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NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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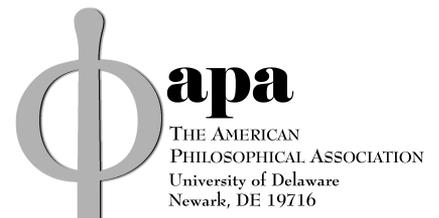
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Philosophy and the Black Experience

John McClendon & George Yancy, Co-Editors

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FROM THE EDITORS

We are delighted to announce that the inaugural Collegium of Black Women Philosophers has been launched. For more information, please visit <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cbwp>. The site has information about the organization and the inaugural conference to be held October 19-20, 2007, at Vanderbilt University. The keynote speaker will be Anita Allen-Castellitto. Also, Joyce Mitchell Cook, the first African-American woman in the U.S. to receive the Ph.D. in philosophy (Yale University, 1965) has been invited as a special honored guest. This is a long overdue organization that is sure to be profoundly instrumental in terms of creating a significant space for assessing and critically discussing philosophical issues of importance to Black women and for providing a safe space for encouraging, recruiting, and maintaining Black women in the profession of philosophy. As the editors of the *Newsletter*, we unconditionally support the efforts of this organization and would like to encourage all to celebrate this unprecedented event.

In this issue, we are delighted to present three articles, two of which, and a book review, deal with issues of race, racism, and whiteness. In our first article, "My White Self," by Joy D. Simmons, within the context of an important autobiographical disclosure, critically explores what it means for her to come to terms with the descriptor "race" with respect to its application to her own identity as a white woman. It is a seminal piece, written in the self-exploratory mode of critical whiteness theorists. Pulling from the work of various critical race theorists, her aim is to elucidate how powerful it is that whiteness is constituted as normative and thus elides its status as raced. She concludes with a discussion of how she might undo her whiteness.

In our second article, "Race and the Ghosts of Ontology," prominent scholar and activist Steve Martinot discusses how the ghost of race continues to manifest its reality, hence, its non-ghost status, within the context of such phenomena as driving while Black, and the ethos of a colorblind ideology. For Martinot, as a ghost, race, paradoxically, continues to haunt us existentially and politically. Martinot offers a critical discussion of various issues around what has been called an objectivist versus a constructivist view of race. He also elaborates on what he calls a "purity condition" vis-à-vis whites and how this condition defines whiteness relationally in terms of "turning exclusion into substance, and defining whiteness by what it is not." Martinot concludes with a critique of Lawrence Blum's distinction between the concept of raced groups qua inherent characteristics and racialized groups qua social facts.

In our third article, Robert Fikes, Jr. presents an informative essay, "The Triumph of Robert T. Browne: The Mystery of Space." Fikes' work is a pioneering biographical account of Browne, a very important but sadly overlooked African-

American philosopher of science. While in a special issue, "Negroes in the Field of Philosophy" (June 1939), the *Negro History Bulletin* mentions Browne as a significant representative of African-American philosophers, little has been written on Browne's life and works. As with the prior articles in this issue, Fikes' contribution to our *Newsletter* also addresses the problem of racism and with special regard to the crucial context for understanding Browne's achievements, struggles, and subsequent invisibility as a historical figure. It should be noted that in the same year (1919) that Browne published his book *The Mystery of Space*, the African-American philosopher Gilbert Haven Jones published his text *Education in Theory and Practice*. Due to racism, both men found it necessary to hide from the general public that they were Black men in hopes that their work would gain a fair and broad reading.

Lastly, George Yancy reviews anti-racist activist Tim Wise's new book *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*. Yancy frames Wise's work within the context of work done by other thinkers on the question of whiteness. Wise's text dares to explore the various quotidian and insidious processes of how whiteness operates.

ARTICLES

My White Self

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It is a cold, wet, Pittsburgh afternoon as I trudge down the sidewalk to the trolley station. The street is busy as usual, but I am tired and take little notice of the people I pass. Their voices seem to blend, and their bodies appear anonymous within the space of the socially mundane. Paying no particular attention to those around me, I am suddenly startled as I notice that I am approaching a small group of "poorly" dressed black men who are standing on the street corner. Though I've often seen black men hanging out on street corners, this doesn't diminish the intensity of my reaction. I instantly feel a knot of fear tighten in my stomach. Their presence stimulates in me a raw feeling of alarm, one that places my body on high alert. I am suddenly awake and acutely cognizant of each of their movements. I nervously watch each man, just in case one of them decides to step closer, to violate my space, my zone of privacy. My face assumes a hard, serious, "don't mess with me" expression. I tense my entire body. Rehearsing five years of Tae Kwon Do in my head, I straighten up to my full height and I walk quickly past the black throng, staying as far away from them as the width of the sidewalk will allow. Soon I am inside the station and my body automatically relaxes. I feel at ease after having

successfully navigated this “perilous” site that so much of white America has warned me against. Once again, I’ve escaped the dangers of this city. Once again, I have made it to a space of safety.

It is only recently that I came to see myself as “raced.” I believed that my white skin rendered me immune to that descriptor. “Race” was a term applicable to people of “color,” and white, after all, is the absence of color. But I can no longer close my eyes to the reality of my own racialized identity. I now experience my identity as raced on a daily basis, particularly when it comes to encounters such as the one above. I have come to realize that my whiteness was as much a catalyst of my fear in that situation as the “blackness” of the bodies on the street corner. The above “confrontation” is representative of how my whiteness, far from being a benign descriptor, is embodied in my day-to-day experience in a way that reinscribes white racist ideology. In this article, I call into question my presumed innocence in the above encounter and show how whiteness operates to construct my field of vision and my bodily comportment. Through an examination of the way I embody whiteness in this encounter, I demonstrate a complete reversal of apparent culpability. In other words, within the encounter, I become the violator, not the one who is violated.

In her brilliant essay “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” Linda Alcoff provides the theoretical background for an analysis of this experience. Drawing from the philosophical thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and working from the presupposition that race is a social construction, she argues that “race is constitutive of bodily experience, subjectivity, judgment, and epistemic relationships,” and that “one’s designated race is a constitutive element of fundamental, everyday embodied existence and social interaction” (Alcoff, 271). Alcoff’s point is that one’s “race,” far from simply a set of visible physical characteristics, is at work on a daily basis, in the way one sees and interacts with other bodies, and even in one’s own bodily comportment. She employs Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “habitual body” to advance her argument. The habitual body is “a default position the body assumes in various commonly experienced circumstances that integrates and unifies our movements” (Alcoff, 271). For example, I assume a habitual body when I sit down at my computer to type. I do not have to hunt the keyboard for each letter and think through every movement of my fingers upon the keys as I spell out every word. Through practice and habit, my body has become so accustomed to the individual movements involved in the act of typing that all I have to do is think the words and they seem to appear on the screen. The entire process has become attenuated. Alcoff argues that racialization operates in much the same way. In everyday encounters with those whose identities are “marked by gender, race, age, and so on” (271), specific perceptual and gestural practices have become so habitual that they fall under the radar, as it were, of cognitive reflection and deliberation; they are naturalized and relegated to the realm of common sense.

In my case, this common sense which structures the habitual body is “white common sense.” It is a product of “the sediment of past historical beliefs and practices of a given society or culture” (Alcoff, 273). Alcoff explains that white common sense is not the “imposition of an ideology” from above, but that it is “part of the backdrop of practical consciousness, circulating, as Foucault would say, from the bottom up as well as from the top down” (Alcoff, 273). Not only is white ideology imposed upon me by a largely racist society, it is so deeply imbedded in my consciousness that it affects the way I walk, talk, and especially the way that I see. In short, whiteness structures my everyday consciousness and mundane modes of being-in-the-world.

My negative reaction to the black men on the street corner is instantaneous; it seems to arise from implicit knowledge. But the felt “naturalness” of my fear is a result of being, as George Yancy argues, “already discursively and affectively acculturated through micro-processes of ‘racialized’ learning (short stories, lullabies, children’s games, prelinguistic experiences, and so forth) to respond ‘appropriately’ in the presence of a Black body” (Yancy 224).

Because perceptual practices are shaped by racial consciousness, the very act of seeing must be interrogated when it comes to our perceptual practices vis-à-vis variously “raced” bodies. When I “see” black men on the corner, I assume that I am seeing them as they are, up to no good, dangerous. I assume that whatever emotional reactions arise from that seeing stem from something inherent in those black bodies. When black men make me afraid, I react to them as if my fear arises from something that constitutes their bodies as such, like an “essence.” On the contrary, Alcoff writes that “there is no perception of the visible that is not already imbued with value” (Alcoff, 272). When I look at the black men on the street corner, I do not engage in a simple seeing. By the time I see them, I have already interpreted that seeing through a historico-cultural schema of meaning. Alcoff writes, “[T]he overt act of interpretation itself is skipped in an attenuated process of perceptual knowing” (Alcoff, 275). Interpretations of what I see have become like the movements involved when I type: they are no longer the result of reflective thought but, rather, habitual practices. That is, the result of this attenuation is that the “perceptual practices involved in racializations are then tacit, almost hidden from view, and thus almost immune from critical reflection” (Alcoff, 275). These invisible interpretive processes that influence how we see the world are disturbing given the level of confidence that we tend to have in what our eyes reveal to us.

Judith Butler theorizes the racially saturated field of visibility in her paper “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia.” The purpose of her piece is to explore how visual “evidence” was used in the Rodney King case to exonerate the white policemen who engaged in King’s brutal beating. The video of King’s beating can be read in two ways: “a man being brutally beaten,” or “a body threatening the police, and... in those blows the reasonable actions of police officers in self-defense” (Butler, 16). The latter is what the Simi Valley jurors “saw.” Butler argues that from these particular interpretations emerges “a crisis in the certainty of what is visible, one that is produced through the saturation and schematization of that field with the inverted projections of white paranoia” (Butler, 16). The field of the visible is already racially schematized and racially saturated such that seeing and interpreting become one and the same thing. “The visual field,” writes Butler, “is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful” (Butler, 17).

By theorizing the racist presuppositions that structure the visual field, Butler explains not only the behavior of the policemen who beat King, but also the decision of the jurors to exonerate the policemen. The policemen and the jury see the black male body as always already dangerous before it even acts. “[T]he black male body, prior to any video, is the site and source of danger, a threat, the police effort to subdue this body, even if in advance, is justified regardless of the circumstances” (Butler, 18). If they were to stop beating King, the policemen felt that they themselves would be in grave danger from the violence that he, as a black man, would inevitably inflict upon them. The jurors, watching the video of the beating through a lens that equates blackness with danger, saw the justified acts of policemen trying to protect themselves and society from the

threat of this black menace. “According to this racist episteme,” writes Butler, “he is hit in exchange for the blows he never delivered, but which he is, by virtue of his blackness, always about to deliver” (Butler, 19).

The fear I felt when I caught sight of the black men on the corner can be understood through what Butler terms “white paranoia.” In the King case,

[t]he attorneys proceeded through cultivating an identification with white paranoia in which a white community is always and only protected by the police, against a threat which Rodney King’s body emblemizes, quite apart from any action it can be said to perform or appear ready to perform. This is an action that the black male body is always already performing within that white racist imaginary. (Butler, 19)

White paranoia is produced by the assumption that, prior to any action on their part, black men are always already dangerous. There was nothing to indicate to me that the black men standing on the street corner were dangerous besides the fact that they were black. They did not move toward me, no words were exchanged; they were simply standing there. And yet I felt fear instantaneously upon seeing them, before any of them had so much as glanced in my direction. This is because when I see, I see through a historico-racial schema that has already coded the black male body as a site of danger. Let me be clear about this: I do not see these black male bodies *as if* they are dangerous. To me, as I walked toward the street corner, these men *were* the *embodiment* of danger as such. I do not have to wait and see what they will do before I judge them to be this or that way. I already *know*.

The meaning I attributed to the black bodies in front of me, far from being something that occurred only inside my own head, became visible in my bodily comportment. The act of seeing, and therefore interpreting, set off a whole chain of self-protective physical gestures that were meant not only for my own safety, but also to communicate to the black men that I perceived their immediate threat. I was “on to them.” I knew what they were “up to.” My own threatening facial expressions, my tense posture, and the wide berth I gave them on the sidewalk, were calculated to dissuade them, to frighten them away. In the end, the fantasy of the dangerous black male body was produced by my own white paranoia. It was *my* white body, with its white habits, that produced the visible manifestations of danger that I attributed to them: it was my face that carried the menacing expression, my body that was tensed and coiled, ready to do violence at a moment’s notice.

This practice of my whiteness, this racially schematized seeing and subsequent adoption of a threatening bodily demeanor, is itself dangerous. I do not mean “dangerous” in a purely physical sense. I am speaking of the existential violence that is done to a black man when I return his body to him as always already dangerous. Yancy fleshes out this notion of phenomenological return in his powerful piece “Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body.” In this piece, Yancy looks at instances where the black body in “its *lived* reality is reduced to instantiations of the white imaginary” (Yancy, 216). When the black body is reduced to these stereotypifications, the result is phenomenological fracture. The black man’s body is returned to him from a perspective that does not cohere at all with his own view of himself. The white gaze confiscates the black body and re-schematizes it. Yancy writes,

The burden of the white gaze disrupts my first person knowledge, causing “difficulties in the development of [my] bodily schema”...The nonthreatening “I” of my normal, everyday body schema becomes the

threatening “him” of the Negro kind/type. Under pressure, the corporeal schema collapses. It gives way to a racial, epidermal schema. (Yancy, 222)

The white gaze has done “epistemological violence” (Yancy, 222). It is as if the white gaze, on Yancy’s view, has denied the black body a sense of meaning all its own, predicating it on the inverse of whiteness. The white gaze blocks the black body’s creation of a coherent body image. Alcoff puts the problem this way: “The near-incommensurability between first person experience and historico-racial schema disenables equilibrium [in one’s body image] and creates what one calls ‘corporeal malediction’” (Alcoff, 274-5). Yancy writes that this “corporeal malediction” can lead “to a destructive process of superfluous self-surveillance and self-interrogation” (Yancy, 219).

This analysis of the dangers inherent in the “white gaze” moves me to look at my experience on the street corner with an ever-increasing alarm. The episode becomes no longer the harmless racist phantasmatic productions of a little white girl, but a situation in which my body has the potential to do real harm. Yancy writes,

To have one’s dark body invaded by the white gaze and then to have that body returned as distorted is a powerful experience of violation. The experience presupposes an anti-Black lived context, a context within which whiteness gets reproduced and the white body as norm is reinscribed. (Yancy, 217)

I wonder with dismay how many times I have violated the black body. How many times have I returned the black male body to itself as always already dangerous? How many times have I reminded the black man that he is “trapped, always already ontologically closed”? (Yancy, 227) These questions render more urgent my desire to block, if possible, the re-inscription of white racist ideology in my everyday lived experience.

There are certainly no easy answers to the question, “What am I to do now?” The field of critical race theory needs to address this question in a more robust way. In her paper, Alcoff does not explore this question in great detail. One wonders, as Alcoff emphasizes again and again throughout her piece that racist ideologies operate at a preconscious level and are almost immune to critical examination, if there is anything that *can* be done. Alcoff answers, in a few densely packed sentences at the end of her paper, that, yes, people can change. Briefly, she argues that phenomenological descriptions, descriptions that analyze how race is embodied in everyday encounters such as my own, can themselves begin to influence change. “But the reactivations [of racist perception and experience] produced by critical phenomenological description don’t simply repeat the racializing perception but can reorient the positionality of consciousness” (Alcoff, 281). Reorienting the positionality of my consciousness means “reconfiguring” my habitual body. Now that I know what steps are being attenuated in my “seeing,” Alcoff argues that I can begin to change. “Noticing the way in which meanings are located on the body has at least the potential to disrupt the current racializing processes,” writes Alcoff (281). I know, given the phenomenological analysis of my encounter, that when I see black male bodies, I see them as already dangerous. I need to somehow reinstate the break between my “seeing” of the black men and my reading of their bodies so that I can consciously begin to read them in new, anti-racist ways that do not foreclose their possibilities.

Judith Butler calls for “an antiracist hegemony over the visual field,” which includes descriptions of the historico-racial schema present when one sees and simultaneously “reads.” She calls for “an aggressive counterreading” of the visual “evidence”

that appears to implicate black men in violent acts, showing that the so-called visual evidence in fact does no such thing. What counterreadings may I give myself in my street corner encounter? “They’re not waiting to jump me, they’re waiting for the bus.” It does not seem like a particularly aggressive counterreading on the surface, but it is aggressive when you pair it with an awareness of the historico-racial schema through which I am apt to see and therefore code them as dangerous. Perhaps I also need to remind myself while approaching the street corner that I do not need to *know* why they are standing there. If I fail to ascertain reasons why a group of black men are standing around on a street corner, this does not mean that they must be up to no good. Moreover, this does not remove their right to be there.

Lisa Heldke, in “On Being a Responsible Traitor,” advocates the formation of a “traitorous identity,” which actively resists the ways in which one’s whiteness constructs the world. The recognition of one’s whiteness as always playing a key factor in the way one approaches the world is crucial to the development of such an identity. Frustrated as I may be with the unhealthy ways my whiteness shapes my understanding of the world, I cannot simply wake up one morning and decide not to be white. According to Heldke, I cannot “step outside” my identity as white. Instead, I dismantle my whiteness while simultaneously inhabiting it (Heldke, 93). Crucial to this process is my *insistence* upon the fact that I am white and the constitutive role my whiteness plays in my perceptions and reactions to the world and others. I need to evaluate my perceptions of the world and my interactions with it to get at the specific ways in which they are shaped by my whiteness. This involves a constant effort on my part. Constructing a traitorous identity involves a rejection of my unexamined life-in-white. Instead, I must consistently reflect upon my experiences with the world to unearth the ways I perpetuate racism and reinscribe whiteness as the “norm.”

Because my whiteness is such a determining factor in the way I see and interact with the world, it is essential that I incorporate the voices of men and women of color into the creative process of constructing a traitorous identity. Heldke, working from Sandra Harding’s modification of standpoint theory, suggests that the critical analyses of the world developed by marginalized persons can help “overprivileged” persons, like myself, develop the “critical aspects” of their identities (Heldke, 91). Understandings of the world developed by black theorists can reveal to me the many ways in which my whiteness is “oppressively” operative on a day-to-day basis, and reveal to me the subtle yet unhealthy ways in which I “see” black bodies. The writings of Frantz Fanon, George Yancy, and other theorists of the black experience are especially helpful in highlighting the ways in which I code the black male body as always already dangerous. Heldke emphasizes, though, that I must do more than simply “read and report” on these analyses (Heldke, 92). It is important that I actively imagine ways to build on these understandings of the world in order to reshape the ways I perceive and interact with the world. This creative process involves finding new ways to “fiddle with” and “subvert” my white privilege in hopes of critically undermining the system that privileges me (Heldke, 95). Developing a traitorous identity also requires constant adaptation. Heldke writes that “overprivilege takes everlastingly new forms, requiring traitors constantly to reinvent themselves” (Heldke, 97-8). The ways in which my “overprivilege” as a white woman operates are not static. The specific ways in which overprivilege functions evolve and change with time. Therefore, the construction of a traitorous identity is an ongoing process. I must be engaged in a continual project of education and critical reflection, working to move unconscious habits to the level of consciousness where I can work to disrupt them.

Given how deeply white racist ideology is imbedded in my consciousness, I suspect that *to do* anti-racism is a moment-by-moment struggle, a constant questioning of those physical and emotional responses that feel most natural in relationship to men and women of other races. What is needed is a habitual interrogation of my “white common sense,” a slow dismantling and reconstruction of the perceptual field, a rupturing of the seamless relationship between seeing and reading. This process must constantly be informed and conditioned by the voices of men and women of color, without which I cannot see the whole picture. Such an active resistance to whiteness opens up the possibility of a society that is capable of a new common sense, where our habitual bodies are oriented in new, anti-racist directions.

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Race and the Ghosts of Ontology

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Introduction: The ghosts of ontology

Race became a ghost the day after all the signs came down; the day after “White only” or “Colored only” disappeared; the day after no one any longer said, “we don’t serve Negroes here”; the day after no black person answered a want ad and was told, “sorry, we’re not hiring right now”; the day after no black person had to pay a higher mortgage rate than whites; the day after no police officer looked at the color of the driver before stopping him/her; the day after the laws used exclusively in black communities were taken off the books; the day after both college enrollments and prison inmate populations reflected the racial percentages of the states they served. In other words, the signs haven’t been taken down. New Orleans, in the wake of the government’s use of a storm emergency, signifies that most of them are still up.

Instead, race became a non-ghost when the court system narcissistically complimented itself on being colorblind. Race became a non-ghost when state governments refused to require police to report the race of a traffic stop or “probable cause” action. (Arrest records contain this information, but arrest records have come to presume guilt.) Race became a non-ghost when derogatory terms were busted back to “slurs,” as if they actually signified something rather than serve as a means of assault. Race has always been a mask, draped over the faces of those whites who act frightened or hostile or contemptuous depending on which script from the structure of racialization they are reading.

To philosophize race means it is neither non-ghost nor mask. During the Jim Crow era, a number of thinkers addressed the question of whether race existed as a biological division of the human species (as delineated by 18th-century naturalists); they demonstrated that the concept was biologically vacuous,

demographically illusory, morally criminal, and politically corrupt.¹ After the great war against fascism, a mass political movement finally assaulted the dehumanization imposed by the Jim Crow signs.

Yet, today, the philosophy still has to be done. Leonard Harris compiles a volume in which he places objectivist and constructivist accounts of race and racism in juxtaposition. Robert Bernasconi compiles the signal texts on race from the last 200 years. Lucius Outlaw compiles essays on race and philosophy. Critical Race theory discusses the meaning of “social construct.” Lawrence Blum wants to reserve “racism” as a moral term. Anne Stubblefield responds by arguing that this is quite insufficient politically, or historically—and, thus, morally. All of them, thirty years after the Civil Rights movement, are driven by the question, how do we get those damned signs taken down?²

Why would so many theorizations appear now? Perhaps it is because the signs themselves became ghosts that not only still haunt us but continue to dominate social and political policy. It requires some serious thought to live in a world dominated by the ghosts of Jim Crow, of forced labor and debt servitude and chain-gangs lurking in a prison industry—and by the ghosts of movements for liberation as well; it requires new conceptual lenses to see what this world is now made of.

Objectivism and constructivism

Harris organizes his book as a forum on the important question of what it means that “race” is a “social construct.” The issues are its reality—a biological vs. a social reality—and what “social reality” means in the first place. Two schools of thought have emerged, called constructivism and objectivism, that for Harris are irreconcilable. Harris gives the following definitions. For the objectivist, races are natural divisions in the human species based on some inherent objective trait (biological, psychological, geographical). The objectivist “can believe that there are groups, such as races, which exist independent of cultural and social ideas...[and] can consider racial groups as objective causal agents, that is, [that] race causes groups to exist” (Harris, 18). The constructivist, on the other hand, “does not believe that groups exist independent of cultural or social ideas...[and] can believe that races are constructed causal agents” (Harris, 19). That is, races are “unnatural,” culturally specific, and based on self-description and “malleable” social psychology.

In Harris’s definitions, there is a strange cohabitation of ambiguity and the “absolute.” He phrases the fundamental or definitive moment of both objectivism and constructivism in terms of possibility—that they “can believe” what they do, suggesting that they don’t necessarily have to. Furthermore, those beliefs are tied (or not) only to “ideas” (as an absolute domain), obviating their possible production by overarching historico-social “factors”—factors that might also have produced those “ideas.” Harris attributes to constructivism the belief that human facts are “absolutely” dependent on contingent cultural ideas, bestowing on the process (of construction) a rigidity or inflexibility. Instead, fluidity is attributed to objectivism. For Harris, objectivism “can argue [has choice in how it approaches things] that the uses of racial categories are justified because they refer to objective realities”; whereas constructivists believe “the use of racial categories is never justified” referentially [that is, Harris grants them no choice in the matter]. Absoluteness appears on the side of constructivism, while tactics and strategies pertain to objectivism (Harris, 443). Harris admits he is (dare I say “constructs himself as”?) a “moderate” objectivist (Harris, 442).

Objectivism and constructivism confront each other irreconcilably across the act of reference to race. As Anna Stubblefield demonstrates, this was the tenor of the debate between Kwame Anthony Appiah and Lucius Outlaw.³ Appiah is an objectivist who argues that race does not exist and, thus, no real reference can be made to race as such; Outlaw is a constructivist who argues that reference to races as constructed is real. In their irreconcilability across issues of morality, philosophy, and culture, the objectivist and constructivist positions are reminiscent of the old materialism-idealism split; either race exists materially, or it is only an idea. One has “real” being, and the other is absolutely contingent. What the materialism-idealism split provides is the convenience of a clean-cut division (despite the dual chicken-egg accusations each has always levied at the other).

Why would a clean-cut division be necessary or desirable, and for whom? There are constructivists who argue that though race is socially constructed, it is not simply an idea; rather, it is produced by a complex process of economic, cultural, and social evolution in response to real historical factors.⁴ Under Harris’s definitions, the question of the “real” materials out of which race was constructed, including structures and operations of power, could not be asked. Such a question would imply an underlying objective reality to which racial entities as constructed would make real reference. Harris: “constructivists deny that races can exist as natural or objective entities” (Harris, 20). Perhaps the objectivists have to cleanly dissociate themselves from constructivism in order to define (against Appiah [Harris, 267]) what “real reference” would mean. But then, the real issue is reference, and not race. Objectivists argue that race has to exist as a real referent to serve a social purpose, while some constructivists argue that the definition and constitution of races is already the social purpose (materially) to be served.

There is a possibility that if we add history and historicity to this thought-complex about race, things will get out of hand. But let’s do it anyway. We live in a culture (the U.S.) in which whiteness and white supremacy are not simply ideas produced by this culture; they are the very bedrock and foundation of its political, economic, social, and cultural structures.⁵ That’s the real problem. How do we navigate between the real absence of a sense of justice under white hegemony, and the implicit (when not overt) demand for justice within the philosophizations of race under consideration here? The history of colonialist conquest of the Americas is a history of whites constructing race and racial identities for themselves. By imposing racial definitions on Africans and Native Americans, the objective of whites was to engender “fundamental” differences between themselves and the Africans and Native Americans. In producing this relationality, whites act like objectivists, producing Africans and Native Americans as real groups in otherness, attributing transcendental and transhistorical values to a real “us-not-them” paradigm, to which their imposed dehumanization on the “them” gave “objective” testimony. Nevertheless, in their arrogated self-superiorization by these means, their objectivist perspective was only something they constructed for themselves. On the other side, Africans and Native Americans discovered themselves having been constructed as objective groups by colonialist occupation—objectivist despite themselves (in their need for psychic survival and defense), and constructivist against themselves (seeing themselves made into conquered and victimized people).

The constructivists would say that race was not something discovered among people (for instance, among people colonized by Europeans); the objectivists would say that when Europeans discovered the difference, what they were looking

at was race. When European colonialists then defined race (the constructivists would say “invented,” and the objectivists would add “referentially” to that) to legitimate their theft of land and kidnapping of people for forced labor, they did so from a position of power. “Racialization” amounted to a complex socio-political act in the interests of power. How can race exist if it was invented-or-discovered as a socio-political strategy? How can race not exist if that strategy has had the effect of enslaving, killing, segregating, criminalizing, and robbing millions in the name of race? Which is the ghost of which?

In Harris’s definition of constructivism, races are contingent on self-description, or their own construction of a cultural and communal cohesion and coherence (Harris, 19). And objectivists see races discovering themselves, as it were, objectively as races. But, historically, it is the other way around. In their colonialist operations, Europeans “discovered” others, and thus discovered themselves as objectively white through their self-definition as different from those others. When they racialized those others as non-white, they constructed themselves as “objectively” superior by imposing an objective sub-personhood (socially and economically) on those others, whose discovery constituted the primary act of construction of their own (white) objectivity.⁶

The idea that the term “race” could be without a referent is only possible by discarding and discounting the power relationships generative of the historical objects placed in relation as races. Today, looking back, we can see 17th-century white objectivism as constructivist, while (some of) those who had been constructed as objective despite themselves (Africans and Native Americans made Negro and Indian) reconstruct themselves as alternately objective races in order to stand in opposition to that former white constructivism. Historically, the construction of race as idea and social categorization has been at the hands of a constructing power or racializer (and not self-descriptive), while an objective sense of race has occurred (as both oppressive and in resistance) through self-description.

This interweaving of these terms is not a dialectic; it has no synthesis. At best, it is the operation of a hermeneutic circle, or what Merleau-Ponty calls a *chiasmus*—each is the foundation of the other. In dismantling the boundary between the two (“irreconcilable”) positions, one does not dispense with anything. Instead, one arrives at the following dual recognition: it is difficult to see how one cannot be a constructivist, and, at the same time, it is difficult to see how one cannot be an objectivist.

How can one not be a constructivist in the face of the central (white-generated) distinction that a white woman can give birth to a black child, but a black woman cannot give birth to a white child? Or, rather, a single black foreparent will make a person black, while a single white foreparent will not make a person white. And by using this descent paradigm as an example, I am not reducing the complexity of race to this but, rather, allowing biology to undermine its own use through its own conceptual force. Real biology admits of no such non-parities; both non-parity and parity are purely conceptual. What this paradigm demonstrates is that a “purity condition” is (has been, must be) presumed by whites to define whiteness. It is a negative purity principle, both in turning exclusion into substance, and defining whiteness by what it is not. Such a purity principle holds for no other race. Only white self-definition requires it in order to exteriorize other races, and define differences among them (breaking the many continuous spectra of traits that the concept of race claims as its elements) by defining itself as the primary difference. The white (negative) purity condition is the ineluctible necessity for the definition of race. It is the epistemic center of whiteness as a culture. It chains the original definition of race to the white point of view it makes possible.⁷

With no referent in biology, non-parity and (negative) purity emerge only as adjuncts to coloniality; they antedate Linnaeus, Gobineau, Kant, and Jim Crow, as well as the various racializations of Native Americans, Latinos, Asians, etc., undertaken in the name of race. It is a colonization that lives on in the epistemology founded on non-parity and negative purity as its primary principles. Since a purity condition exists by definition only, as does non-parity, together they expel biology from the domain of definition of race, even while basing that definition on an “instrumentalized” biological function (parentage or ancestry). Conceptual instrumentalization and real objectivity are often not free from being confused with each other. Neither negative purity nor non-parity have any source in their object (people of different colors). They have only to do with a specific knower, a white one.

In other words, if race exists by definition (of a white negative purity condition dependent on what it is not), then its domain of existence is only the act of definition, the power to define, which then most essentially depends upon the power to impose that definition on others. (This is the question of interest, and race is always, though rarely spoken of, as a question of interest.) In other words, whiteness itself is defined across a relation of imposition. It is a violent imposition; a violence that hides in the normative procedures that white identity has assumed for itself. Internalizing that power to impose, and depending on its negative purity principle, whiteness necessarily finds those on whom it has imposed its racializations to reside at the very core of its own identity⁸ and self-understanding. Its dependency on them is absolute.

The epistemology of whiteness, the definition of race, and the power to define through violence do not form a basis for enslavement and segregation, but their collective mask. For some constructivists, the imposition of that mask is the objectivity of race. Race begins with power and never stops making reference back to that power, which Clevis Headley calls “epistemic imperialism” (Harris, 89). It is not that whiteness is the center of all discourses of race but, rather, that the historical structures of racialization (of oppression, land-seizure, and forced labor) and the imposition of a social categorization on those racialized is the ineluctible center of whiteness and white identity.

Nevertheless, here we are, centering our discussion on whites, albeit on the imperialism and racism of EuroAmerican societies. So much concerning race and racism is from the white point of view. One of the politically significant aspects of an objectivist viewpoint, for black thinkers, is that it provides an understanding of race from elsewhere than a white point of view—not as a compensatory mechanism but as a form of oppositionality. It argues for a solidity to black (or brown, or indigenous, or Asian) being that escapes and contests the white construction of blackness (or of “natives,” or of Asians, etc.). Black objectivism and white (supremacist) objectivism are incommensurable, since white objectivism defines black people as deviating from the white account of agency and subjectivity while black objectivism understands and encounters black people as agents and subjects for themselves, irrevocably.

And, thus, it is also difficult to understand how an anti-racist person would not be objectivist. Albert Mosley argues for understanding the worldwide emergence, conjunction, alliance, and ideal of Africans in commonality as a single heroic vision of an anti-colonialist African race.⁹ It is this vision that informed DuBois’s thinking, and his identification of a common African continent-wide, Atlantic-wide, and worldwide unity. That vast African presence in the world, standing forth from being the primary victim of European colonialism, and aware of itself as

such, began to bring to solidarist fruition, during DuBois's last years, processes he had helped to initiate. Its unity resided in common descent, history, memory, and the condition of having suffered the same "disaster and insult." For DuBois, it forms a common "kinship" for all the "children of Africa," and to which he pays homage and honor in proclaiming his membership. Not only a sense of an "anti-colonialist race" in which to politically reflect itself, this common kinship also emerged in recognition of the implacability of the enemy, from the torture and apartheid starvation from Algeria to South Africa, to the police brutality and police occupation of black communities in U.S. cities. The struggles against Jim Crow in the U.S., the Negritude movement in Europe, the national liberation revolutions after WWII, presented a global entity, a melding together of those who had been scattered and dragged to the far corners of the colonialist system.¹⁰

To this, Mosley adds a meditation on African philosophy, as reflective of an inherent psychology and worldview (Mosley, 84). For him, the rise of an Africanist consciousness is not the same thing as an African consciousness. Where African solidarity engendered a political existence as a racial group in motion, it nevertheless reflected an underlying Africanist origin that had never been undone by transport or redefinition. African people could recognize each other as a people of common descent because they had all been told the same thing about the way they looked. And they turned the way they looked into the way they looked at each other, a commonality of past and future. Between the worldwide common descent that DuBois celebrated, and the sense of Africanist consciousness that threads its way through traditional African thinking, more than a social construction emerges. It was a sense of descent that transcended politics, embracing both those who stepped too far ahead and those who opportunistically betrayed the process of liberation through corruption.

It was to this anti-colonialist race of Africanity that DuBois turned as a source of opposition to the enemy's implacability. Yet, oscillating back and forth between the raciality of blackness and the politics of blackness [between *Dusk of Dawn* and *Dark Princess*, for instance], he is himself the prime example of the difficulty of living a clean objectivist and constructivist disjunction (Mosley, 75).

The attempt at disjunction appears stranger still with respect to Native Americans in the U.S., who argue among themselves about who should be included in their societies—in part in response to federal legal intervention imposing new definitions.¹¹ Is membership to be decided in terms of who can trace parentage and bloodline, or, rather, who can live the life and walk the walk? At what objectivist cut-off point does the percentage of "Indian blood" cease to be Indian blood? At what constructivist point does the maxim, "if one can live like us, walk the world like us, think like us, take strength and heart from our ceremonies like us, and love the world like us, then such a one is one of us," cease to be sufficient? During the 18th century, there were many European settlers who went and lived the indigenous life and found it more to their liking than that of the Puritan colonies.¹² By the 19th century, however, the white settler mentality had become too consolidated, too rigid and unopposable, as Herman Melville suggests at the end of his novel, "Typee." Today, many indigenous persons (some as light as any white person) have said to whites, "we are not like you, and we live a life that you could not live, and could never understand." Part of that is the hardship of living and maintaining a tradition in the face of white U.S. genocidal assaults on that life. What part is objectivist if it changes with history? And what part is constructivist if it changes history itself? Both sides have adherents, as does the community of black thinkers and philosophers. As Mosley points out, the split that occurred

between Senghor and Césaire in the Negritude movement during the 1930s was over this disparity (Mosley, 77).

I am not trying to build a bridge between these positions. It is not needed. Their historical inseparability as chiasmic is the very mother of their separation in the first place. But in light of the difficulty in maintaining the irreconcilability that Harris postulates, all this suggests that objectivism and constructivism are more properly understood as belief systems, rather than philosophical schools. That is, they are forms of political praxis. Belief approaches the world with a choice of lens in hand through which to view experience and history, rather than question experience and history as a way of arriving at a lens. A belief system is the spectre that remains after analysis has rendered existence an inert object. This is not to diminish the involvement of objectivism and constructivism in doing the rethinking demanded by the post-Civil-Rights situation in the U.S. The Civil Rights movements, in contesting the power of death (that is the unavoidable context here), thought they had wrought irrevocable changes. But after watching the Civil Rights movement itself become a ghost, and then confronting the non-ghost of race as it has appeared in colorblindness, unrecorded profiling, and a prison industry, one faces the necessity for a new critique to articulate the referent that lurks in this intricate socio-political interstice. The power of death remains the life of power. The ghost of ontology points to what fills the space between objectivism and constructivism: political power. The categories of race that the power to define deploys do not just refer to generational descent, but are immersed in biology or genetics, which it then uses as its language. Biology, constructivism, genetics, cultural solidarity, inherent psychology, and poverty all become the rhetoric of a structure of power that, in its power to define and impose its definitions as cultural norms, creates those norms as objective.

Power constructs, and what it constructs takes on the aura of fact. Its ability to do that is what makes it power.¹³ Redefinition means to construct an alternate power, in order that what one then defined and constructed would likewise take on the aura of fact. This is the power inherent in oppositional social movements. If constructivism validates itself across the contradictions in objective factors (the descent paradigm), objectivism validates itself in the self-construction of its own alternate power as a movement to render itself and its issues objective.

White anti-racist constructivism

Alongside black or brown anti-racist objectivisms, there are also white and black anti-racist constructivisms. Outlaw and Locke provide two versions. Anna Stubblefield presents a third. She begins with the history of the colonialist invention of race and whiteness, and how it places whiteness and white supremacy, its power and its power to define, at the core of all cultural and political thinking in the U.S., even unto white anti-racist projects (Stubblefield, 152). Thus, the focus of her anti-racist thinking is how to programmatize a sense of white people taking responsibility for themselves and ending their complicity in racism and white supremacy. For her, the implicit implacability of power, in its many modes of driving racist oppression, is an ineluctable fact.

There are other white anti-racist constructivists who choose to ignore the question of power, and, in so doing, betray themselves. One such is Lawrence Blum. Blum has written a book with the ironic title *I'm Not a Racist, But...* In this book, he addresses racism as a moral wrong among people, and works backward from that to the question of whether race is a referent for it or not, eventually getting to historical questions toward the end. He argues that "race" as objective fact doesn't exist, while racialized groups, as social facts, do exist.

Blacks, whites, Asians, and Native Americans have been treated as if they were races. This makes them racialized groups, but not races; for there are no races. This is not merely a shift in terminology. Racialization does not, but race does, imply inherent characteristics, a virtually unbridgeable moral, experiential, and cognitive gulf among racial groups, and a hierarchy of worth. (Blum, 162)

Blum is here instructing people to the benefits of thinking in terms of “racialized groups” rather than in terms of “races.” But Blum doesn’t say why the presence of inherent characteristics (races) necessarily has moral, experiential, and cognitive concomitants. He enumerates concomitants, but doesn’t say why they produce “unbridgeable” differences. And it is axiomatic for him that a “hierarchy of worth” is manifest only in the case of “inherent” differences, as if non-parity inhabited inherency, biological or otherwise.

“If there are no races,” he continues, “then any racial solidarity presuming them is without foundation. Based on a falsehood, [belief or reliance on races] lends itself to... moral distortions” (Blum, 169). The moral distortions he sees as “inherent” in race and not in racialized groups include “exaggerations of social difference and moral distance, stereotyping, intra-group commonalities that displace commonalities across groups, and a privileging of racial identity,” which includes the ability of each race to be racist toward others” (Blum, 169). Because races are not socially constructed while racialized groups are, it is races that become separatist and alienated while racialized groups necessarily form without unbridgeable differences of experience.¹⁴

He is not rejecting black or Native consciousness, nor the solidarity that is its life force. For him, “black consciousness can be based not on race but on racialized identity.” But it seems to make a difference to him whether black people identify with a black consciousness and a black identity through contingent groupness or with a racial community in resistance that makes reference to itself as a race. Is not the latter in direct opposition to racialization by white supremacy? Does it not require a counter-construction of a “racial group (objectively) in resistance” (making objective reference to “race”) to respond to having been formerly “constructed” as a “racialized group (constructively) in subordination” by white supremacy? Is there not a politics of opposition contained within the interface between objectivism and constructivism that cannot be ignored?

It is strange to think of social difference or intra-group commonalities as in themselves moral, whether distorted or not. Morality implies the existence of agency in inter-group or inter-personal attitudes, of agential attitudes with respect to other persons. Group autonomy, solidarity, and identity are necessary preconditions for group agency. Is autonomy greater for a group that appropriates itself as objective, or as one that only finds itself a “racialized group” as given? In addition, Blum presents these separations (e.g., exaggerations of social difference) as without alternative for races, and thus unchosen. He admits difference of degree but not of kind. To posit them as not therefore chosen is to constitute a form of determinism (for races but not for racialized groups). An alternative could be a strong sense of autonomy upon which a racial group could stand. And, in fact, autonomy would facilitate and prioritize a dialogic paradigm toward other groups rather than the fear, insularity, and distance to which Blum condemns them (given that participant autonomy is the necessary condition for dialogue). Blum does not envision a sense of racial group autonomy since races don’t exist for him; nevertheless, in the absence of any such alternative, his sense of racial “behavior” becomes more than simply “moral distortions.”

What appears to be ignored is that each racialized group must also be constructed with different experiences, moralities, and cognitive relations to the world. Their very construction as racialized groups would constitute their central experience, at the core of their cognitive relation to the social world. If their racialization is at the center of their experience and cognitions, then what objective factor renders their experiential and moral differences necessarily bridgeable? Indeed, if objective “races” do not undergo the “experience” of racialization because they already exist as races, then from where comes the unbridgeable gulf between them? It would seem that Blum has placed “unbridgeability” in the wrong category.

But to contrast the two in this fashion raises the question, who does the racializing in the case of racialized groups? And who produces the hierarchy in the case of races? Objectivism can escape these questions by positing the possibility of a dialogic between autonomous objective races, but constructivism must answer them. Blum leaves the identification of “racializers” out. In the U.S., both historically and in the present, flaunting the non-ghost of race, the ghosts of the signs that never really came down, the on-going violence of prison and profiling, whites are the racializers. Racialized groups of color would have similar experiences and cognitive relations (in their confrontations with whites and white supremacy) that would be commonly incommensurable with white experiences and cognitions as racializers. For any constructivism, the primary unbridgeable moral gulf would be between the racializers and the racialized. This difference would constitute a primary “inherency” characteristic in Blum’s paradigm of racialized groups—though he assumes there are none.

Blum is instructing people of color to look at themselves not as races but as racialized groups. But on what basis should they trade one form of inherency for another? After all, if black people chose to see themselves as a race, and Chicanos chose to resist their racialization through an ethnic territorial identification (Aztlán), for both to see themselves as “racialized groups” would violate and sunder their specific historicity. The moral value of Blum’s argument would contradict itself.

In omitting the racializer, as well as the contemporary history of racialized group formation, and in spreading the ability to be racist evenly among all, Blum has placed his “racialized groups” on a horizontal plane, without ongoing hierarchy. Hierarchy is left to the objectivist domain of “races.” Indeed, Blum’s goal is a race-neutral account of racism. “My goal of an adequate account of racism is entirely antithetical to race-based attachments to definitions of “racism” (Blum, 35). That is, either he wishes to abstract the definition of racism from who does the defining, or he wants to escape the “race-based” by arbitrarily shifting to racialized groups, which ostensibly don’t have a racializer. But once the racializer is included in the latter possibility, it becomes another vertical power-generated hierarchy, and it matters who does the defining.

Nevertheless, Blum is subtle about how he omits the question of who does the racializing. “American society structured into its institutions and norms of group interaction the idea that whites were a superior and more worthy ‘race’...[and] all ‘nonwhites’ were inferior or deficient” (Blum, 147). “American society”?? That couldn’t have included the vast black population slaving on agrobusinesses called plantations who, in some areas, constituted the majority, could it? Would they have participated in such a travesty?

Through law, custom, and popular understanding and behavior, people of African descent were turned into the racial group “black.” They were consigned to a subordinate place in society. ...Blacks by and large

accepted racialism with regard to themselves and whites. (Blum, 148)

Clearly, blacks don't form part of this "popular understanding." One could almost ignore his use of passive voice with respect to law and custom, deleting agential responsibility for it, except for the ease with which he shifts to an active voice when speaking of black acceptance. It makes his passive voice unignorable. And what is being ignored by the passive voice here is precisely who does the racializing, and the power relations involved. Include them and the horizontal plane he assumes disappears.¹⁵

But what does it mean to efface white responsibility for what whites have done to others? Blum informs all in general that "racial" solidarity is based on a falsehood, despite his having personally chosen the axioms upon which to arrive at that conclusion. He wants his conclusion to hold for everyone. But other constructivist accounts exist for which that sense of falsehood is not relevant (Outlaw's, for instance). Blum has taken the stance of the generalizer, the definer. He has also erased the cultural historicity of those for whom a "racial" solidarity provides a sense of being and power (DuBois, for instance). There is only one historicity to be invoked, that of the agentless "American society." Unfortunately, this is nothing but a white point of view, with its propensities to impose its generalizations and instruct others with respect to them. Blum's text becomes a case study of the idea that to desire a race-neutral account of racism, one must necessarily adopt a white perspective on it, and thus fail to produce a race-neutral account.

Ultimately, white anti-racism has to be constructivist; it has to historicize its own white identity in order to stand against the structures of racialization that impose race even on anti-racist white persons in their whiteness. Should they think objectivism, it would not only give whiteness an adamant permanence, but it would confirm the white supremacy that produces racial categorizations. To identify with one's whiteness and affirm that identification (different from simply recognizing that one has been racialized white by the structures of racialization) is to embrace the entire history of colonialism, enslavement, torture, and present day coloniality, imprisonment, impoverishment, and police rule, that have produced that whiteness that one embraces. This is the contradiction that racialization has foisted on whites who seek a just and thus necessarily anti-racist world.

But the ultimate test of white anti-racism, though not of its constructivism, is a refusal to generalize its thinking and positionality to those others who have been previously racialized by white supremacy, some of whom have chosen objectivism. Indeed, white anti-racist constructivism is closer to black objectivism; they stand antithetical to the white objectivism of coloniality across the interface of power.

This interweaving of objectivism and constructivism elucidates part of the mine-field upon which communication and conversation attempts to occur between whites and persons of color. In ordinary conversation, for equality to obtain, a black person often faces the necessity to autonomously re-racialize him/herself in order to throw off all vestiges of white-imposed racialization indexed in the appearance of his/her interlocutor; it is an appropriation of autonomous racial being to offset the desubjectification of subjection imposed by whiteness itself. But his/her white interlocutor would have to do the opposite, deracialize him/herself, in order to come out from behind the whiteness that had been given, a whiteness that would prevent his/her black interlocutor from being heard because already spoken for by that whiteness.¹⁶ That is, a black person may seek to transcend the double consciousness DuBois

identifies as resulting from white racist domination through self-racialization, while a white person must become someone unknown to him/herself both in order to hear the other and to see him/herself as the other sees him/her. For white persons to see themselves as others see them would mean adopting a form of inverse DuBoisian double consciousness.

Endnotes

1. Lilian Smith. *Killers of the Dream* (New York: Norton, 1949); Ashley Montagu. *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (Cleveland: World, 1964); Alain Locke. "The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture." In *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, edited by Leonard Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 187-99.
2. Leonard Harris, ed. *Racism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999); Robert Bernasconi. *Race* (Malden: Blackwell, 2001); Lucius Outlaw. *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Lawrence Blum. *I'm Not a Racist, But...: The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Anna Stubblefield. *Ethics Along the Color Line* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
3. Anna Stubblefield is a constructivist who argues that race as constructed is real, and for taking race into account as an important moral principle. She begins with the history of the invention of race and whiteness in the English colonies, and sustains throughout her discussion the notion that whites and white identity are what have an interest in maintaining race and racism, and thus constitute the core of the problem. If the role of racism is to maintain a hierarchy with respect to race, then it belongs to those who have an interest in doing so. All racism, by implication, is then white racism. Others, beset by that hierarchy, primarily have an interest in resisting it. She calls upon white people to take responsibility for what whiteness and white supremacy have done to others in the course of its colonialist criminalities, and its distribution to white society of its unmerited and ill-gotten gains.
4. Oliver Cox. *Caste, Class, and Race* (New York: Doubleday, 1948); Lucius Outlaw. *On Race and Philosophy*; Theodore Allen. *The Invention of the White Race* (New York: Verso, 1996); Steve Martinot. *The Rule of Racialization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Troy Duster. *Backdoor to Eugenics* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
5. This is the central argument throughout Martinot, *The Rule of Racialization*. See also Alexander Saxton's *The Indispensable Enemy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) and Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), both of whom address the question from somewhat different perspectives.
6. It took the English colonies roughly a century to "construct" a concept of race and their own whiteness. When the English arrived in Jamestown, they did not see themselves culturally, socially, or ontologically as white, though by the middle of the 17th century some used the term descriptively. They arrived with a structure of allegiance, and a sense of supremacy imparted by their Christianity. But the chromatic terms now associated with race had to be transformed from being descriptive to functioning culturally as racializing, from referring to personal appearance to referring to social categorizations. Cf. Steve Martinot, *The Rule of Racialization*, chapter 1.
7. The Spanish invented the notion of "limpieza de sangre" in the interest of political purpose during their wars to ethnically cleanse Iberia of Arab influence and hegemony. For Spanish colonialism, purity came first before race, and was added to a sense of entitlement and supremacy inherent in their Christianity. Making no restrictions on mixed marriages, they constructed a hierarchy on both ethnic and economic grounds. Whiteness as a racial category (the modern concept of race) was invented in the English colonies.
8. On the generation of the white racialized identity through the other, see George Yancy, "W.E.B. Du Bois on Whiteness

and the Pathology of Black Double Consciousness,” in *APA Newsletter*, vol. 4, p. 10ff; also Martinot, *The Rule of Racialization*, ch 4.

9. Albert Mosley. “Negritude, Nationalism, and Nativism: Racists or Racialists?” In *Racism*, edited by Leonard Harris, p. 74-86.
10. Lewis Gordon introduces a fascinating fact into the debate in mentioning that some medicines, generally prescribable to whites for certain illnesses, cannot be generally indicated for black people, since some suffer adverse side effects from the same medicine. The explanation is the greater variety of gene pools contained in what is subsumed as “black” in its construction, both by the purity principle for whiteness, and by the embrace of vastly different groups into the Africanist race through their anti-colonialist solidarity. In George Yancy, *What White Looks Like* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 192, note 21.
11. Eva Marie Garroute. *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native Americans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
12. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 214.
13. As George Yancy says, speaking of the middle passage and its devastations, “power produces; it produces reality.” That is, what it produces are the objects of its knowledge [Yancy, *What White Looks Like*, 114]. What power produces as fact and truth becomes objective. Race and racism, as objective entities and as the products of 500 years of colonialism, are manifestations of power. Constructed by the power of coloniality, they become objective as central organizing principles of the coloniality of power. Cf. Ramón Grosfoguel. “World-Systems Analysis in the Context of Transmodernity, Border Thinking, and Global Coloniality.” In *The Fernand Braudel Center Review*, vol. 29 (2006).
14. According to Blum, racism only requires an antipathy, and an intention to socially inferiorize the other for the purpose of self-superiorization on the basis of race. It has nothing to do with the power relations that engender racial categorization or hierarchy, whose manifestation constitutes racial oppression. Ostensibly, the “hierarchy” of values to which he refers will just go away if we stop thinking of races and start thinking of “racialized groups.” Furthermore, reducing “racism” to this minimalist level doesn’t dispel the unfortunate conflicts that have in fact arisen between racialized groups—accusations of betrayal or opportunism between Latinos and blacks, for instance, or Native Americans and Chicanos in the southwest. These conflicts exist within the reality of common subjection to white coloniality. But they reflect a different dimension of political agency than morality; indeed, they represent the autonomy that makes agency, morality, and politics possible.
15. This skewed attitude appears often in Blum’s text. He exemplifies black racism with a situation in a black high school in which a lone white student is harassed by black students because he is white (Blum, 37). On the other hand, if a white man tells an anti-black racist joke, and he doesn’t know it is racist, then he is not being a racist in telling it (Blum, 17). Blum seems not to see that the luxury of ignoring a joke’s racism and hurtfulness is inherent in white hegemony and domination. He skews the presumption of virtue to clearly favor white people.
16. Harris flirts with parity when he says that “liberation of any social race from oppression by racism requires ending the racial identity of the oppressor and the oppressed” (Harris, 440). It definitely requires ending the racial identity of the oppressor. It only means ending the racial identity given the oppressed by the oppressor, but not the identity, which may be racial in the tradition it takes for itself, constituted by the oppressed as part of their own process of liberation. The first principle of anti-colonialism (and hence of anti-racism) is to guarantee the autonomy and sovereignty of the colonized.

The Triumph of Robert T. Browne: The Mystery of Space

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[Editor’s note: this article first appeared in the January-April 1998 issue of The Negro Educational Review and hence the nature of the Postscript that follows.]

Somewhere, there may be an equally significant unsung African American who has inexplicably been overlooked by historians and others in the academic community, but until that person is identified the most compelling case has to be that of Robert T. Browne whose singular achievement in the rather abstruse, conjoined domain of religious philosophy and mathematics is unparalleled. Aside from deciphering the meaning of his principal writing and the relevance of his ideas to the lives of his people, perhaps the difficulty in piecing together the details of life has stymied more than a few researchers who might otherwise have publicized his accomplishments. A man of truly heroic proportions, Browne has remained a shadowy figure for nearly seventy years though he rubbed shoulders with the Black intellectual giants of his era. To partially rectify this, what follows represents the most that has been written about him to date.

What was known of his personal life and career was published in 1915 in *Who’s Who of the Colored Race* (Mather). Even in this terse, single-paragraph biographical sketch one can easily discern a dichotomy of socio-political commitment and scholarship. Robert Tecumtha Browne was born on July 16, 1882 in La Grange, Texas. He attended local public schools and graduated from the all-Negro Samuel Huston College, founded by the Freedmen’s Aid Society and the Methodist Episcopal Church in nearby Austin, where he became an assistant teacher. A blurry photograph of the unidentified members of the student body in 1900 shows 23 women and 4 men (Heintze, 1985), one of whom is probably Browne. In 1904, one year after graduation, he married and was blessed with a son, Robert Jr. He was also involved in various religious and youth education projects and served as vice president the Texas State Teachers’ Association. After a stint as a high school teacher in Fort Worth, he entered the U.S. Army at San Antonio. By 1911 he was a widower. Circa 1914 Browne was living in New York City’s Harlem earning a respectable salary—at least for a Black man in a large northern city—as a records clerk in the Quartermaster Corps, U.S. War Department. He devoted many off-duty hours to the Methodist Church, the Y.M.C.A., the Equity Congress and the Negro Civic League of Greater New York, oftentimes in a leadership capacity (Mather 46).

Possessed of a restless intellect that demanded investigation into all fields of learning, Browne enrolled in such diverse classes as experimental chemistry and literature at the College of the City of New York (Mather) and indulged a love of books by becoming a collector. Keeping in mind all of the foregoing enterprises, it is hard to imagine that Browne’s transcendent gift to posterity was slowly, meticulously taking shape as World War I approached.

Forever searching to reconcile his understanding of the phenomena of the material world and his own spirituality, Browne eventually found that mysticism’s respect for diverse religions and acceptance of scientific inquiry in theosophy led to a thriving movement among certain intellectuals, as a rational alternative to religious fundamentalism and its obverse: godless science. The genesis of theosophy is traced back to 3rd century Alexandria, Egypt with the teachings of the Greek mysteries of God, but the turn of the early 20th century brand

of theosophy mainly followed in this country had its origins in the 1870s with the founding of the Theosophical Society by the Russian emigrant Mme. Helena Blavatsky, et al. Subsequent writings by the organization's leaders enunciated its views on the limitations of agnosticism and materialism; encouragement of scientific research of psychic phenomenon and the "latent divine powers in man"; the study of religions in order to arrive at a system of "universal ethics"; and, what must have been of particular concern to Browne, the brotherhood of man irrespective of race, color, creed, gender, or class (Blavatsky, 1918). The organization's headquarters had moved to India, reflecting theosophy's strongly Buddhist and Hindu influence, when Brown became a member (Mather, 1915).

Through higher mathematics he acquired a deep appreciation for the ethereal; more precisely, the realm of space and time as they relate to the construction of the universe. But, typical of the theosophists, Browne did not worship at the altar of science and mathematics, believing neither was as expandable as the human mind which formulated them nor as sublime as man's spirituality assisted by his intuition. Apparently, he had read considerably about these matters and spent countless hours synthesizing what he knew. This was the other, private world of Robert T. Browne which hardly any of his neighbors and co-workers could have suspected.

By 1914 he had put his thoughts down in an unpublished manuscript titled "Hyperspace and Evolution of New Psychic Faculties." Further refinements and revisions followed until he was confident that a major publisher would take on his 400-page magnum opus. Fully aware of the social climate at large, Browne was careful to conceal any hint of his race, fearing that his manuscript would be rejected or unread by editors for reasons having nothing to do with the merits of his work (Sinnette, 1989). White Americans, including publishing house personnel, he surmised, were not positively conditioned to read of profound philosophical concepts and fathomless mathematical theorems knowing they sprang from the mind of a Black man. Thus, he communicated with prospective publishers by mail, never in person or by phone. Despite this, executives at E. P. Dutton & Co. were suitably impressed and the manuscript was re-titled and published as *The Mystery of Space* in 1919. Appreciative readers were left to wonder why there were no company-sponsored book signing parties or arranged speaking engagements featuring Browne to bolster sales.

The book's inordinate subtitle was: *A Study of the Hyperspace Movement in the Light of the Evolution of New Psychic Faculties and an Inquiry into the Genesis and Essential Nature of Space*. Opposite the title page was an often used quotation of the theosophists by the English physicist John Tyndall (1820-1893) as it synopsised the core of their belief. It read: "The domain of the senses, in nature, is almost infinitely small in comparison with the vast region accessible to thought which lies beyond them" (Browne, p. v).

The dedication to his late wife, born Mylie De Pre Adams, was followed by the preface in which, early on, Brown revealed both his respect for and skepticism about the possibilities of the mathematical method interpreting much beyond the physical universe. He stated: "The intellect has but one true divining rod and that is mathematics...it points the way unerringly, so long as it leads through materiality; but, falteringly, blindly, fatally, when that way veers into the territory of vitality and spirituality" (p. vii). The introduction was mainly alphabetically arranged definitions of esoteric terminology frequently used in the book (e.g., chaomorphogny, deiform parallel-postulate, duopyknon, zones of infinity), including hyperspace which he explained was: "That species of space constructed by the intellect for convenience of measurement...idealized; a purely

arbitrary, conventional mathematical determination; the fourth dimension; any space that requires more than three coordinates to a fixed point position in it, a five space, an n-space" (p. 10).

Browne had boldly attempted to solidify the foundation of modern theosophy by framing some of its major tenets in the context of science, demonstrated via mathematics, thereby making it a more rational alternative to traditional religious creeds. From the start it was clear that his treatise was not for the uninitiated or the dilettante as the breath of Browne's erudition was nothing short of stunning. He displayed an easy grasp of the intricacies and interrelatedness of the natural sciences, ancient and modern philosophies, Eastern mysticism, non-Euclidian geometry, and psychology. Throughout the text he restated that the purpose of the book was to present an outline of the course mathematical thought down through the ages that resulted in the idea of the multiple dimensionality of space. Also, he advanced the optimistic vision that humanity, currently in its infancy, would evolve to where man's mental and spiritual capacities progress to such a level that the "mystery of space" ultimately is decoded because man is a conscious thinker with an irresistible attraction to knowledge. Hence, mysteriousness is "a symbol of ignorance or unconsciousness" destined to be overtaken by conscious thought. Pointedly, he wrote: "There is no mystery where science is" (p. 273). He concluded the final chapter with this:

Speculation will give way to truth and there shall be but one philosophy and that shall be the knowledge of the real. Mathematics...(will become) a higher form of kinetics which will serve the intuitive faculty as mathematics now serve the intellect. Science will then be no longer empirical in its method; but a system of direct and incontrovertible truths. Religion will rise to meet these changes; faith will surrender its place to Knowledge. ...Man, for whose highest good these ultimate changes will come, will be a new creature, a higher and better man; and humanity shall evolve a new race. There shall, indeed, be "a new heaven and a new earth." (p. 358)

The book was hailed by critics. The eminent pundit Benjamin De Casseres of the *New York Times* proclaimed it the "greatest of all latter-day books on space" (119). Never having met with or heard of Browne, he continued:

It is written by a mathematician, a mystic and a thinker, one who, endowed with a tremendous metaphysical imagination, never lets go any point of the threads of reality. Lucid and logical, with a pen that never falters, Mr. Browne advances steadily from page to page upon the fortress of science, laying outpost after outpost in the dust. He knows all the weapons of the astronomers, the mathematicians, the atomists, and the lesser-act mystagogues. He knows them all and laughs at them. (119)

The British physicist E. N. Andrade, writing for the *London Mercury*, thought the book had "some profoundly original thoughts" that would titillate mathematicians and that its diagrams had the "sublime symbolic simplicity of the middle ages" (335). Louis T. More of the University of Cincinnati (another physics professor) writing in New York's *Weekly Review*, complained that the book was weighed down with too many abstractions and arcane references, nevertheless recognized Browne's "definite and interesting thesis" in stating the limits of mathematics and the possibilities of man's intellect and intuition operating in hyperspace (133). In contrast, Lilian Whiting, an Episcopalian poet-journalist writing in the *Springfield Republican*, found *The Mystery of Space* to be quite

“intelligible” and a “clear and well considered resume of facts.” She could barely contain her enthusiasm, declaring it to be “one of the most fascinating books imaginable” (11-A).

One can only speculate, at this point, how Browne managed to reconcile his Christian faith with the precepts of theosophy which, among other things, included the Buddhist-inspired belief in the transmigration of souls (reincarnation an karma); the possibility of human perfection, or the evolution of man into a perfectly wise godlike creature; a fascination with powers of the occult and psychic phenomenon; and, most significant, the denial of both a personal God or Savior and a heavenly or hellish afterlife. Whereas theosophy held that man gained special insight into the Divine through his own efforts at self-development, his Christian faith taught that man is saved by God’s grace which is asked for and granted, even to the undeserving. It seems paradoxical that while Browne was contemplating and expounding on the mystical and scientific path to knowledge of the supernatural, at the same time he was president of his church’s Methodist Brotherhood, editor of his church’s newsletter (the “St. Mark’s Church Life”), and had traveled to Indianapolis as a delegate to the National Convention of Methodist Men. Not once in *The Mystery of Space* did he mention the name Jesus—though theosophists consider Christ and the Buddha among those who have attained perfection—nor did he comment on any Christian doctrine. Perhaps Browne found in theosophy’s eclecticism and supposition that the great religions of man all emanated from the same divine source, sharing common philosophical threads, eased whatever incongruity he may have sensed in participating in church activities. Apparently an important requirement for Browne was involvement in a community of his social peers among whom he could more comfortably interact as an African American—and that meant church. He could grapple with the inconsistencies of his religious life in the privacy of his own mind.

A survey of nonfiction books written by African Americans up to 1919 clearly establishes that *The Mystery of Space* stands alone as a work of religious philosophy and science, or as a treatise demonstrating an author’s expertise in several disciplines. Fifty-six years after the Emancipation Proclamation, African American’s production of nonfiction was comprised overwhelmingly of personal narratives, prescriptions to uplift the race, and expositions on race relations or “the Negro problem.” Not only was Browne’s book unexpected, it went unnoticed by the Black press and, later, uncelebrated by chroniclers of the African American experience. No doubt its obscure subject matter and other-than-Christian focus restricted its readership to a tiny, highly educated elite component of American society, few of whom were Black.

Today we are faced with the unsettling circumstance that Robert T. Browne, at age 39, seems to have abruptly disappeared from the face of the earth just two years after the publication of his book. We know that he was an acquaintance of the celebrated bibliophile Arthur Schomburg. His founding of the Brooks Library of Negro Literature (named for his pastor, Rev. William Brooks) eventually lead to his becoming president of the city’s Negro Library Association which sponsored an exhibit of books and artifacts in Brooklyn in 1918, co-sponsored by Browne and Schomburg (Gubert 333). By 1919 Browne was thought to be a freelance science writer (Sinnette 62); however, a check of indexes of the nation’s science magazines and journals has revealed nothing authored under his name in this period. He was also thought to have been a translator (Moss 120) but there is no evidence to substantiate that anything he might have translated was ever published. Two decades had passed when Browne and his book received scant attention in

a nationally distributed Black periodical: the June 1939 issue of *Negro History Bulletin*. His mention in a painfully brief article here provided no new insights and failed to add any new biographical data (Kapranzine 76).

The last we hear of Browne is in reference to committee work he performed with historian Carter G. Woodson in July 1921 to revise the constitution of the American Negro Academy (Moss 217). Schomburg had recruited Browne into this group of ambitious scholars who later elected him first vice president (214) and invited him to present a paper on “Einstein’s Theory of Relativity” at the group’s twenty-fourth annual meeting (218). Efforts to uncover more details about Browne from Huston-Tillson College, the Fayette Heritage Museum & Archives in La Grange, Texas, St. Mark’s Church in Harlem, U.S. Census Bureau records pertaining to La Grange and Harlem, and even a search of thirty years of New York City death certificates all proved unproductive in yielding any new information. One would hate to think that Browne died suddenly of illness or accident, or that he simply left the city for an unknown destination at the onset of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement he would likely have assisted in some manner.

Past neglect of Browne’s varied accomplishments almost defy explanation, and it would be tragic if further research on Browne is postponed because of inadequate funding or lack of interest. It must be emphasized that *The Mystery of Space* is a precedent-setting work without equal in terms of subject matter and is one of the very few nonfiction books by an African American to have garnered such wide critical acclaim up to 1919. It seems only reasonable that from this point forward those who tout Black achievements as a means to instill racial pride and group cohesion should acknowledge a niche for Browne in the pantheon of African American intellectual heroes.

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Postscript to “The Triumph of Robert T. Browne: The Mystery of Space”

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Robert T. Browne was the shadowy, eccentric author of the widely acclaimed *The Mystery of Space* (Browne 1919), a book on mathematical philosophy and hyperspace lauded by the *New York Times* as “the ‘greatest of all latter-day books on space’” (De Casseres, 119). The book was welcomed by publisher E. P. Dutton, whose staff mistakenly assumed this Black American to be White. In the body of my essay “The Triumph of Robert T. Browne: The Mystery of Space” I lamented at the conclusion: “Today we are faced with the unsettling circumstance that Robert T. Browne, at age 39, seems to have abruptly disappeared from the face of the earth just two years after the publication of his book.”

Six years later, in March 2004, I was contacted by email by Thelma Calvo, a member of The Hermetic Society for World Service, who had read the article while conducting biographical research on Browne. She informed me that from 1922 to 1933 Browne lived in Brooklyn, New York, and was involved with a scientific organization called The Academy of Nations, and that from 1933 to 1942 he had lived uneventfully in the Philippines until the Japanese army invaded and he was thrown into a POW camp from whence he was liberated by U.S. paratroopers and Filipino guerillas in a well-timed attack in 1945 (T. Calvo, personal email communication, March 1, 2004).

Coincidentally, the previous day I had received a phone call from Christopher P. Moore, a curator at the New York Public Library, who was researching a book and inquired about details of Browne’s career after the publication of his *magnum opus*. He said someone from the Hermetic Society—presumably Ms. Calvo—would soon contact me. Moore had come upon an interview with Browne he intended to use in his forthcoming book about the experiences of Black soldiers in World War II and had tracked Browne back to New York and uncovered his work in the Hermetic Society. A year after our phone conversation Moore published his book *Fighting For America: Black Soldiers—The Unsung Heroes of World War II* (Moore 2005), in which he provided additional information about Browne who, aside from his life as a mathematician and philosopher, had been a procurement staff employee for the U.S. Army since 1913. Browne distinguished himself at POW camps at Santo Tomas and Los Banos in the Philippines teaching his starving prison mates courses on Asian and “Esoteric Christian” philosophy and his own mind-over-matter visualization techniques that may have helped them survive their ordeal (Moore 2005). Moore closed his discussion of Browne with this:

Following his three-year internment, Browne had returned to the United States where he later remarried and adopted a child from the Philippines. In 1950 Browne founded the Hermetic Society, a theosophical religion. He died in 1978. (287)

According to Calvo, Browne published a 417-page novel, *Cabriba: The Garden of the Gods* (Hanaranda 1925), using the pseudonym Mulla Hanaranda, and hundreds of philosophical tracts for the Hermetic Society (Calvo 2004). Thus, the mystery of Browne’s whereabouts after 1921 and his latter career to a large extent has been solved. Finally, in mid-2006, I received an unexpected email from Dr. Miguel A. Fiallo, an official of The Hermetic Society for World Service, headquartered in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, who related some additional

minor details about Browne (referred to as “Preceptor, Ascended” and “Blessed Master”) and pointed me to an extensive Internet site maintained by his affiliates (M. A. Fiallo, personal email communication, June 13, 2006) at: <http://www.la-sociedad-hermetica.org>.

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BOOK REVIEW

White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son

Tim Wise (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005). XII + 155 pp.

Reviewed by George Yancy
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According to Peggy McIntosh, white privilege or whiteness involves an invisible package or knapsack of unearned assets. Moreover, it is an asset of which you are meant to be oblivious/unaware.¹ Why oblivious? Sites of power draw their strength from their invisibility. Whiteness, as a site of hegemony and privilege, gains and maintains its strength through its normative status. Within the context of a social ordering that emphasizes color-blindness, the power of whiteness is further elided through fundamentally flawed conceptions of how we, as individuals, are constituted. Color-blindness not only overlooks the continued existence of white racism, but it also perpetuates the distortion of reality with its presumption regarding the philosophical validity of liberalism and meritocracy. On this score, whiteness is a lie that covers over its traces and conceals itself through norms that tend to miss the complexity of racism. It would be wonderful to exist within a society where being Black does not count against one, or where being white does not give one some level of privilege. However, in contemporary North America, we have not achieved this powerful vision; it stands as an unfulfilled ideal (or perhaps a challenge) vis-à-vis the prevalence of white supremacy.

One might argue that whiteness involves an epistemology of ignorance, a form of ignorance that is not simply about our failure to be attentive to epistemic virtues. Shannon Sullivan argues that whiteness qua “privilege is not just ‘in the head.’ It also is ‘in’ the nose that smells, the back, neck, and other muscles that imperceptibly tighten with anxiety, and eyes that see some but not all physical differences as significant.”² She also argues that “ignorance of white domination is not just an empty gap in knowledge nor the product of a mere epistemological oversight.”³ Sullivan is worth quoting in full:

Ignorance of it [whiteness] is actively, dynamically, and even deliberately produced—albeit not consciously so—and it stubbornly maintains its existence as an allegedly mere lack through that uncanny type of production. Here the seemingly trivial claim about the existence of white privilege becomes much more momentous. As unconscious habit, white privilege exists as nonexistent, and the lack of knowledge about it helps structure all knowledge about one's self and the world. Human beings' experiences of white privilege profoundly shape who they are, what they do, and what kind of world they live in, and those experiences often do this without one's awareness of them.⁴

The encouragement for whites to see beyond the ideology of individualism can be a difficult point to sell. After all, to see beyond a form of individualism that is predicated upon the Horatio Alger myth encourages whites to come to terms with their whiteness in responsible ways, to concede that one is implicated in power structures and normative orders according to which one ought to act responsibly, that is, to resist whiteness as a socio-political site of injustice. According to Martha R. Mahoney:

The shift in vision that makes whiteness perceptible is thus doubly threatening for whites: It places whites in a category that their whiteness itself requires them to be able to ignore, at the same time that it asks them to admit the perceptions of those defined outside the circle of whiteness.⁵

In *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, which is divided into a preface and six chapters, Tim Wise, a prominent anti-racist activist and writer, attempts to move beyond the rhetoric of individualism and explore how his identity is constructed through various norms and institutions where whiteness matters. And while he rejects the claim that whiteness constitutes a distinct biological race, he is attentive to the social deployment of race-language and how whites continue to exercise privilege through everyday, mundane acts. "Race may be a scientific fiction, but it is a social fact: one that none of us can escape no matter how much or how little we talk about it."⁶

In the tradition of critical race theorists, Wise integrates the power of personal narrative to provide a first-person analysis of what it means to be white and thereby privileged within North America. His aim, however, is not to reduce his experiences to a single, autobiographical account.⁷ Rather, he intends for his narrative to speak for those other white voices that refuse to admit that the emperor is naked. And though he argues that whiteness is a master narrative, he is aware that wealthy whites have greater power than poor whites, and that "white men are more powerful than white women, able-bodied whites are more powerful than those with disabilities, and straight whites are more powerful than gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered whites."⁸ In other words, he concedes the various ways in which whiteness is mediated and gets inflected by nonracial factors. However, he makes it clear that "no matter the ways in which individual whites may face obstacles on the basis of nonracial factors, our race continues to elevate us over similarly situated persons of color."⁹

The title of Wise's text will be familiar to those who have read or heard of journalist John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*, in which a white man takes medication to "experience" what it is like to be Black in the Jim Crow South. *White Like Me* effectively shifts our gaze away from Blackness to whiteness. While it is not possible to explore all of the narrative complexities

in terms of how they speak to Wise's whiteness and whiteness, more generally, I will provide a sketch of some of the important points covered in each chapter. One important point to note is a structural one. Wise begins each chapter with a powerful quote from James Baldwin. So, not only does the reader get a sense of Baldwin's powerful grasp of race, but Wise gives priority to a Black voice that reflected a profound understanding of the lies of whiteness.

While it is true that in *Black Like Me* Griffin gets to experience some sense of what it was like to exist on the other side of the color line, he was always already raced. This is a point that Wise explores in "Born to Belong." Wise argues:

My first experience with race was being conceived to a white family, which automatically meant certain things about the experiences I was likely to have once born: where I would live, what jobs and educations my family was likely to have had, and where I would go to school. Long before I ever met a person of color, I was experiencing race because I was experiencing whiteness.¹⁰

Wise's point is that whiteness is a site that too often goes unmarked. He deftly calls into question those narratives by whites that are based upon the premise that race was experienced for the first time during an encounter with someone who was not white. His point is that to be white is to be raced. In this way, the white body is marked and potentially seen as different. Wise provides a very interesting genealogy of sorts of how his family, within a context where whiteness is a privilege, was able to build a foundation for his future flourishing. And though I would have liked to have read more about his personal struggles with his Jewish identity vis-à-vis his whiteness, Wise is aware of how skin color can function as an asset, a piece of property. Although he is clearly aware of the existence of anti-Semitism and aware of the "skill at scapegoating those who differed from the Anglo-Saxon norm,"¹¹ concerning his great grandfather Jacob, he writes:

He may have been a Jew, but his skin was the right shade, and he was from Europe, and so all suspicions and religious and cultural biases aside, he had only to wait and keep his nose clean a while, and then eventually he and his family would become white. Assimilation was not merely a national project; for Jacob Wise, and for millions of other Jews, Italians, and Irish, it was an implicitly racial one as well.¹²

And for those whites who would argue that whiteness is something concerning which they are not responsible, Wise maintains that whiteness and Blackness are predicated upon differential histories that make for differential impacts. He writes:

So please, spare me the "I wasn't around back then" routine. I wasn't either, for the most part, but I'm here now, and so are you, and so are black and brown descendants of those persons of color who were restricted in their ability to accumulate assets, professional credentials, educations, homes, or whatever else.¹³

In "Privilege," Wise delineates pivotal points in his life where whiteness as a privilege functioned as a powerful buttress that helped him through various circumstances. For example, when in college, Wise talks about having overslept and having walked into class an hour late for a three-hour exam, and having missed another exam altogether that was given early in the morning. In both cases, he was allowed to take the exam. While he says that he can't know for certain if being white had

anything to do with this, he says that “I can certainly imagine that had I been black, both of my professors might have taken a more skeptical view of my seriousness as a student.”¹⁴ Wise goes on to point out that his faults were viewed as “his faults.” He sees this as a site of privilege, arguing that regardless of what his professors may have thought about his various failures, “about oversleeping, or about missing an exam altogether, one thing I would never have been forced to consider was that they might take either of those things as evidence of some racial flaw on my part.”¹⁵ In short, his own failures would not have been attributed to the incompetence of white people, more generally. On this score, to be white in America is to be treated as an *individual*. Whites are not judged as instantiations of a more general problem, one that might be said to be innate within the general “racial hoard,” as it were. Insightfully, he notes: “That Arabs are being treated with suspicion since 9/11, while white men were not treated that way after Tim McVeigh’s bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, is entirely, completely about white privilege.”¹⁶ His reflections on paddling as a form of discipline in schools with respect to how white and Black parents either endorse or reject such forms of discipline raise interesting questions. Furthermore, his reflections on how white privilege is linked to how Black bodies are taught to negotiate the world are very insightful. The fact that white children are not warned about how they ought to behave in the presence of police officers is clear evidence, for Wise, that whiteness is a luxury. He writes:

When black mothers have to teach their sons to keep both hands on the wheel if stopped by a police officer, so as not to get shot—something I have never heard a white mother speak of doing with her white son—we know we’re talking about more than a minor irritant.¹⁷

The point here is that the Black body is weighted down with a history of myths and lies through which white police officers “see” the Black body. Within this context, the Black body is deemed dangerous a priori.

Wise provides another example where in the sixth grade, because he was white, he was able to play pretty much any role that he wished in his school’s drama club. While he notes that his father was an “actor,” he is aware of how his whiteness functioned within the context of plays that were already scripted for white actors. This, of course, meant that as a white student he had various opportunities that were denied Black students. Noting that there are only so many times that a school can perform *Othello*, he argues that to be white in his school, even if one was a mediocre student, “you could still find a niche, an outlet for your talents, your passions, your interests in the form of theater.”¹⁸ He argues that teachers must be willing to break the aesthetic sensibilities of the audience to “cast a person of color in a role that is traditionally played by a white person (like *Romeo* or *Juliet*, or *Hamlet*).” And lest the reader misses the significance of his point about white privilege within this context, Wise says that the “theater was a life raft for me in middle school, without which I may have gone under altogether. So my ability to access it, and the whiteness that granted me that ability, was no minor consideration.”¹⁹

Wise also relates a story of how he was stopped on a few occasions because he was thought to be “driving while Black.” He relates that he had not been speeding, he was wearing his seatbelt, and he had not committed any moving violations. He does note that he had tinted windows and “an anti-David Duke sticker on the back bumper” of his car. His point is that the white police officer profiled him as Black. Wise challenges the reader who may doubt his analysis where he writes, “Then perhaps you can interpret for me the meaning of the officer’s

one word comment when I rolled down the window and he got a look at my face: ‘Oh.’”²⁰

Wise sets himself a difficult task. It is already difficult to expose the extent to which one’s own whiteness is implicated in structural power. After all, whiteness is such that its power is obfuscated through remaining invisible. Wise goes on to suggest ways that whites might resist whiteness. Of course, this has implications for his own whiteness as he is engaged in the process of undermining the very transcendental norm that privileges his skin color. In “Resistance,” he says that “one of the biggest problems in sustaining white resistance is the apparent lack of role models to whom we can look for inspiration, advice, and even lessons on what not to do.”²¹ He recognizes that “there is not only one way to be in this skin.”²² Hence, while there is always the problem of interpellation vis-à-vis those power structures that position one’s raced identity over and above one’s intentionality, Wise realizes that one can choose to resist (*re-sistere*, “to take a stand” against) various ways in which one has learned to *be*, that is, to live one’s body as if fixed by a racial essence.

What is of particular importance regarding Wise’s discussion of whites resisting whiteness is the emphasis that he places on the role that Black voices must play in any anti-racist efforts that whites undertake. “The first thing a white person must do in order to effectively fight racism is to listen, and more than that, to believe what people of color say about their lives.”²³ What is also fascinating about his discussion of resisting whiteness is his frankness, particularly his honesty concerning times when he failed to challenge various acts of white racism. Again, he is worth quoting in full:

Before I ever stood up and challenged a store clerk for racially profiling customers, there were dozens of times that I saw it and did nothing. For every time I interrupted someone for making a racist joke or comment, or responded to such a joke or comment in a forceful manner, there were dozens of times that I didn’t: when I let things slide, with a nervous laugh but little else. There was even the time that I said nothing after listening to a guy who was the head of the volunteer literacy program at Tulane talk about one of the kids he was tutoring, by noting that while he was a cute little eight-year-old now, when he became a teenager he’d probably become “just another nigger.” I said nothing to this, and the silence then and at other times haunts me, as it should.²⁴

One interruption strategy that Wise uses effectively is to call into question the sense of “white solidarity,” or what he calls “white bonding,”²⁵ presupposed when whites tell racist jokes around other whites. He relates the story of being out with a group of other whites when someone he did not know told a racist joke. Calling into question the very presumption of the racist performance, that is, that other whites in the group welcomed the joke, Wise used his interruption strategy: “Did you hear the one about the white guy who told this really racist joke because he assumed everyone he was hanging out with was also white?”²⁶ According to Wise, the white guy who told the joke missed his point completely, mentioning that he had not heard the joke. Wise went on to tell him that he was Black and that his mom is Black. The guy apologized, saying, “I didn’t know.”²⁷ Wise finally admitted that he is not Black, which really confused the guy. Wise then said to the white guy: “You must not think very much of white people, huh?”²⁸ I find this to be a fascinating critique. Wise turns the guy’s proclivity to tell racist jokes in the midst of other whites into a critique of the guy’s insulting presumptive attitude toward those other whites present. In short, not only did the joker assume that the

others were racists, but racists who really like to hear racist jokes.²⁹ Wise raises important epistemological questions here. For example, how did the joker “know” that the other whites present would enjoy the racist joke? What prior experiences did he bring to that context of white bodies? What is it about a group of white bodies that tacitly sanctions the telling of racist jokes? And what is it like to have such presumptive knowledge challenged as Wise did?

In his chapter entitled “Collaboration,” Wise makes it clear that the ideology of liberalism, where the individual is conceived as an atom disjunct from larger social structures, is a farce. He puts this beautifully where he says that “it would be easier if one could forever and always remain on the side of the angels.”³⁰ The fact of the matter, though, is that our lives are always already linked to various forms of injustice. This is how Wise would have his readers think about whiteness. In other words, to be white in America is to be in collaboration with systems of power, structures of racial inequality, and racial injustice, even if one does not live one’s life consciously as a racist. On this score, then, there are no innocent whites. Of course, one could make a similar argument regarding men and the powerful structures that privilege male bodies. Regarding whites and how they unjustly benefit from the ways in which white supremacy constitutes a system of governance, Wise says that “our innocence, in that regard, is something we almost automatically relinquish the minute we are born white in this land.”³¹ Wise points out that while his grandfather, Leo Wise, was always willing to help Blacks in the neighborhood—he gave out \$20 bills to people, helped to pay people’s light bills, bought food for families that were struggling—he owned a liquor store in the midst of a Black community. The point here is that Leo Wise, while a “good white,” was implicated in a larger social context of oppression. Wise:

The fact is, my grandfather, who had spent several of his formative years as a teenager residing on Jefferson Street, would indeed make his living owning and operating a liquor store in the black community. Though the drug he sold was a legal one, it was a drug nonetheless, and to deny that fact, or to ignore the implications—that my grandfather put food on his family’s table (and mine quite often) thanks to the addictions, or just the habits, of some of the city’s poorest African Americans—is to shirk our responsibility to own our collaboration.³²

Of course, Wise realizes that anti-racist resistance is a continuous project. It has the character of a verb as opposed to a noun. After all, racism is insidious. Even as Wise continues to make a conscious effort at eradicating his racist tendencies, he realizes how trapped he is within the vortex of white power and how, psychologically, whiteness creates these moments of psychological dysfunction. He relates a story that gets at the core of how racism operates at such subtle levels. In his chapter entitled “Loss,” he relates that in 2003 he boarded a plane headed to St. Louis. He says that as he “walked down the jet way to board the 737, I glanced into the cockpit...and there I saw something I had never seen before in all the years I had been flying: not one but two black pilots at the controls of the plane.” Despite all of the anti-racist work that he had done, Wise confesses that he thought: “Oh my God, can these guys fly this plane?”³³ Wise points out that what he knew to be true was of little help. This points to how racism often operates beneath the radar of cognition. He sees this sort of response as “tantamount to a soul wound.”³⁴ This points to the sheer magnitude of the work that is necessary to do away with the insidious nature of racism, and how racism eats away, as W.E. B. Du Bois might say, at the souls of white folk. In fact, earlier

within this chapter, Wise tells the story of his grandmother, Maw Maw, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Wise shares the horrible narrative of the last stages of her life, how she began “to forget who people were, confusing me with my father on a pretty much permanent basis.”³⁵ Wise poses this important question: “What does a little old lady with Alzheimer’s tell us about whiteness in America?”³⁶ Wise makes a point of sharing with his readers that she was anti-racist and tried to teach this to his parents and, by extension, him. What makes this story even more tragic is that her dad was a member of the KKK. He eventually quit the Klan because of his daughter’s anti-racist fortitude. After all, at the age of fifteen, she had fallen in love with Leo Wise, who was Jewish. Wise provides these details in order to provide us with the reality of racism and how it is a form of soul wound. As her condition worsened, she forgot her former self, which is one of the powerful tragedies of Alzheimer’s. She began to call her nurses “niggers.” Wise:

She could not go to the bathroom by herself. She could not recognize a glass of water for what it was. But she could recognize a *nigger*. America had seen to that, and no disease would strip her of that memory. Indeed, it would be one of the last words I would hear her say, before finally she stopped talking at all.³⁷

In “Redemption,” Wise’s last chapter, his opening quote from James Baldwin is particularly telling. Baldwin makes the point that life is tragic because for us, each of us, the sun will go down for the last time and that each of us will return to the void from whence we came. More than an observation about our existential absurdity, Baldwin points to what we can do while we are here. In fact, despite our inevitable demise, we can live our lives in ways that are noble and such that we earn our death, as it were, with deeds that transcend the moment and point to a future that will succeed each one of us. This frames the last chapter nicely. There is redemption (a calling back, a reclaiming) even as we may never end racism. Wise says, “I have no idea when, or if, racism will be eradicated.”³⁸ He opts for hope within a context where there are no promises. Hence, instead of placing all of one’s energy in obsessing over outcome, where “burnout is never too far around the corner,”³⁹ Wise believes that it is “an honor and a privilege to serve as the threat of a good example, and to be prepared to die for your principles if need be, but even more so, to be unafraid to live for them.”⁴⁰ Grounded in Parrhesia, Wise’s *White Like Me* is a welcomed textual force that critically speaks to the powerful dynamics of white supremacy and dispels any illusions regarding the immanent eradication of white power and whiteness as the transcendental norm. Nevertheless, Wise, while realizing the existential stakes involved in fighting against racism, believes that fighting for justice is a continuous project that requires the nurturing of a disposition to reinsert one’s efforts over and over again at building a better world.

Endnotes

1. Peggy McIntosh. “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through the Work in Women’s Studies.” In *Critical Whiteness Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 291.
2. Shannon Sullivan. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 188.
3. Sullivan, 189.
4. Tim Wise. *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005), 189.
5. Martha R. Mahoney. “Segregation, Whiteness, and Transformation.” In *Critical Whiteness Studies: Looking Behind*

the Mirror, edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 331.

6. Wise, viii.
7. Of course, as with much of critical whiteness studies, more work needs to be done in terms of giving greater attention to the ways in which the self-confessional mode often presupposes the self, in this case the white self, as self-transparent. While Wise is certainly aware of how his own whiteness is complicit in larger social structures of injustice, and how his own racism is insidiously embedded, he does not consider the various complex issues around the implicit trust that he grants knowledge of the white self. For a critical, though brief, discussion of this problem, see Monique Roelofs' epilogue in her chapter "Racialization as an Aesthetic Production: What Does the Aesthetic Do for Whiteness and Blackness and Vice Versa?" in *White on White / Black on Black*, edited by George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).
8. Wise, *White Like Me*, ix.
9. *Ibid.*, ix-x.
10. *Ibid.*, 10.
11. *Ibid.*, 7.
12. *Ibid.*, 8.
13. *Ibid.*, 13.
14. *Ibid.*, 18.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 48.
17. *Ibid.*, 23.
18. *Ibid.*, 29.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 39.
21. *Ibid.*, 62.
22. *Ibid.*, 63.
23. *Ibid.*, 67.
24. *Ibid.*, 85.
25. *Ibid.*, 88.
26. *Ibid.*, 92.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 101.
31. *Ibid.*, 102.
32. *Ibid.*, 103.
33. *Ibid.*, 133.
34. *Ibid.*, 134.
35. *Ibid.*, 128.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, 131.
38. *Ibid.*, 154.
39. *Ibid.*, 155.
40. *Ibid.*

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