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NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

FROM THE EDITORS, JOHN McCLENDON & GEORGE YANCY

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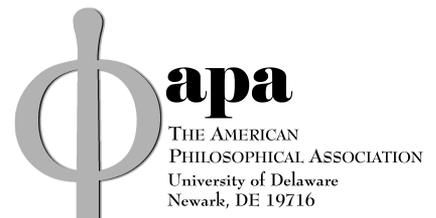
“The Veiled Presence of Race in the Philosophy of Art:
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Philosophy and the Black Experience

John McClendon & George Yancy, Co-Editors

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FROM THE EDITORS

We are happy to begin the new academic year with three articles from very different perspectives. We had planned to have a different format. However, due to technical problems, we will not have the projected essay/interview of Dr. William R. Jones.

The three articles in this issue bring insights to bear upon three significant philosophical motifs. In our first article, Monique Roelofs explores the important theme of how philosophical aesthetics and philosophies of the arts engage in forms of discourse and various theoretical moves that obfuscate the extent to which presumed race-neutral methodologies in philosophical aesthetics actually function to reinforce the norms of whiteness. One important aspect to her analysis is how the concept of relationality “is key to an understanding of the entanglements of aesthetics and race.” Her exploration of the complex relational connections between aesthetics, issues of racialization, and power creates an incredibly rich philosophical space for further analysis. Our second article, by Timothy Chambers, is a very timely piece that explores how, “in many situations, it is possible to evaluate a person’s behavior using either of two rival ethics: an ethic of autonomy/independence, and an ethic of cooperation/conformity.” Chambers shows how these two rival ethics are mutually exclusive, and how a person’s behavior is subjected to critique by an uncharitable observer. He links this tendency toward an uncharitable reading of a person’s behavior to the impact of prejudice. He frames this discussion within the context of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, where he analyzes two images—one of whites (the Getty Image) and one of a Black person (the Associated Press Image) wading through the water. The Black person was said to be “looting,” thus stealing something that did not belong to him, while the whites were said to have “found” some food, the implication being that they were in need. Chambers’s piece raises broader issues regarding the possibility of how to unlearn racist prejudices, thus challenging larger issues of disrupting an ethics of double standards that are saturated with racism and that distort the intentional meanings that Black people bring to their own behavior. Our third and final article, by Reverend Renee McKenzie, is a concise delineation and analysis of what constitutes a womanist ontology. Within the context of the piece, McKenzie argues that a womanist ontology is fundamentally related to lived sociality, that is, the presupposition of the other within a larger social context that renders the self-other dynamic intelligible. This self-other dynamic is not simply horizontal or socio-communal, but vertical; that is, metaphysical or spiritual as well. While certainly acknowledging the power of white supremacy, in stream with Lewis Gordon and Anna Julia Cooper, she is insistent upon emphasizing the importance of womanist agency and an existential and spiritual movement

toward wholeness that is nevertheless possible within a context of anti-Blackness. McKenzie also argues that womanist identity vis-à-vis a pre-social structure is “founded in a time when the self, in a deflected desire for God, directs toward the other in responsibility lived out as justice.”

The editors continue to think that an awareness of the history of an African American philosophical tradition is of critical importance no matter what school of thought one is aligned with or what contemporary problems are on the agenda. The current status of African American philosophers in the profession emerges from a definite history. For example, seventy years ago, William Fontaine became the first African American to receive the doctorate in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania. Yet, despite earning his doctorate from UPenn and having previously chaired the department in philosophy and religion at Morgan State University, when Fontaine was hired as the first African American in the philosophy department, he held the rank of a mere instructor. Although Fontaine published widely and had administrative experience, it took several years before he was granted tenure. Hence, though he was the first African American to receive tenure at the University of Pennsylvania, Fontaine’s esteemed status was certainly long overdue. And as we survey the status of African American philosophers today, we must judge critically how far we have progressed in the past seventy years.

ARTICLES

The Veiled Presence of Race in the Philosophy of Art: Reclaiming Race for Aesthetics

Monique Roelofs
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Race is a conceptual blind spot in philosophical aesthetics and the philosophies of the arts. While compelling avenues of philosophical thought reveal the intertwinements of conceptions of the state, the public, and the individual with racial constructions,¹ that is to say, with lived realities that are organized with the help of racialized categories, aestheticians tend to bypass such entanglements or to insulate their premises and inquiries from their relations to racial formations. Philosophical investigations of common and prominent themes in aesthetics by and large proceed in ostensibly colorblind terms. I have in mind here, for example, discussions of art’s cognitive, imaginative, and affective dimensions, the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, everyday and environmental aesthetic systems, the politics of art and criticism, the nature of art’s situatedness in culture, capital, history, and modernity, and

the analysis of art's gendered and class-inflected workings—in short, numerous areas of concentration at the heart of the field.² There are exceptions, especially at points where critical race theory intersects with aesthetics and, more narrowly, in the study of beauty, cross-cultural aesthetics, and artistic practices marked in terms of cultural “Others.”³ But characteristically the discipline—its theoretical paradigms, central preoccupations, institutionalized self-understandings, standards of quality—shuns exposing its structural principles to the workings of racial difference.

In the context of asymmetrical power relations, many have argued, colorblind policies give *carte blanche* to the racial forces that be, whether intended or not.⁴ Colorblindness not only fails to contest racial domination, but assists also in its maintenance and reaffirmation against perceived breaches. Within a racialized social and conceptual system, what may seem to be race-neutral methodologies in fact typically reassert white privilege. The field of aesthetics is not exempted from this well-documented phenomenon. The inattention to race shores up the aesthetic pillars of whiteness and bolsters the whitening supports of aesthetics.⁵

Racialization and aestheticization (which concerns, among other things, aesthetic contributions to the shaping of identities, relations of power, and formations of knowledge and culture) stand in complex historical interconnections. These must be studied and worked through in order to create more tenable social, economic, cultural, political, environmental, and aesthetic constellations.

What part can aestheticians play in this? How can we achieve a critical, non-racist frame of aesthetic analysis, normativity, and experience? In the following, I will sketch a direction of inquiry that can galvanize the specific strengths aestheticians may bring to questions of race. A finesse in differentiating subtle layers of aesthetic meaning-formation in their sociohistorical context is called for in a realm that cathects such significant psychic energies as racialized aesthetic consciousness. Perspectives on race in political philosophy and cultural analysis stand to gain from philosophical insights into racialized structures of aesthetic imagination, perception, and affect. Beyond that, a role is cut out for philosophers who are prepared to think sharply about current aesthetic controversies regarding matters of race and nation, such as those over the Danish caricatures of Muhammad, the remake of New Orleans after Katrina, the narrowing figuration of the “aesthetic homeland” under three consecutive USA PATRIOT Acts, and the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh.

In order to ready aesthetics for these theoretical tasks, a somewhat abstract philosophical move is necessary. I propose to take as a starting point for a deepening understanding of the links between aesthetics and race the phenomenon of relationality, because relationality in the racial realm does a great deal of work for relationality in the aesthetic world and vice versa. Race (like, and as inflected by, gender) clearly acquires its significance in a network of human relationships. Conceptions of race help to negotiate relationships among individuals and communities. Aesthetics, too, pertains to relationships, namely, to relations connecting artists, audiences, forms, communities, cultures, critics, theorists, historians, curators, artistic movements, modes of perception and address, and so forth. Though this is not often emphasized, forms of normativity in aesthetics (aesthetic standards, values, grounds of aesthetic judgment, etc.), whether of the Kantian variety, or those elaborated implicitly or explicitly by Richard Wollheim, Kendall Walton, Arthur Danto, Richard Shusterman, Theodor W. Adorno, Julia Kristeva, and others, are indebted to a broad and varied array of such relationships.

Indeed, aesthetic normativity takes shape within a network of relationships. It cannot be established by any simple set of the relata I have just begun to list. Each variable affects the aesthetic modes of address and exchange undertaken by aesthetic agents. Each of these and numerous other factors play a structural role in the aesthetic field. Aesthetic theory must acknowledge the potentialities proffered by the full range of supports of relationality. Limiting the range of normatively relevant factors too drastically (e.g., by centering them narrowly in human competencies, the qualities of objects, the artist-viewer/public axis, or individualist conceptions of agency) amounts to a curtailment and simplification of aesthetic existence, a diminishment of its resources. What aesthetic normativity consists in, on an adequately expansive relational picture, is a matter for another discussion. However, if aesthetics is to stand in an enlivening, non-oppressive relation with the realities of aesthetic interpretation, embodiment, and practice, it must allow that these different parameters make normative contributions to the process of creating aesthetic values and ends. For such values and ends cannot be set in ahistorical fashion but are under formation in the complex interactions that lend aesthetic life its richness.

Reflecting on aesthetic norms, contemporary aestheticians often take these relationships for granted, under the heading of generic notions such as “culture,” “social context,” “the public,” “history,” “theory,” or “the body.” The following statement, which opens an influential book in the field, is exemplary of this tendency: “My starting point is simply the observation of paintings, novels, stories, plays, films, and the like...together with an awareness of the importance these works have in our lives and in our culture.”⁶ The term “culture” in this remark, and in the analyses it introduces, masks a pronounced relational politics, both within the designated community, and on the part of the philosopher who references the traditions and values of this collective. We can catch a glimpse of the political choices and realities summoned behind the above passage by asking: What kind of importance is being assumed and created? Whose lives are understood to qualify as “ours?” In which temporal and material constituencies of the culture do they unfold? By what criteria are the relevant cultural strata distinguished from which sections of which other cultures? Given that a culture is a heterogeneous entity that relies on processes of legitimization, the philosopher who grounds aesthetic norms in cultural practices⁷—no matter how abstractly—takes a position in a contested political field. Behind the notion of culture stretches a vast complex of relationships that instantiates configurations of power and ineluctably generates conflict. Aesthetic normativity and racial identifications are under formation in this contestatory relational space, which they also help to shape collaboratively. In order to gain insight into their precise operations we must therefore theorize them in tandem, inquiring beyond generic appeals to culture.

The concept of relationality is key to an understanding of the entanglements of aesthetics and race. By taking a detailed look at the fine-grained relational negotiations that result in aesthetic constellations (such as formal codes, conceptions of sound or visibility, modes of spectatorship, etc.) philosophy can hope to forge the conceptual apparatus needed to begin to take account of the aesthetic productivity of race. At the level of relationships, we can learn, for example, about the ways in which racial formations support aesthetic norms and underwrite historical accounts of aesthetic normativity. We can bring into view how structures of relationality enable and constrain possibilities for aesthetic intersubjectivity and exchange. This may reveal how these structures complicate the nature of pressing contemporary aesthetic controversies, such as those surrounding the future of New Orleans. Plans

for the city will be of decisive influence for a broad range of differentially racialized relationships that were sustained by its aesthetic heritage and environment. The significance of these relationships must be carefully weighed in any historically sensitive picture of the relevant aesthetic responsibilities and entitlements.

The advantage of a relational picture is that it acknowledges the specificity of aesthetic phenomena, while simultaneously registering their social, political (and so forth) grounds and impacts. Relationships function as hubs for a wide array of interactions between aesthetic elements and race. I have already mentioned the impact of racial factors on aesthetic structures. I call this “racialized aestheticization.” The correlative of this phenomenon is “aesthetic racialization.” This concerns the creation of racial constructs via aesthetic formations, that is to say, the racial productivity of aesthetic elements.⁸

Aesthetic racialization contributes distinctive complexities to the relational politics undertaken by the philosopher who comments on “our” culture, or, for that matter, on mixed cultures, or on the cultures of “Other” nations and populations. Cultures are political entities that are at the same time also aesthetic phenomena. Aesthetic values and experiences inform their authorizing principles, guiding imaginaries, exemplary qualities, operative inside-outside distinctions. Such values and experiences enable cultures to make themselves legible in various modalities (of tactility, smell, etc.). They also enable cultural hierarchies to be passed on into hybrid and syncretic forms. As embodied subjects who participate in and reflect on culture, we implicitly articulate aesthetic stances. We assume positions in relation to a field of multimodal aesthetic norms by which our and others’ cultural identities are oriented. These norms steer the trajectories of racial becoming and desire that are open to us for identification or disavowal. As agents of and commentators on culture, we enact a valorization of and a responsiveness to an acculturating spectrum of racializing aesthetic norms that help to make us who we are.

Our participatory and analytical relations to culture articulate a set of aesthetic and political choices. It is here where we can play a part in subverting current and traditional forms of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization.⁹ For although the aesthetic norms that help to shape our racial identities to a certain extent precede the voices we adopt in various media (whether they be fictional or analytical writing, movement, or paint), we can attempt to own up to the positions we occupy in the racial and aesthetic field.¹⁰ We can witness the voices aesthetic racialization and racialized aestheticization have imparted to us. Examining the conceptual repercussions of these phenomena, we can make conscious decisions about which theoretical tenets need revision and which ones may be kept unchanged. Experimenting with alternative tonalities and loci of enunciation, we can continue our work of devising critical modes of address, refreshing the relations with our publics and predecessors.

Philosophers of art have cautioned against the risks of theoretical isolation, such as the threat that aesthetics might fall short of the standards developed by other branches of philosophy, and have insisted on the interdisciplinary nature of the field.¹¹ Race is probably not what they had foremost in mind, but as aestheticians gain fluency in this undertheorized aesthetic zone, they can hope to enrich their interdisciplinary bonds, initiating dialogues with critical approaches in the humanities (notably, art history, cultural analysis, musicology, literary and film studies, and so forth) and the sciences (for example, dynamical systems theory, sociology, cultural anthropology, economics, psychology, and so on). They may also hope to intensify their connections with other disciplines of philosophy,

such as Africana, Asian-American, Latin-American, American-Indian, Latina/o, feminist, social, political philosophy, and ethics. The learning will in each case go both ways. Aestheticians may wish to adopt for themselves theoretical standards and methodologies that govern work in these fields, as they broaden and strengthen the intellectual base of their discipline.

The same back-and-forth can ensue between public controversies and aesthetic theory. How should the aesthetic violence that was inflicted on the life world, the aesthetic history, and cultural/environmental rootedness of the inhabitants of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans in consequence of a lack of adequate protection reflect on the question of the city’s future, including its aesthetic marketability? What was the specific aesthetic stab the initial Danish caricatures did or did not deliver constituencies within Muslim populations, considered in light of the ways the cartoons challenged representational norms (restrictions on depiction, within and across cultures) but also conformed to them (dependably effective stereotypes, longstanding genre-conventions). How can we understand the status of the operative norms in light of the socio-economic and media controls that restrict speech in allegedly freedom-loving societies? Which, if any, elements of the relational fabric surrounding the initial publication in Denmark transfer to the reprints in various newspapers, which mobilize a different aesthetic context? What was the specific aesthetic message Mohammed Bouyeri, Theo van Gogh’s murderer, might have attempted to convey about constructions of European-Dutch culture when he knifed a letter to his victim’s body, in an allusion to the bodily calligraphy sequences in van Gogh’s and Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s film *Submission: Part 1*? In what ways can we think beyond the all too simple dichotomy of free versus restricted speech in these cases, by shifting the discourse to the values we might wish to foster and sustain through the structures of aesthetic relationality that we inhabit?

In what respects does the aesthetic of the 9/11 attacks resemble the aesthetic efforts of the pipe bombing art student, whose unfinished smiley face of explosions was to highlight the surface of the United States eight months later? How may the 9/11 aesthetic (and its rigorously dramatized, embodied wounding of the U.S. imaginary) be read in light of a history of aesthetically supported imperial expansion and (neo)colonialism that rendered aestheticized domination an economic and political pillar of Western nationhood? Witness in this light the currency of the opposition between “American soil” and “terrorist attack,” and its rhetorical masking of the violent treatment of indigenous and subaltern peoples on that “soil.” Can we lend our understanding of aesthetic normativity a new spin if we consider the monitoring of library loans under the PATRIOT Act in light of the ways Hume has taste support virtue of character and an ethnocentrically defined national culture, among other things, by affecting “what books we shall read?”¹²

Current controversies demand aesthetically incisive readings of racial questions and vice versa. They create an aesthetic politics from racialized and racializing aesthetic norms in conjunction with representational histories, media conventions, interpretive protocols, figurations of aesthetic power, alienation, and belonging. In bringing to bear on these questions our understanding of the multiple registers of signification that make for aesthetic meaning, we may be able to enrich public debate, initiating more reflective and perhaps less damaging answers, while at the same time gaining insight into the relational factors that lend aesthetic life its forms and substance.

Aestheticians today can draw inspiration from thinkers such as Cornel West, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Gloria

Anzaldúa, Edward Said, Barbara Johnson, and Rey Chow, whose pathbreaking work at the intersection of aesthetics and race has opened up powerful new paradigms in the past decades. This work should remind us that there are debates to be catalyzed, and new audiences to be created of artistically adventurous and theoretically eager colleagues and students. Not in the least, we can look out for a wealth of unforeseen theoretical and artistic possibilities as we begin to address a blind spot that has dulled the aesthetic imagination far too long.¹³

Endnotes

1. See, among others, David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
2. A ruthlessly abridged catalog of works that keep race at bay from these themes could list: Jerrold Levinson and Jenefer Robinson, eds., "Art, Mind, and Cognitive Science," *JAAC*, 62.2 (2004); Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes, eds., *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Though race is mentioned briefly in Noël Carroll's essay in this collection, its specific logic does not impact the argument, which might as well have concerned, say, class; Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, eds., *The Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Peterborough, CA: Broadview Press, 2004); Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith, eds., *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004); Lydia Goehr, "Political Music and the Politics of Music," *JAAC*, 52.1 (1994): 99-112; Joseph Margolis, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art? Lectures in the Philosophy of Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Paul Mattick, *Art in its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Gregg M. Horowitz, *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). Strikingly, in light of the work on intersectionality in feminist philosophy since the 1980s, besides an interview with Adrian Piper and an essay by Peg Brand, the only two essays that problematize racial configurations in Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) are by non-philosophers who are also women of color (and, alongside Piper, the only women of color in the anthology). With the exception of an essay by Laurie Shrage, the same goes for Hilde Hein and Korsmeyer's *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). While 12 out of the 16 texts collected in the more recent *Women, Art, and Aesthetics*, edited by Brand and Mary Devereaux (*Hypatia*, 18.4 [2003]), discuss race at least in passing, the subject in each case receives sparse theoretical consideration, except in a short poem, centered around the figures of Kant and, yet again, Piper, as well as in a full-length essay on representations of black women written by a non-philosopher, who is also the only woman of color among the contributors. As may be surmised from some of the above citations, the absence of a sustained debate on questions of race crosses the analytical-European continental divide in philosophy, marking a great many writings on aesthetics by philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Mario Perniola, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray.
3. Significant exceptions include: Goldberg, 30; Mills, 61-2; Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billy Holiday* (New York: Random House, 1998); Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*, Part III, "Aesthetics Democraté" (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); George Yancy, "A Foucauldian (Genealogical) Reading of Whiteness: The Production of the Black Body/Self and the Racial Deformation of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, edited by George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004); Meg Armstrong, "The Effects of Blackness": Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54.3 (1996): 213-36; Crispin Sartwell, *The Art of Living: Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Traditions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), chs. 4 and 5; Peg Brand's introduction and Paul C. Taylor's "Malcolm's Conk and Danto's Colors; or, Four Logical Petitions Concerning Race, Beauty, and Aesthetics," in *Beauty Matters*, edited by Peg Brand (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 57-64; Danto's cursory treatment in *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003) rapidly forecloses the analyses the subject might open up (40-44, 74-78).
4. See, for example, Gordon, 55-56, 65-6, 127; Alcoff, 199-201, 215.
5. On the contributions of aesthetic ideals to the legitimization of white supremacy by modern discourse, see Cornel West, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," in *Prophecy Deliverance! Towards an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); For a critique of the hierarchical racial effects of false universalism in aesthetics, see Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice," in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, edited by Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 237-79. I examine the workings of what I call "racialized aestheticization" (which pertains, among other things, to the whitening of aesthetic concepts, relational structures, and the forms of subjectivity and exchange they help to mediate) and "aesthetic racialization" (which includes the aestheticization of white cultural formations) in my "Racialization as an Aesthetic Production: What Does the Aesthetic Do for Whiteness and Blackness and Vice Versa?" *White on White/Black on Black*, edited by George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 83-124.
6. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1.
7. Walton grounds prescriptions about what is to be imagined (via principles of generation) in cultural functions and social contexts (38, 40-41, 52-53, 69).
8. See n. 5.
9. A non- or antiracist aesthetic theory, as feminist accounts of intersectionality reveal, can only be a picture that addresses racial questions simultaneously as questions of gender, class, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, and other categories of identity and difference. As I elaborate elsewhere, it is thus necessary to examine besides racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization, also "gendered and class-inflected aestheticization" (and so on) and "aestheticized gendering and class-formation" (and so forth).
10. In the case of Walton's theory, for example, taking account of its own positioning would necessitate, among other things, a critical assessment of competing hypotheses about the assumed cultural functions and contexts of representations. The status of prescriptions for imaginings would have to be addressed in light of the significance of other forms of actual and idealized uptake.
11. Alex Neill. "The Isolation of the ASA," *ASA Newsletter*, 24.1 (2004); Ivan Gaskell. "Interdisciplinary Aesthetics," *ASA Newsletter*, 25.1 (2005). Published also at www.aesthetics-online.org/.

12. “Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion.” In *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, edited by John W. Lenz (New York: Library of the Liberal Arts, 1965), 26.
13. A shorter, slightly modified, less fully documented version of this essay, titled “Culture, Capital, History, but not Race?” has appeared as my “Voices of the Profession” column in the *Newsletter of the American Society for Aesthetics*, 26.2 (Summer 2006). Published also at www.aesthetics-online.org/.

“They’re Finding Food, but We’re Looting?” A Two-Ethics Model for Racist Double Standards

Timothy Chambers
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“I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says they’re looting. You see a white family, it says they’re looking for food.”

—Kanye West, “A Concert for Hurricane Relief,”
September 2, 2005

Introduction

Double standards abound, particularly those which target African Americans. Witness the anonymous email-circular, “Being Black in the Workplace,” which efficiently sweeps the double standard minefield:

They take my kindness for weakness; they take my silence for speechless. They see my confidence as conceit; they see my mistakes as defeat. My questions mean I’m unaware; my advancement is somehow unfair. If I stand up for myself, I’m too defensive; if I don’t trust them, I’m too apprehensive. I’m defiant if I separate; I’m fake if I assimilate....¹

Hurricane Katrina, and its aftermath, recently provided a vivid portrait of other double standards operative in American culture, the most famous one appearing in this essay’s title.² The foregoing examples also illustrate how double standards can give rise to *double binds*—situations in which African Americans are vulnerable to criticism no matter *which* choice they make.

Understanding the specific mechanisms of society’s ailments isn’t, of course, sufficient for remedying them. But it’s certainly necessary. In that spirit, I wish to describe a model which Joy Kroeger-Mappes has offered to conceptualize sexist double standards. I then articulate how, with a bit of refurbishing, Kroeger-Mappes’s “Two Ethics” model can illuminate the mechanisms underlying racial double standards, with a special focus on those directed at African Americans. I conclude with some clarifying points and corollaries.

The “Two Ethics” Model

The inspiration for the present analysis stems from Joy Kroeger-Mappes’s insightful article treating the Ethics of Care, the Ethics of Rights, and their respective roles in activating sexist double standards. “[T]he characteristics of the two ethics are so different,” she writes, that women “are caught in an ethical catch-22: We can either be morally deficient as women when we adopt men’s ethic of rights, or [we can be] morally deficient as human beings when we adopt women’s ethic of care. Moreover, since women are in fact held accountable to *both* ethics [unlike men]...there is always a point-of-view from which women’s behavior can be found wanting” (115, emphasis added).³

While the present account differs from Kroeger-Mappes’s in its details, the first two parts are isomorphic in form to her explanation of our society’s sexist double standards (and double binds):

(a) *In many situations, it’s possible to evaluate a person’s behavior using either of two rival ethics: an ethic of autonomy/independence, and an ethic of cooperation/conformity.* Unlike philosophical specialists, ordinary people rarely possess an explicit and comprehensive ethical code. Instead, a person’s moral views can be limned in terms of a cluster of moral maxims—clichés—which the person applies to situations so as to render a moral judgment. At the risk of being glib, my thesis is that the typical person’s participation in moral judgment is, as Vince Lombardi once described football, “a game of clichés—and [people] believe every single one of them.”

It’s also rare for people to realize that, in general, for every cliché (“Opposites attract”), there can be found a cliché which offers opposite counsel (“Birds of a feather...”).⁴ So it is, too, with moral clichés; in particular, two mutually exclusive maxim-constellations can be identified: one I will dub the “ethic of cooperation/conformity,” and the other, the “ethic of autonomy/independence”:

Subject:	Autonomy/Independence	Cooperation/Conformity
i) Requesting Aid	“Stand on your own two feet!”	“Nothing wrong with admitting you need help”
ii) Claiming one’s due	“Stand up for yourself!”	“Don’t rock the boat” “Patience is a virtue”
iii) Personality	“Express yourself” “Be yourself”	“Try to fit in” “Don’t alienate people”
iv) Assertiveness	“The squeaky wheel gets the oil”	“The nail that sticks up gets hammered down” ⁵
v) Blameworthiness	“You have no one to blame but yourself”/ “You made your bed, now lie in it”	“Now’s no time for finger-pointing”
vi) Property ⁶	“Respect others’ property” “That’s not yours!”	“People should share with those in need”

It would seem that the ethics of autonomy and cooperation are subsets, respectively, of the ethics of rights and care. As is easy to see from the table, the two columns of maxims in each row are mutually exclusive: in a given situation, the left-hand column invites one type of action, whereas the right-hand column counsels the opposite tack. This brings me to the next point of this explanation:

(b) *Since these two rubrics are mutually exclusive, a person's behavior is always vulnerable to critique by an unsympathetic or uncharitable observer.* Once the bimodality of the above moral maxims is exhibited, it's easy to see how double standards (and double binds) can arise.⁷ To take the example which inspired this essay's title, it can be shown that the caption-author for the Getty Image *saw* the wading whites as⁸ "in need," and thus saw them as exemplifying a Cooperative maxim (row (vi)): How could the market-owner complain? After all, "People should share with those in (desperate) need."⁹ In the case of the Associated Press's caption-author, he also applied row (vi)—but he saw the African American, instead, as *violating* the Autonomy maxim ("You should respect others' property"). So it's a case of "looting."

The above process can be used to illuminate other double standards, like those at the heart of "Being Black in the Workplace." Confidence can be seen as a boon under the Autonomy rubric ("Stand up for yourself!" "Express yourself"). But when confidence is judged as violating Cooperation maxims ("The nail that sticks up gets hammered down"), it can be spun as a bane ("conceit"). Again: "I'm defiant if I separate ['Try to fit in']; I'm fake if I assimilate ['Be yourself']."

While the first two steps in this account articulate how double standards are possible, I have yet to explain what *fuels*, or *motivates*, people to avail themselves of this pernicious process. Hence the last part of the *explanans*:

(c) *Prejudice makes people more likely to be unsympathetic/uncharitable judges of another ethnicity's behavior—i.e., more likely to apply a condemning maxim, rather than its laudatory opposite.* Philosophers of science have long recognized that empirical observations are *theory-laden*¹⁰: we will see those diverging bubble-chamber tracks as an electron/positron pair only if we interpret the tracks according to (*inter alia*) the Dirac Equation. Analogously, sociologists have long pointed out that interpersonal observations are belief-laden; to take Rosenhan's famous example, if I count a person as among the "sane," I'll interpret his writing in a journal innocuously—but if the context is a psychiatric ward, the act of writing might be "seen as an aspect of [the patient's] pathological behavior: 'Patient engaged in writing behavior'."¹¹ In short: *believing is seeing*.

Now at the very least, prejudice entails the belief that people of a given group are more likely to engage in "disagreeable" or "less desirable" behavior. This quasi-theory acts as a biasing-mechanism which drives the prejudiced to see deviance in minorities' behavior which would otherwise be dubbed "normal" in non-minorities. Given prejudiced beliefs, plus the fact that (by the previous propositions delineated) *most* acts are vulnerable to socio-moral critique by some well-established cliché, then the prejudiced mind will habitually "see" deviance, rather than normality, in the "other."

Conclusion

In sum, then, I have explained how a bimodal pair of ethics gives rise to racist double standards (and double binds); stitched together, the full explanation is as follows: *In many situations, it's possible to evaluate a person's behavior using either of two rival ethics: an ethic of autonomy/independence, and an ethic of cooperation/conformity. Since these two rubrics are mutually exclusive, a person's behavior is always vulnerable to critique*

by an unsympathetic or uncharitable observer. Prejudice makes people more likely to be unsympathetic/uncharitable judges of another ethnicity's behavior—i.e., more likely to apply a condemning maxim, rather than its laudatory opposite.

This explanation canvassed, a few clarifications are in order. First, the present view suggests a possible amendment to a recent trend in ethics. Feminist ethicists, for instance, have rightly diagnosed how an "ethic of autonomy/independence" can be exploited to victimize our society's most marginalized members. As Diana T. Meyers forcefully warns, when "dependency is dismissed as a defective form of selfhood, caregiving responsibilities vanish along with children, the disabled, and the frail elderly."¹² Yet the analysis that I have provided shows how the ethic of *Cooperation*, too, can be exploited to chastise those minorities who (justifiably) exemplify an ethic of Autonomy in demanding their due; "frankly," wrote Martin Luther King in his famous Letter, "we know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was 'well timed' [i.e., a demand for more cooperation] in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation."¹³

Next, two explicit remarks about this essay's scope are in order: for one, while my title advertises an explanation of "racist" double standards (double binds), my focus has been to explain those double standards which victimize African Americans. It's not obvious to me that the present view could, without some serious refurbishing, explain the different types of double standards suffered by Latino Americans, for instance, or Asian Americans. (Though it might prove a worthwhile exercise to see how my view specifically falls short in generalizing it.) A second point worth noting is that, by "prejudice," this phenomenon needn't be restricted to the shamelessly bigoted. Much prejudice, as Malcolm Shabazz observed, is practiced by wily foxes, rather than snarling wolves.¹⁴ And to these two categories, a third needs to be added: prejudice is also harbored by *unwitting ostriches*. In this sense, the prejudice which engenders double standards may very well be invisible to the prejudiced themselves—a phenomenon which, if Harvard psychologist Mahzarin R. Banaji is correct, is more common than one would like to concede.¹⁵

Lastly, although I've explained prejudice as a factor engendering double standards (and double binds), the true relationship is a vicious cycle. After all, the prejudiced's concrete judgments, in turn, work to "confirm" the prejudiced beliefs which engendered the judgments. The prejudice biases the judgments—and the judgments, in turn, fossilize the prejudice. This is, of course, just a special case of the well-known "confirmation bias" people exhibit in psychology experiments which aim to study human hypothesis-testing: given that a person *believes* some hypothesis, he will seize upon observations which serve to support the hypothesis (he "remembers the hits"), and is less sensitive to counter-instances of his pet hypothesis (he "forgets the misses").¹⁶

Thus it has been shown how racist double standards (and double binds) are the upshot of two factors: the flexibility of our moral judgment, on one hand, and the inflexibility of individuals' (sometimes subconscious) biases, on the other. Can this vicious cycle, once brought to light, be *unlearned*? We can only hope.¹⁷

Endnotes

1. I've excerpted only a few stanzas from the poem; the full text can easily be found online (e.g.: <http://www.newarkspeaks.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-106.html>, Accessed: 14 April 2006).

2. The controversy revolved around two images. One photograph, circulated by the Associated Press, showed an African American man, wading through the flood, toting a bag and a case of cola. “A young man,” read the caption, “walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store.” The second picture, taken for Getty Images, showed a white couple, also wading through water, and toting a bag and backpacks. “Two residents,” the caption read, “wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.” (Tania Ralli, “Who’s a Looter? In Storm’s Aftermath, Pictures Kick Up a Different Kind of Tempest,” *New York Times* (5 September 2005): B5.)
3. Joy Kroeger-Mappes, “The Ethic of Care vis-à-vis the Ethic of Rights,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 9 (1994): 108-31, rpt. in *Voices of Wisdom: A Multicultural Philosophy Reader*, 4th Edition, edited by Gary Kessler (Wadsworth: New York, 2000): 110-23. My citations refer to the latter source’s pagination.
4. Many critical reasoning texts point this out, usually in the context of citing clichés as a form of the “Fallacy of Appeal to Majority”—e.g., David Kelley, *The Art of Reasoning*, 3rd Edition (WW Norton: New York, 1998), ch. 6.
5. I thank Heather Ohata for bringing this maxim to my attention, in the context of her Honors’ Thesis, “A Comparison of Japanese and U.S. Medical Ethics” (Brown University, 1998).
6. As an historical aside, it’s worth noting that Laurence Kohlberg’s famous “Heinz Dilemma” for gauging ethico-cognitive development tests one’s ability to apply the Cooperative Property maxim to the dilemma, and articulate why it’s justified to gainsay its Autonomy-column rival.
7. Kroeger-Mappes illustrates her “two ethics” explanation this way: “[T]o care for a child (being responsive and giving attentive love) can be considered praiseworthy (a judgment derived from the ethic of care), while at the same time a mother can be criticized (a judgment derived from the ethic of rights) for not giving a child space or allowing the child to develop as an individual by making mistakes. ... Giving a child space of course in turn can be criticized as uncaring, inattentive, and nonresponsive” (page 116).
8. The role of Wittgensteinian *seeing-as*—i.e., *understanding* a situation *as* exemplifying a general concept or maxim—is an essential part of moral evaluation. For introductory remarks on the concept of “understanding-as,” see John Hick’s illuminating, “Seeing-As and Religious Experience,” in *Faith*, edited by Terence Penelhum (Macmillan: New York, 1989), 183-92.
9. And if the market owner wasn’t there? Well, “the Good Lord helps those who help themselves!”
10. One *locus classicus* of this view is Norwood Russell Hanson’s *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1965), ch. 1.
11. David L. Rosenhan. “On Being Sane in Insane Places,” *Science*, Vol. 179 (1973): 250-58, at p. 256.
12. Diana T. Meyers. “Feminist Perspectives on the Self.” In *Readings on the Ultimate Questions*, edited by N.C. Rauhut and R. Smith (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2005): 240-52, at p. 241. Also worthy of note is Felicia Ackerman’s worry that physician-assisted suicide will disproportionately afflict our society’s most vulnerable members—cf. “Assisted Suicide, Severe Disability, Terminal Illness, and the Double Standard,” in *Physician-Assisted Suicide: Expanding the Debate*, edited by Margaret Pabst Battin, Rosemond Rhodes, and Anita Silvers (Routledge: New York, 1998): 149-61.
13. To take an example of more recent vintage, consider the scurrilous email circular, “So I Volunteered,” which lambastes sufferers at the Convention Center thusly: “I’ve been watching the news lately and have seen scenes that have made me want to vomit. And no it wasn’t dead bodies, the city under water, or the sludge everywhere. It was PEOPLE’S BEHAVIOR. The people on T.V. (99% being Black) were DEMANDING help. They were not asking nicely but demanding as if society owed these people something. Well the honest truth is WE DON’T. Help should be asked for in a kind manner [think of the cooperative cliché, “A drop of honey catches more flies...”] and then appreciated.” (The email’s full text—along with a devastating analysis—appears at <http://www.snopes.com/katrina/personal/volunteer.asp> (Accessed: 18 April 2006).)
14. Elsewhere, Shabazz spoke even more strikingly: “As between the racists and the integrationists, I highly prefer the racists [sic]. I’d rather walk among rattlesnakes, whose constant rattle warns me where they are, than among those Northern snakes who grin and make you forget you’re still in a snake pit.” (“Alex Haley interview with Malcolm X,” *Playboy Magazine* (May 1963), rpt. in *Alex Haley: The Playboy Interviews* (Ballantine: New York, 1993).
15. For a primer, see, e.g., Mahzarin Banaji, et al., “How (Un)ethical Are You?” *Harvard Business Review* (December 2003): 55-65. Prof. Banaji’s views aren’t without controversy; for a range of critiques and defenses, see the cluster of “Commentaries” in *Psychological Review*, 15 (2004): 279-310.
16. For an entertaining tour of this, and other common patterns of human irrationality, with an eye toward diagnosing the reasons for belief in the paranormal, see Michael Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things* (WH Freeman: New York, 1998).
17. I thank George Yancy and the University of Hartford Philosophy Club for helpful discussion and suggestions.

A Womanist Social Ontology

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This womanist social ontology is a womanist philosophy that expresses an understanding of the self and the relationship of this self to the other. It is ontological to the extent that it is informed by the traditional philosophical notion of ontology while pushing beyond ontology to embrace what Emmanuel Levinas calls the ethical; i.e., the pre-conscious relationship between the self and the other. This ontology is social in the sense that one can speak of any relationship between the self and the other as constitutive of a social relationship even if this encounter can be said to be pre-social, or before the point of conscious awareness.¹

The womanist self is a social self; a self formed in the crucible of being a black person living in an anti-black racist society; and, shaped by a positive experience of community and a spiritual and/or religious experience with God. It is from the body of work produced by women African American religious scholars that one can identify three philosophical assumptions recognized as undergirding the womanist self and her relationships in community. These assumptions are empirically true because they reflect the lived reality of African American women. For this reason, they are not being postulated as hypotheses.

The identification of these three assumptions began to be shaped with Alice Walker’s definition of womanist published in 1983. As successive scholars adopt this name, shape, form, context, and particularity are added to the womanist title and definition. To speak of a common identification of African American women is to offer neither an essentialist nor experiential identity endeavoring to encapsulate each individual into a common collective. Womanism is contextual in that its particular expression is informed by variables such as location, place, and time, while existing in such a way that being a womanist can be recognizable. The assumptions, then, point

to enduring values that sustain the lives of African American women and their community. The philosophical assumptions are these:

1. Womanist work encompasses fluidity and change as it remains responsive to the demands of the particular context into which it is called.
2. Womanist scholarship is functionally organized around the demand for survival.
3. Womanist work operates within the specific dynamics of commitment to self and community. This is articulated as concern for wholeness. Neither autonomy nor social relationship is prioritized at the expense of the self or the other.

To suggest that womanist thought possesses fluidity and change is to recognize that it is shaped by a mediating position of the both/and rather than the oppositional either/or. As fluid, it is able to absorb contradictions and to live inside the tension that contradictions frequently impose. For instance, the concept of mothering for African American women is not dependent upon the either/or of biology but reflective of the role of women as tradition-keepers, guardians of culture, and community leaders. Mothering understood in this way appropriates the past, present, and future as representative of a continuous whole becoming a means for upholding tradition as fluid and responsive to the needs of the present.²

Survival and wholeness, the second and third philosophical assumptions, are pivots around which womanist reflection has developed thus far. Survival, offering a practical emphasis, reflects on what sustains and propels women in their efforts to overcome the wounds of oppression. Wholeness, a spiritual emphasis, is simultaneously the focal point and the organizing point, being both the spiritual ideal and the practical idea.³ Wholeness of self and wholeness of community is seen as that which we live in imperfectly today, yet that which we aspire toward in fullness for tomorrow.

Wholeness is *integral* to the womanist social self because in speaking of community one implicitly affirms its presence. But it might also be considered *foundational* to the extent that it is an aspect of the ontological pre-social structure embodied in the *is-ness* of the person.⁴ Womanist ontological wholeness offers that mutuality, justice, and interdependency between the self and the other is not something added to the autonomous being but, rather, as an aspect of the *is-ness* of the person, is a pre-conscious shaper of the conscious self. In contradistinction to the womanist scholarship that offers mutuality, justice, and interdependency as a crucial second move of the autonomous self in movement toward the other,⁵ I contend that the relationship between the self and the other contains mutuality, justice, and interdependency as always already aspects of the womanist social self as a pre-social structure.

Womanist scholarship supports this understanding of the pre-social relationship in the work of Emilie Townes in a discussion of *ontological wholeness* and *is-ness*. One can also find support for an understanding of a pre-social relationship in Emmanuel Levinas's ethical which finds the self/other relationship established before conscious awareness and before affirmation or rejection of the relationship is consciously possible. Pre-consciously the other is received by the self only as alterity and is always beyond knowledge of the self.

Through election the other assigns meaning (i.e., identity) to the self and in this assignation of responsibility, substitution, and subjectivity the self discovers that its freedom is finite. Finite freedom comes as a limitation upon the self prior to the point of a collision between two freedoms and is found as a freedom of the self that is the freedom to be for the other. Levinas, in shifting

freedom from the arche to the an-arche, shifts the dynamics of the relationship between freedom and fraternity as well. Freedom becomes something derivative⁶ and not something supplemental to fraternity. Freedom becomes the uniqueness of my responsibility.

According to Levinas, it is the community that mediates the self/other relationship. The *third* or the *other other* pays witness to the encounter between the self and the other, demanding that he/she not be forgotten. Justice becomes a necessity or even a demand and the self must choose between the two, the other and the other other. The presence of the third ushers in sociality, and the needs of the community become established. Consciousness intersects with society, and the ethical is superseded by justice. For Levinas, though, justice is simultaneously the beginning and the goal. It is an aspect of the self/other relationship as something always already present, albeit outside of the ethical, even as it is present within the conscious self/other relationship. Justice, like freedom, is not imposed upon the conscious self but is something that is always already present. For Levinas, and perhaps for Townes, the original or conscious relationship is contained within the pre-original, or the pre-conscious, one.

A tension for womanist scholars, from which emerges a both/and, would be the undesirability of focusing exclusively or with greater emphasis upon the pre-conscious self/other relationship. Townes reminds us that for black women "everything we do is mediated by our bodies"⁷ and so Levinas's work, which tends toward abstraction, is insufficient for meeting the demands of the both/and of the pre-conscious and conscious self and self/other relationship. The womanist self cannot ignore the reality of living in, as Lewis Gordon names it, an anti-black racist society.

Anti-black racism conditions the context within which we are given to understand identity. Identity for Gordon is always shaped by the quality of being lived. Social identity is identity shaped by the social order, and existential identity is shaped by lived experience. Africana identity, the identity of people of African descent, is formed in the meeting of the two, and that meeting occurs within a world shaped by anti-black racism. Blackness is the creation of whiteness and the Blackness of Black identity is rooted in a hostile environment. The struggle for Black identity within such a context is a struggle for recognized humanity. Whites may be other for Blacks, but Black people within this realm of cultural oppression, because they are constituted as non-persons without human presence, cannot be an other to whites.

The Black self is in a struggle for an identity reflective of positive and affirmative being. Such a struggle exists on two fronts. It exists as resistance against the negative perceptions emerging from near complete engagements within the anti-Black racism that constitutes a denial of humanity and the designation, *other*, relative to the white person. This is also a struggle for an internalized self able to escape from the force and total nature of oppression desiring the complete alienation of the Black self from society and the self. From the perspective of the Black self, oppression, or the restriction of options relative to some other social group, forces one to bump up continuously against limitations which persistently threaten and expose that Blacks have a problem. In the existential spirit of seriousness, having a problem and being a problem collapse into unity, and Black identity becomes the realization and fulfillment of its negative identification.

To speak of the womanist self is to recognize that this self has its identity informed by the context of which it is a part. But it is also a self with the capacity to move beyond the restrictions and limitations imposed upon it. Gordon says that

this is evidence of a person's ability to transform her or himself. Twentieth-century scholar Anna Julia Cooper suggests that it is the *Singing Something* implanted in each of us that possesses an awareness of an innate desire for wholeness, a God-planted awareness of human worth and value able to withstand the force of anti-black racism.

A womanist social ontology that emerges from the pre-social relationship must engage our contextual social reality. Unlike Levinas, this philosophy cannot avoid the impact of race and other particulars such as ethnicity and gender. To deny the particular and the singular of the individual, especially in an anti-black racist world, is to render the self and/or the other invisible. A womanist social ontology would not say with Gordon that anti-black racism is a prime shaper of womanist identity. Womanist identity is rooted in the pre-social structure that is shaped in a relationship prior to racism, founded in a time when the self, in a deflected desire for God, directs toward the other in responsibility lived out as justice.

Endnotes

1. Michael Theunissen writes that when one speaks of a social relationship it can be thought to encompass all levels of relating including that which occurs on the conscious and the pre-conscious levels. Michael Theunissen. *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, trans. Christopher Macann (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984), 6-7.
2. Diana L. Hayes. *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995), 25.
3. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. *If It Wasn't for the Women* (Orbis: Maryknoll, 2001).
4. Emilie M. Townes. *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 65.
5. Cheryl J. Sanders. *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Marcia Y. Riggs. *Awake, Arise & Act* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994).
6. Howard Caygill. *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.
7. Emilie M. Townes. *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 172.

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