another white respondent writes: “calling a Nigger a professor is like calling White Black and Wet Dry.” These kinds of expressions, as well as many others highlighted in the book, expose the true face of anti-Black racism in America—a system of unmitigated hatred that suddenly transforms or reduces a distinguished professor highlighted in the book, expose the true face of anti-Black oppression against oppressed groups in the United States. Yancy’s display of vulnerability led him to disclose his Black male privilege and sexism, as well as his complicity in the oppression of women within a gender-based hierarchy of society. He had hoped that, by being honest about his own male privilege and sexism with his readers, his white American readers would be willing to admit that they benefit from white privilege and that they are complicit with structural racism and racial oppression.

Despite Yancy making himself vulnerable and admitting his own faults, white readers did not reciprocate. Rather, they lashed out against him even as he reached out to them in an honest and loving manner. He considers this backlash to be the result of white fragility, which hinders them from risking their white selves and endangering their participation in a system of privilege and racial comfort that depends on the subordination of people of color. He also considers much of the backlash to the “Dear White America” letter, and the white entitlement undergirding that backlash, to be a defense mechanism put up by white people who benefit from whiteness to detract from the very difficult engagement in critical thinking about their place in a white supremacist society. They could not bear the responsibility for their complicity with structural and racial oppression; they could not bear the burden of whiteness. The negative responses that he highlighted in this chapter shows that his white respondents either misunderstood or undermined the central message of his “gift” to them—the call for white folks to speak out against racism regardless of the risks involved. Nonetheless, Yancy emphasizes the importance of having the courage to speak the truth about white privilege and anti-Black racism despite receiving many negative responses to his call for white readers to...
engage in existential self-risking that he called for in his letter. As he reminds us, “I understand that the letter was bold, but in this time of racist toxicity, which has always been the reality in America, we can’t afford to be silent.” He wants his white readers to be able to sacrifice their comfort and “fragility” to confront the problems of racial injustice in America today.

There are at least two problems with the third chapter. First, it is unclear how Yancy justifies his assertion that there is such a thing as Black male privilege. For example, he does not provide an empirically grounded account of Black male privilege, with ways of measuring how it operates in society and detecting its existence. Nor does he account for how males in a subordinated racial group possess the power necessary to have male privilege. If anything, Black males “do not possess the institutional means to create it or maintain it do not actually have it.” In my view, Yancy still needs to flesh out the concrete ways in which his privilege as a Black male confers structural power over non-white people in the United States. In this chapter, he writes about the necessity of accepting the gift (i.e., love message) originally offered in that letter. As he writes, “this book, which still functions as a letter to me, through me, though we are different; I am a woman and white.”

However, Yancy is aware that what he is asking for will challenge their complicity in racial oppression (and as a human. This is something that deserves urgent attention in scholarship across disciplinary lines in higher education in the United States. In spite of all this, Yancy maintains that he is hopeful that white Americans can begin to think differently about their whiteness within a fluid and relational context. An important first step towards achieving this goal is for white people to recognize the ways in which they are racists for reaping comfort while Black and people of color suffer. According to Derrick Bell, a racial realist view of white racism entails an acknowledgement that our anti-racist actions “are not likely to lead to transcendent change and, despite our best efforts, may be of more help to the system we despise than to the victims of that system we are trying to help.” So how do we make sense of Yancy’s hopefulness (that his white readers will challenge their complicity in racial oppression) if it is examined through the lens of racial realism? Will it
make any difference at all? Yancy seems to anticipate Bell’s concern that an anti-racist effort asking white people to “risk the white self” may further exacerbate rather than resolve the problem when he writes thus: “I assure the reader that I am not naive, but I continue to be hopeful, even as my hope feels as it is sometimes complicit with white supremacy.”

The problem with Yancy’s hope that white people will have the courage to risk their white selves is that this will not suffice to rupture the structures of oppression and systemic racism. Consequently, if hope does not work, is pessimism an option? Following James Baldwin, Yancy writes in Backlash that he does not consider himself a pessimist because he is alive. That is, the assurance that life opens room for unimaginable possibilities, e.g., white America changing to such an extent that white people cease to be racists. Yet he declares in the same breath, “I am not an optimist either because white America is far too bleak in its ethical treatment of Black people and people of color. As such, as I continue to hope, I don’t want hope to become a crutch.” What Yancy truly wants his readers to accept here is unclear. On the one hand, he is hopeful that white Americans can change; on the other hand, he expresses his pessimism about the likelihood that white Americans will actually change.

I think the positive upshot of Backlash, the hope that racists whites can be transformed to interrogate their whiteness and their complicity in structural racism in the United States, does not extend to what Yancy describes as a third alternative to pessimism and optimism—post-hope. He holds that “[p]erhaps what we need is a kind of post-hope.” This involves a painful recognition for Black people that, “[t]o be Black, in this view, is to have always already been sentenced to death in virtue of being Black within a white supremacist world, where I am just waiting to die.”

It is similar to what Abdul R. JanMohamed describes as the existential lot of the Black or “Othered” body within a white supremacist society, which is to become “the death-bound subject.” In my view, what Yancy refers to as “post-hope” is just a variant of pessimism. To imagine the Black subject as eternally death-bound is to put an existential limitation and a mark of finality to possible outcomes for such a being. It is to imagine a world where the hope for a better existential outcome for the Black subject is nonexistent. In other words, it is not to imagine a world where Blackness could ever be humanized, transformed just as the white racist could “hopefully” be transformed. Yet, Yancy maintains that “[p]ost-hope is not being a pessimist or giving up in despair, rather it is a stance that we take that is more realistic.” His version of racial realism as stated here, is unmistakably pessimistic about the existential outcome for Black lives—the certainty of death. This brings the following questions to mind: what becomes the value of Yancy’s hopefulness for the dismantling of structures of oppression and systemic racism if the Black subject is always death-bound in his vision of a post-hope world? What becomes the value of his letter and book urging white people to take risks that would allow them to see themselves as problems? What is the point of all these? Perhaps one should imagine Yancy as a gadfly—a temporal equivalent of Mrs. Biona MacDonald, the intriguing character that Derrick Bell references in Faces at the Bottom of the Well.

NOTES


3. Colleges are meant to be a place for free intellectual inquiry and dialogical debates even on the most difficult or controversial topics/ideas. But in recent times, not all professors feel that freedom. Across the United States, in the past year and a half, a lot of university professors, have been targeted via right-wing online campaigns because of their research, their teaching or their social media posts. Some have lost their jobs, and others say they fear for their families’ safety. Here are a few examples: Josh Cuevas, an associate professor in the school of education at the University of North Georgia, was subjected to scrutiny by his congressional representative for getting involved in an argument on social media about Donald Trump. Ted Thornhill, an assistant professor of sociology at Florida Gulf Coast University, came under white racist attack, championed by far-right news sites and racist blogs, for daring to teach a course entitled “White Racism.” See Anya Kamenetz, “Professors Are Targets in Online Culture Wars: Some Fight Back,” NPR News, April 4, 2018, https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/04/590928008/professor-harassment; Ted Thornhill, “Why I Teach a Course Called ‘White Racism,’” The Conversation, February 1, 2018, http://theconversation.com/why-i-teach-a-course-called-white-racism-90093.


5. Ibid., 41.


9. Ibid., 15.


11. Yancy, Backlash, 28.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 51.

14. Ibid., 52.

15. Ibid., 38.

16. Ibid., 101.

17. Ibid., 55.


19. Ibid., 35.


21. Yancy, Backlash, 95.

22. Ibid., 105.

23. Ibid., 112.

24. Ibid., 120.

25. Ibid.

27. Yancy, Backlash, 22.


30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.


34. Yancy, Backlash, 101.

35. In Faces at the Bottom of the Well, Bell describes Mrs. Biona MacDonald as an intriguing Black character who risked everything to fight white racial oppression, but when asked about it, she did not say she risked everything because she hoped or expected to win against the whites who held all the economic and political power, as well as the guns. Rather, she recognized that—powerless as she was—she had used her courage and determination as weapons to “harass white people.” See Derrick Bell, Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism (New York: Basic Books, 1992), xii.

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