

APA Newsletters

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NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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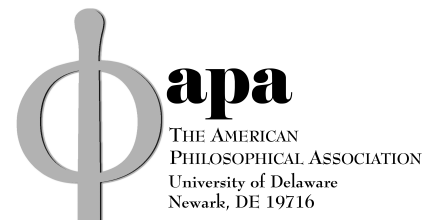
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Philosophy and the Black Experience

John McClendon & George Yancy, Co-Editors

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FROM THE EDITORS

In this edition of the *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, we are pleased to have an article by Leonard Harris entitled "Philosophy and Flagships." Within the context of Howard University's discussion about eliminating its philosophy department, Harris offers an insightful overview of Howard University's flagship status among historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Harris also makes important links to Alain Locke and his role at Howard. Harris' point is to critique forms of myopia that may very well undergird what is happening at Howard University by telescoping the rich pluralism of Locke. He also makes important references to key sites of community building for philosophers of African descent, arguing for their indispensable importance. Leonard Harris offers a broad analysis of Blacks in philosophy, particularly within the context of racism, selective privileging, and hegemonic practices that militate against the presence of Black philosophers in terms of key academic positions of power and authority. In the end, Harris is a Lockean romantic, yet he fears that Blacks will inherit the fate of Tuskegee's anti-intellectualist tradition, moving away from the intellectual fruits and essential benefits gained from a rigorous training in philosophy.

We are also pleased to have an article by George Yancy entitled "Narrative Descriptions from the Ground Up: Epistemological and Existential Importance." In this article, Yancy reflects on the importance of narrative within the context of his important text, *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations*. He insightfully reveals some of the implicit and explicit assumptions that guided the formation of that text, arguing that he attempted to capture the voice of Black philosophers within the context of anti-Black racism. He also explores why the text was important to him and how it functions pedagogically and philosophically for philosophers of African descent. The article also speaks to how the text created and creates an audible space that is too often dominated by whites. Yancy's article raises important meta-philosophical issues and emphasizes the importance of philosophical voices and knowledge-production vis-à-vis those who have been marginalized within the field of philosophy.

We are also excited to have a poem submission by Jenson Leonard. He is a brilliant young word-warrior and we would like to share his work within the context of the *Newsletter*. His poem is entitled "Bojangles (A Forlorn Caricature)." The poem is complex, reflective, fearless, and engaging, both philosophically and politically. We expect great things from Leonard as he continues to twist language to express what is often so difficult to express in words.

Last but not least, we are excited and honored to publish John T. Warren's review of Barbara Applebaum's insightful and critically astute new book, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility and Social Justice Pedagogy*.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Philosophy Born of Struggle

**Eighteenth Annual Conference at Michigan State University
October 28-29, 2011**

Theme: Economic Crisis, Philosophy, Education, and the Role of Philosophy for the African American Public

This conference seeks to address the cultural and political dynamics of worldviews, philosophical analysis, education, and economic needs within African American communities and the wider society. Areas of concerns include processes of decision making resulting in public policy, community needs, and the influence of academe.

In our reflection and call to action we will contextualize public policy from the "Moynihan Report" to recent "Contracts with America" and their attendant consequences on academic institutions and the nation as a whole. Participants are encouraged to submit abstracts related to philosophies of education and the African American experience, public policy and human liberation, race and economic distribution, cultural understanding and economical outlook, educational mobilization and social transformation by August 15, 2011.

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ARTICLES

Philosophy and Flagships

Leonard Harris
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The Department of Philosophy at Howard University has a long and distinguished history consonant with its status as the “flagship” of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Howard’s plan to eliminate the bachelor and master’s degree in philosophy, the only HBCU to ever offer a graduate degree in philosophy, portends the demise of Howard as a flagship, which is an ominous warning that the support that HBCUs have provided minority philosophers is coming to an end. Possibly, it is also a signal that philosophy departments are no longer required as a discipline necessary to help define a university’s high status.

The first master’s degree in philosophy at Howard was granted for a thesis submitted in 1932 by Frank L. Norris, “An Analysis of the Form/Quality Element in Contemporary Theories of Value,” which was authored under Alain L. Locke’s guidance. Locke was the first black Rhodes Scholar in 1907, first black Harvard graduate in philosophy in 1918, and editor of the anthology *The New Negro*, 1925, that ushered in and defined the Harlem Renaissance. Locke was a pragmatist, cultural pluralist, and noted for promoting the aesthetic features of African American art as a way of supplanting minstrel images and creating a new picture of African Americans as complex persons. The influences of African American literary and folk culture, value theories of Christian von Ehrenfels, Wilbur Urban, and Georg Simmel, the pragmatism of Hugo Munsterberg, William James, and the ideas of Pixley Isaka Seme (one of three founders of the African National Congress of South Africa) and W.E.B. Du Bois wedded to form Locke’s version of pragmatism, critical pragmatism. Locke’s version of pragmatism emphasizes human emancipation, aesthetics as a social force, ethics of self-formation, transvaluation of values, and the fallibility of reason, including instrumental pragmatic reasoning.

Locke promoted the artistic production of African Americans with a non-moralistic and purely aesthetic approach. He believed that a critical approach would be a successful strategy to combat racial stereotypes because an aesthetic approach reveals universal qualities that thereby bespeak favorably and well for the people that embody its cultural source. Well-formed literary and artistic works that use the resources of African American culture reveal the universal qualities of balance and symmetry of form; moreover, tragedy and humor reveal the embedded existential qualities of complex personalities. Such works are thereby elevated from being mere folk expressions to cosmopolitan goods. The revelation and elevation makes possible transvaluation in ways that allow African Americans to be categorized, not as a population of minstrel one-dimensional stereotypical agents, but as a people with a rich culture and home. In short, African Americans are seen as complex persons. Locke was often criticized for being too romantic.

In a pluralist fashion, Locke included in the *The New Negro* articles favoring competing flagship cities and universities: James W. Johnson, “Harlem: the Cultural Capital,” Robert R. Moton, “Hampton-Tuskegee: Missioners of the Mass,” E. Franklin Frazier, “Durham: Capital of the Black Middle Class,” and W.A. Domingo, “Gift of the Black Tropics.” As it turned out, Howard became the most noted flagship university.

In 1973, I was interviewed at Northwestern University for a position in philosophy. At the interview I was informed by a philosopher from South Africa who was a staunch supporter of apartheid that my performance was admirable for a Negro. I was told this just before I was informed by the chair that they needed to interview a Negro to provide evidence of their racial sensitivity (employment was never an option). I was employed by Central State University in 1973 as a grant writer and volunteered to teach a course on black philosophy. HBCUs have been an employer when no one else would.

The Committee on Blacks in Philosophy has held various meetings since 1976 on Howard’s campus. When African American Rhodes scholars sponsored the 100 Year Celebration of Locke’s award on September 24, 2007, at Howard, it was in a sense a reaffirmation of Howard as the “flagship” in philosophy. The terror of anti-black racism is still a fact in the profession. There are two summer institutes directed at increasing minority participation in philosophy—Summer Institute for Diversity in Philosophy, at Rutgers University, and Penn State University’s Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute. Professional committees such as the Committee on Blacks in Philosophy of the American Philosophical Association and scholarly societies such as the Alain L. Locke Society, Philosophy Born of Struggle Association, Society for the Study of Africana Philosophy, and the Caribbean Philosophical Association provide comfortable niches for philosophers interested in a range of issues, including racism. Such niches provide not only an academic source for networking, but also emotional comforting because they constitute a socially friendly community and thus are without the degrading treatment Robert Gooding Williams portrayed in “Look, a Negro!” The experiences of Black philosophers representing a wide range of philosophical orientations has also been voiced in George Yancy’s groundbreaking *African American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*.

African American philosophers have struggled to create intellectual niches in a viciously hostile academic community. Black philosophy conferences were held at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, 1971, Tuskegee Institute, 1973/1976, Wingspread Conference Center, Racine, Michigan, 1976, Morgan State University, 1979, University of the District of Columbia, 1980, and Haverford College, conference on Africana philosophy, 1982. The Robert R. Moton Center for Independent Study under the leadership of a Black philosopher, Broadus Butler, provided Postdoctoral fellowships that allowed for the study of Black philosophy and conference sessions where senior philosophers such as Eugene C. Holmes were introduced to newly graduated African American philosophers between 1976-1977. There is the Alain L. Locke lecture series at the W.E.B. Du Bois Center for African and African American Research, the annual Locke Lecture at Howard University, the Anna Julia Cooper Fellow faculty position at Penn State University, and the William T. Fontaine Society and Fellowships at the University of Pennsylvania. Spelman University has an impressive record of its graduates continuing on to graduate school, especially to the University of Memphis, which enjoys the NRC’s highest ranking for diversity. And last but not least, if not a flagship, certainly a leader, it is important to mention the Tuskegee University National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care. Historically excluded voices found and created niches with direct and indirect support from HBCUs.

The idea that philosophers are above racial prejudice is about as defensible as the idea that there could be a discipline of philosophy in a racist academic culture magically governed by racially blind virtuous intellectuals. Let alone the racism of Kant, Hume, or Hobbes, sadly, too often progressive American philosophers such as John Dewey, who rejected the idea that

humanity consisted of inherent inferior and superior races, nonetheless too often sanctioned racial segregation.

There are two African American distinguished philosophy professors (named, endowed) in Pennsylvania (Lewis Gordon, Anita Allen) and New Jersey (Howard McGary, Anthony Appiah); one in New York (Michele Moody-Adams) and Illinois (Charles Mills); two in southern states (Bernard Boxill, North Carolina; Bill Lawson, Tennessee); and none west of the Mississippi. The most well-known and influential African American philosophers, Angela Davis and Cornel West, do not hold positions housed in a department of philosophy. All appointments except for Boxill's were made in the last twenty years.

The 100 Year Celebration of Locke's Rhodes' award also marked another 100 years of uninterrupted almost exclusive white privilege at the highest levels. The highest honors have been reserved for whites and honorary whites (under South African apartheid, a designation for Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese). The crucial variable for honorary white status in apartheid South Africa and a good deal of America, especially in the profession of philosophy, is being non-Black and publishing works on white authors—like being Japanese in apartheid South Africa and subjugating Black employees with the same draconian vigilance and cruelty as well as accomplished anti-Black white racists. Even if these analogies are misaligned comparisons, they convey the result of what real people do and ignore.

The number of distinguished positions at Northwestern University, University of Pennsylvania, and New York University is greater than the number of positions awarded all African Americans in the last one hundred years; so too for Brown, Berkeley, and Rice. What a race-based cash cow benefit for university investment portfolios! Not even the Ku Klux Klan could have devised a much better profession—a profession which successfully promotes the erroneous belief that it is governed by objective, rational, virtuous, and color blind scholars who use criteria of excellence to define merit.

And the money is nowhere traced! There are no institutions recording the location of distinguished positions in philosophy and consequently no way to account for existing funds or previous generations of funds used to establish undue disparity, let alone prove intentional discrimination, color-blind criteria skewed for racial preferential consequences, or misuse of public funds for race-specific group privilege. Possibly, the benefits received by whites at the highest levels have all been received without any of them intentionally promoting racial disparity. There could hardly be a better way for interlocking personal networks of scholars using color-blind criteria for ill-gotten largess to be received than by unintentionally sustaining a historically inherited racial divide. The Ku Klux Klan, not just institutions of higher education, has long since learned that paper trails can be dangerous.

If the idea of a flagship university is passé, arguably the idea of a discipline housed at a flagship university contributing to that university's flagship status is also passé. There may be excellent fiscal reasons for Howard to end its major in philosophy, especially since HBCUs have been unduly hit by a downturn in alumni giving and increased competition for scarce foundation and government resources.

Without the benefit cash cow's involving unknown millions over generations for positions in philosophy to bolster investment portfolios—in addition to all the other pressures encouraging administrators to lessen support for the humanities—it may be too much to expect the maintenance of majors in philosophy at any HBCU.

Howard is certainly a great university and may well emerge from its current reduction of programs and majors, of which

philosophy is only one. Perhaps it will be more like Booker T. Washington's model for Tuskegee, a model that emphasized industrial and normal education as the form of education most likely to empower African Americans in a racially prejudiced environment. I only hope that Howard reinstates its M.A. in philosophy, even if the idea of a flagship university and department of philosophy are passé and even if philosophy departments are no longer a necessary sign that a university is participating in the pursuit of knowledge qua knowledge. I admit to being a Lockean romantic.

Narrative Descriptions from the Ground Up: Epistemological and Existential Importance¹

George Yancy
Duquesne University

In her review of my book *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* (back in 1999) Stella Sandford wrote, "Perhaps it is part and parcel of the *tremendous humanizing of philosophy* that this book achieves. Whatever it is, I don't think we can afford to ignore it." Clevis Headley's blurb that appears on the back cover of my book *The Philosophical I, Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy* (2002) reads: "*The Philosophical I*, humanizes philosophy in the sense of giving philosophy a 'voice.' Yancy's text focuses on the flesh-and-blood human beings who breathe life into philosophy as they heroically confront the social, political, cultural, and other factors that shape the drama of life." While it is my aim to focus only on the former text, both quotes speak to the way in which both volumes conceptualize philosophy from the perspective of flesh and blood human beings.

The way in which I thought about these two books in the past has slightly shifted and expanded. This, it seems to me, points to the fact that a hermeneutic and narrative framework both discloses and yet conceals, that temporality can function as a lens through which we gain greater interpretive or narrative clarity. One always begins an inquiry *in medias res*. There is no hermeneutic perspective from nowhere. Every perspective (etymologically, "to look") is a partial, *unfinished* look, a beckoning for one to look again, to re-think again, to re-feel again, to re-narrate again, to re-story again. Both Sandford's and Headley's comments helped to concretize my philosophical intuitions regarding the human face, as it were, of philosophy. In this sense, others add to and help shape the meaning of one's own self-understanding about one's intellectual projects. This is especially true when it comes to treating one's own life as a project. At a deeper level, then, the importance of *the other vis-à-vis* one's own growth points to the fundamental truth of *sociality* and the truth that we don't shape who we are *ex nihilo* and that who we are does not result from auto-genesis. This might be *prima facie* true for many, but keep in mind that there is the assumption in some philosophical quarters that dependence or reliance upon others—especially when it comes to the life of the mind or acts of "genuine" philosophical creativity—is something that we ought to discourage. After all, philosophy is about going it alone, rugged individualism, retreating to the privacy of one's own stove-heated room and working at the frontier of philosophical exploration, leaving the world behind, bracketing out one's social locations, putting aside emotion, and by all means denying the body, with its needs, its desires, and especially its annoying excretions. As an undergrad in philosophy, I came to think about the body as an encumbrance. I thought that to do *really* good philosophy one had to be something of a philosophical ascetic or that one

had to be “pure,” that is, one had to be free from the trace of others, free from the world, and free from life’s distractions. Embodiment was something of an embarrassment that philosophy had to deal with. After all, being born between urine and feces was just too funky. Embodiment linked me to other bodies, which invoked relationships of dependency, which implied history, which further implied complex interlocking narratives, and which ultimately meant vulnerability. But what would philosophy look like from the perspective of a self that fully realizes its vulnerability and its dependency? What would philosophical creativity look like? What would philosophy departments look like? What would philosophical collegiality look like? As a philosophical *mind*, however, I was meant to be unrelenting, indefatigable, immutable, and detached.

Yet, there was something about how I experienced my racial embodiment within mostly white philosophical spaces that belied this search for incorporeal purity. More was at stake. I could not disappear. There was something about the fact of my racial embodied experiences, and the racial narratives built around that body, that did not square with the sea of white bodies that did philosophy in *abstracto*. There was the dawning of a profound cognizance: that is, we have not come from the same *lived* raced space, we were not cut from the same racial narrative cloth, as it were. Hence, *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* became a project that I had to do; it was a project that I needed. It was a collection of *raced* narratives that both spoke to a self (*to me*) that *had been* shaped by various raced narratives and a self that *was being* shaped by various raced narratives. In fact, *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* shaped me as I shaped it; it was dialectical. The text helped to complete me (or story me) as I helped to complete it (or story it). The text wasn’t simply about me, but about the past, present, and future experiences of Blacks in the field of philosophy. In this sense, the text had a wider dialectical and narrative terrain; it was a dynamically interpersonal text that honored the experiences of Black people in the field of philosophy. I was after a dynamic “we-relationship” that would help to constitute the particular self that I was becoming. This “we-relationship” was decisive and came to solidify the performative “I am.” In short, then, those invaluable stories helped me to make sense of my identity as a Black philosopher. The stories within *17 Conversations* helped to create me; they helped to make me less enigmatic as a Black philosopher, less mysterious to myself.

There were things that I needed to hear. I needed to hear Laurence Thomas say, “I believe that no philosophy department in America would hire a Black who would trouble the waters.”²² I needed to hear Anita Allen say, “Yet as a Black person it felt odd to sit around asking such questions like ‘How do you know when two nonexistent objects are the same?’ There you are in the middle of the era of affirmative action, civil rights, women’s movements, etc., and you’re sitting around thinking about nonexistent objects and how to tell when they are the same.”²³ I had to hear Howard McGary say, “I think that the APA has done very little [for Blacks] as an organization. Very little.”²⁴ I had to hear Adrian Piper say, “I think that everybody assumes that Black women are basically maids or prostitutes and so you have a lot to get over when you go into a [philosophy] department.”²⁵ I had to hear the story of Albert Mosley and how he experienced tension after he was invited by a prominent philosopher of science to study with him at Oxford. Mosley was passionate about problems involving incommensurability, scientific realism, and the differential accounts of science given by Thomas S. Kuhn and Karl Popper. Mosley applied for a Fulbright and received it. I had to hear him say, “But 1966-1967 found me torn again between scholarship and activism. I almost refused the Fulbright scholarship because I felt guilty

that I was not actively involved in the civil rights struggle.”²⁶ And while Bernard Boxill was steeped in Bertrand Russell’s and Alfred North Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica*, and works by Alonzo Church and Quine, he was passionately attracted to all of the discussions and political upheavals around 1965. It was important *for me* to know that Boxill eventually wrote his dissertation on the Black Power debate through the lens of Frantz Fanon’s work.²⁷

Such narrative accounts brought me face to face with various expressions of the muck and mire of Black *Erlebnis*, that is, the range of ways in which Black philosophers make meaning within the context of various occurrences or experiences where, in this case, anti-Black racism is salient. Such narrative accounts helped me to think with greater clarity about the practice of philosophy, its aims, purposes, and shifts relative to particular social locations. Through these narratives, I was not after forms of universalism that obfuscate modes of particularity. Moreover, I did not presume that these raced narrative voices would speak for all epistemic subjects *simpliciter*. My point of philosophical embarkation did not rest upon the assumption of a fixed set of abstract and universal problems or solutions. This was my philosophical inclination at least. In retrospect, one might say that I had become skeptical of the Cartesian epistemic subject (one denuded, as it were, of historical and corporeal *particularity*). The Cartesian subject, based upon an epistemic substitutability assumption, had no place for what I was after. I was after the self as *homo historicus*—in all of its raced, classed, gendered, embodied, and embedded reality.

I wasn’t simply after propositional truth-claims, but a *lived* framework that made important links between various truth-claims. But I was also interested in the way in which Black philosophers’ storied truth-claims make an impact on people who looked like me. I was as much interested in the “facts” as I was in the mode of re-telling the facts, how the facts were mediated by and through the process of remembering, how the facts impacted me, how I *heard* the facts, how the conditions of my own life rendered the facts meaningful *in a particular way*. I was interested in how “facts” can shift and come to mean something radically different. I wanted to *hear* how these Black philosophers made sense of their lives precisely *as* Black philosophers. I would argue that the gathering of these narratives, then, was itself an act of political praxis. The telling of the narratives created an audible space and thus challenged various dominant, white philosophical voices.

I was interested in how Black philosophers had *arrived*. While philosophical embarkation was important to me, *arrival* signified an embedded history, a place from whence one came. Arrival implied a yesterday, a before. Generally speaking, I would argue that all sites of embarkation are implicative of complex processes of arrival. It seems to me that many philosophers engage in philosophy as if they were free of the contingencies of arrival, the distal narrative dynamics of arrival. Like God, they are somehow always present, unconditioned, and without specificity of location. In the construction “S knows that P,” I wanted to know about the arrival of S, how S came to know what S knows and how this impacts P. As I thought about the phenomenon of arrival, I was *not* after something that required a law-covering model of explanation, but I wanted these Black philosophers to delve into the confusing (non-nomological) existential density of *lived* experiences and within the complex space of meaning-making. I desired a shared meaning, something that squared with my own narrative arrival. Moreover, I wasn’t after something that I would simply acknowledge as one more additional fact in the life of S, as it were, but I was after something that would have a perlocutionary impact on how I storied my past, my present, and possibly my future. *In*

this sense, I was after narrative coherence, not metaphysical unity. My engagement with those narratives, indeed, having become part of those very narratives, functioned as a form of co-narration/collective multi-narration that had a profound impact in terms of providing me with a sense of self-affirmation.

Why narratives by Black philosophers? I was looking for ways that Black philosophers organize their experiences “into,” what Donald E. Polkinghore refers to as, “temporally meaningful episodes.”⁸ More specifically, I was interested in how such experiences get organized vis-à-vis African American philosophers who struggle within the profession of philosophy and how struggle itself functions as a site of knowledge-production and knowledge-transformation. In short, then, the narratives within *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* constituted/constitute epistemological sites. The narratives themselves provide entry into the interiority of lived meaningful experiences, and ways of engaging the world and being engaged by the world. The narratives provide a space within which the power of voicing functions as a specific site of knowing. The narratives function as sites of epistemic authority. The narratives focus upon the importance of first-person accounts. Within an anti-Black world where Black critical subjectivity is denied, first-person accounts testify to the complexity of a Black experiential and conceptual here. Yet, they were first-person accounts that always already presupposed a preexisting context. In this sense, then, one might say that each individual life is, as it were, transitive (etymologically, “passing over”), requiring an “object,” an other, a context, a milieu, or a world in terms of which its meaning might be “completed” or, more accurately, further constructed qua storied.

At a meta-philosophical level, *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* managed to call mainstream Anglo-American philosophy into question as the text’s 350-plus pages focused on various complex axiological and social ontological concerns of African American philosophers as voiced through narratives. The narratives rendered visible the lives of Black philosophers. There was simply no text in 1998 or before that time that explored in great detail the personal lives of Black philosophers vis-à-vis their philosophical views. Hence, the text not only humanized philosophy, but dared to recognize the humanity of Black philosophers. The narratives of these philosophers spoke to various facets of institutional power and hegemony. The narratives came from those whose voices are marginalized and silenced, where some of those voices are doubly or triply marginalized and silenced. I wanted a text where Black philosophers spoke for themselves; a text that created a space where up and coming Black philosophers might “find themselves,” a textual space within which they might enter in order to hear better their own inner voices or inner, though inchoate, stories. I wanted younger Black philosophers to have a text that might help them to better story their lives, a text that might bring sanity within a field that is largely monochromatically white and where various philosophical problems—problems predicated upon certain normative assumptions about the “philosophical-we”—fail to speak to them. I wanted a text that would deconstruct the image of the quintessential philosopher qua white male. Moreover, I wanted a text that was attentive to issues that were/are specifically experienced by Black women in the field, a text in terms of which their needs, concerns, and existential conundrums would be voiced. Because they are the other of the second-sex, I wanted to know when and where they enter.

Within this text, African American philosophers provided me/us with narratives about their lives whereby they made intelligible the various dynamics that help to shape the identities that they had become, were, indeed, still becoming.

As Polkinghore writes, “The realm of meaning is not a thing or substance, but an activity.”⁹ The selves with whom I co-narrated through the textual site of *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* were not fixed substances. Yet, I was after something more than discursive constructions, mere ciphers within a network of significations. I wanted to hear from bodies of flesh; identities that take their historical embeddedness seriously. Even as I have come to theorize the self as a site of both possession and dispossession, I wanted narratives that were not inhibited by a *bone stuck in the throat of signification*. And just as I have come to think of selves in terms of postponement (*postponere*, “to place after”), as always already incomplete, indeed, as always *more* to come, this does not render ontologically moot the *ontologically real ways* in which selves narrate themselves and precisely *understand themselves* through those very narrations. Moreover, my commitment to the self as incomplete does not render moot the very real ways in which the self is *narrated* and where those narrations either speak meaningfully or problematically vis-à-vis selves.

I wanted a text that not only engaged in semiotic warfare, but one that involved philosophers who knew what it meant to suffer at the site of the body. Their narrative-knowledge or their narrative-knowing, then, implicates the body, which implicates the messiness of the funk of life. After all, any narrative will not do. For example, in his *Confessions*, Rousseau writes, “The true object of my confessions is to reveal my inner thoughts exactly in all the situations of my life.” Yet, there is something exclusively centripetal about his approach. The storied epistemologies in *17 Conversations* are deeply centrifugal; they are narratives that are deeply relational; that point beyond the immediacy of one’s own “inner thoughts” to a world that shapes and configures one’s thoughts, the direction of one’s thoughts, and thoughts that one deems most important, salient, and relevant.

One might say that I wanted narratives from the ground up. I wanted to telescope the lives of those who Charles Mills refers to as “non-Cartesian Sums.”¹⁰ According to Cornel West, “If the Cartesian viewpoint is the only valid philosophical stance, then the idea of an Afro-American philosophy would be ludicrous.”¹¹ While my anti-Cartesian assumptions are *not* novel, they transcend the familial “Oedipal conflict” subtext that is often associated with so many thinkers who eagerly unseat the patriarch of modern philosophy. To think of the history of western philosophy as constituting a family with cross generational (monochromatic) ties, it is important to note that Black people were never even part of the family; they were always already outsiders, deemed permanently unfit to participate in the normative (read: white and male) philosophical community. I am honored when Black philosophy grad students and already established philosophers approach me with an excited “Thank you for *17 Conversations!*” I have been told by some that reading the text was literally the defining moment for them to pursue philosophy. Somehow those narratives provided them with the necessary armor to go on. I wish that I had *17 Conversations* as an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh. When in conversations with Wilfrid Sellars, Carl Gustav Hempel, or Annette Baier, my questions would no doubt have been configured differently. My understanding about the often unmarked whiteness of the field would have been different, how I thought about what constitutes a philosophical problem, and how philosophical problems are constituted, would have been different.

17 Conversations was itself a profound narrative gesture, a way of installing narratives into the stream of Black narrative production. The text spoke to my own desire/wish to fill a gap in my own past. It was my way of filling a gap in my knowledge that I had to endure. The text’s importance for younger Blacks

in the field has created a space for them to see themselves, to read about other Black philosophers who function as witnesses and role models to their predicaments, struggles, confusions, and delights. I don't think I recall ever having a white philosophy grad student thank me for *17 Conversations*. There is nothing logically contradictory to be approached by a white student intent upon letting me know just how the text has transformed his/her life. But why has this not happened? What is it about the narratives that specifically speak to Black philosophers or other philosophers of color? While all of the experiences within the text may not map *exactly* onto the lives of *all* Black philosophers who read the text, the text specifically resonates with Black philosophers. My sense is that I have captured a facet or profile of *lived* Black experience, an experience that is *real*, that has social ontological, epistemological, and political implications. *17 Conversations* is about narrated identities and how such identities are complex, raced, gendered, sexed, classed, etc. It is, one might say, an inter-subjective, hermeneutic framework within which Black philosophers are able to see themselves and gain solace. The narratives within the text are not incidental to the otherwise purely philosophical content. Rather, the narratives are themselves functioning *philosophically*. The narratives *do* philosophy by framing and re-framing what is of philosophical importance. The narratives *make meaning* in the telling. The narratives are in some sense *doing* epistemology and ontology as they are conveyed. In short, a world is being enacted, constructed, and revealed precisely through the narratives.

Endnotes

1. I had the pleasure of reading a version of this paper at an APA conference (Eastern Division, 2010) in a session offered by the Society for Analytical Feminism. I would like to thank Pieranna Garavaso for making the initial call for papers addressing the theme: "The role of autobiographical and biographical narratives in philosophical debates." It was an honor to share that panel space with Naomi Scheman, Susan Brison, Linda Alcoff, and Eva Kittay.
2. George Yancy, ed. "Laurence Thomas," in *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 293.
3. George Yancy, ed. "Anita L. Allen," in *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 168.
4. George Yancy, ed. "Howard McGary, Jr.," in *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 85.
5. George Yancy, ed. "Adrian M.S. Piper," in *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 59.
6. George Yancy, ed. "Albert Mosely," in *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 145-55.
7. George Yancy, ed. "Bernard R. Boxill," in *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 327-41.
8. Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 1.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
10. Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1-19.
11. Cornel West, "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience," in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 8.

Bojangles (A Forlorn Caricature)

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Somewhere deep in the margins....
deep in the margins....

It strikes me as peculiar,
the way the blacks,
as if genetically predisposed,
gravitate toward the back
of the bus.
and how on that very same bus,
i sit beside a poor black schizophrenic bum
reading the newspaper upside down aloud
and i can hear his stomach's desperate growls
and across from me
pampered white girls discuss
their menial superficialities.

And the way my parents blindly appraise
Yaweh the Anglo Saxon
In one of those fine historically black churches
where at the epicenter of the altar
they pay reverence to the twenty foot tall image
of the blessed good white
patriarchal lord Jesus Christ.
(The grand irony of it all being
that their church is in
Pittsburgh's Hill district;
"Hill" the operative pseudonym
for nigger)

And how academia
has me Claude Neal'd
hung and asphyxiated
on a noose of Euro centrism
mended with narcissist fibers.
a curriculum of self-hatred
Forlorn feet of cold
black-red leather dangling.
An epidermis likened to
emaciated silk
Emasculated of my Africana
an amalgam of man's filth.

Somewhere deep in the margins....
deep in the margins....

BOOK REVIEW

Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy

Barbara Applebaum (Lexington Books, 2010). 230 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-7391-4491-6 (Cloth, \$75.00)

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I'm growing more and more concerned that as research on whiteness continues to hit the academic scene that less and less is being said. That is, so often what I read feels like old arguments replayed without challenging either the production of racism as lived or racism as theorized. The end result is often, in my own perspective, little more than tired mantras of privileged angst. So when I picked up Applebaum's new book, *Being White, Being Good*, I did so with both hope and suspicion. Pleasantly, I found myself not only intrigued with Applebaum's narrative, but also challenged in my own work on this topic (as both a teacher and a researcher of race, racism, and whiteness). Applebaum has crafted a sophisticated argument about how whiteness persists and how we are each implicated in that ongoing, reiterative process. It is a book worth picking up, worth engaging, worth dialoguing about—its lessons for us are far reaching and I'm better for having read it.

Early in Applebaum's book, she frames her project's goals: "It is the complicity of *well-intentioned* white people that is the focus of this book" (10). The book thus offers a critique of how we talk about and teach whiteness and further complicates how white folk are situated in relation to that effort, challenging what declarative reflexivity does and how it protects white power. For instance, in a simple example of her basic thesis, Applebaum notes that the paradox of whiteness and racial power lies not only in overt racists but also within the best intentions of well-meaning white people who, in their acknowledgment of racism, actually strategically situate themselves outside the problem of whiteness. In this sense, the question of how one can occupy a subject position of a white person without the accompanying implication in racism becomes a focal question—What is a white person to do? This book is Applebaum's attempt to answer this complicated and risky question.

To build her argument, Applebaum begins by questioning the current thread in research and teaching of whiteness, namely, the premise of "white privilege pedagogy," which focuses on individualistic and atomistic conceptions of whiteness. Such ways of seeing whiteness limits students' (and our own) understandings of whiteness and leads to naïve solutions. In particular, the conception of privilege sustains the illusion that whiteness is about receiving benefits rather than a clear sense that whiteness is a way of being in the world. The former conflates whiteness with some sort of choice while the latter is more complex and allows for one to see how whiteness is embedded in the fabric of our lives, in the tissue of our bodies.

Because at the heart of Applebaum's argument is the question of subjectivity, she moves swiftly into discussions of the subject as constituted in/through white complicity, drawing on Judith Butler's work on performativity. Butler is a strategic choice—as a theorist of subjectivity, Butler enables a sophisticated framework for how a subject is constituted

through reiterative norms while still maintaining a language of agency that enables the subject to, within the shared sense of the social, act. As a heuristic lens, Applebaum uses Butler to "suggest that white complicity pedagogy pay serious attention to the danger in assuming a subject [...] can stand outside of power," directly situating the subject as a product of white supremacy and thus unable to shake off the constitutive acts that have produced that subject (55). While recognizing Butler's potential limits (e.g., concerns that Butler's work is too, perhaps, individualistic), she nevertheless allows Butler to demonstrate that "even when whiteness is disavowed, whiteness is reiterated" (85).

From a discussion of the subject, Applebaum shifts in chapter 4 to white complicity epistemology, noting that she seeks a shift from "language as representation to language as discourse" (91). Here, Applebaum charts out critiques of some language theory that stabilizes language as a tool that a subject might use. She argues that such models of language reduce the constitutive power of language and render it passive. In some ways, this argument mirrors John Stewart's (1995) argument on a post-semiotic philosophy of communication, moving to what he calls "articulate contact" where, borrowing from Gadamer, we live in the human world, a world "not of things but of meaning" (116). Language is not a tool for we live in and are sustained by language. From this premise, Applebaum discusses the paradox of white disagreement: "Does such an understanding of discourse preclude the possibility of disagreement" (91)? Can the white constituted subject disagree without falling into the trap of white denial? While I will come back to this point later in the review, it is important to consider Applebaum's central contention on this point: "Systemically privileged students' resistance to learning/knowing is more than merely one's individual personal disagreement with the course content. Rather it is an exhibition of a culturally sponsored defensiveness and refusal to engage that is not only offensive to the systemically marginalized but that also reproduces systems of oppression and privilege in the classroom" (108). Part of her response is to remove a student (or person's) disagreement from an individual voice to linking it to larger forms of discourse that have reiterated the oppression of those s/he disagrees with in the first place. In the end, a form of engagement is recommended that asks white subjects to bear witness, to listen with the ethic of potentially being transformed.

Applebaum ends her book by crafting a vision of white moral responsibility that, roughly, follows this logic: "The complicity claim maintains that all whites are complicit in systemic racial injustice and this claim sometimes takes the form of 'all whites are racist.' When white complicity takes the latter configuration what is implied is *not* that all whites are racially prejudiced but rather that all whites participate in and, often unwittingly, maintain the racist system of which they are part and from which they benefit" (140). From here, a white complicity pedagogy is offered: "white complicity pedagogy begins with the principle that the recognition of complicity, not just privilege, is the starting point for white engagement with systemic racial injustice. [...] entails more than just a facile confession. It involves understanding how whiteness works through white bodies and the discursive practices of well-intentioned, caring and even progressive white people" (180). White vigilance (in the form of humility, critique, and uncertainty) is proffered along side with "listening" in order to gain access and constant awareness of how whiteness is produced in and around us. While a modest response, one tempered with caution for offering too prescriptive a conclusion or pedagogy, we do see more than a recommendation here to just be aware, but to see the constitution of power in and through even white folks' efforts to resist racism and whiteness.

Applebaum's book is a rich text that powerfully contributes to ongoing dialogues about whiteness, racism, and social justice pedagogy. Perhaps the most simplistic contribution of the book lies in its critique of white privilege pedagogy (still a powerful trend in research and, certainly, in classroom practice) and the articulation of a counter model: white complicity pedagogy. While one situates the student as an individual (and thus produces not only a logic of individualism but a sense of individual accountability and individual agency) the other holds the individual in productive tension with social systems, never allowing the white subject off the hook for how s/he participates in discourses of power. While white privilege pedagogy often claims to be working against individualism, its centrality within that discourse works to reduce its efficacy. It is this foundational point (and Applebaum's very careful articulation of it) that makes this book valuable.

Further, Applebaum's careful articulation of white complicity early in the book builds a useful framework for understanding the white complicit subject, the epistemology of white complicity, and, ultimately her pedagogy of white complicity—like building blocks, the pieces link and form a carefully integrated picture of how (and why) white folks are complicit in the production of racism and white supremacy. The book ultimately leaves the reader with a picture of a regulated social world that we must navigate—a social world that neither presents easy answers nor clear roadmaps for social change.

Part of the careful picture that Applebaum creates is the fact that any white person, regardless of intention and desire, reiterates racism, produces whiteness, and confers dominance. While the case is strong, this leads me to three interrelated questions that I, as a reader, am left with as I finish the book. First, I am curious about how Applebaum wants me to see the "truth" of racism—that is, how am I to understand what is "really going on" in a moment of interaction, in a moment of what John Stewart calls "articulate contact"—the meeting of people, each steeped in the social regulatory regime that is white supremacy. While certainly Applebaum wants to avoid essentialism (21), I nevertheless am not sure how to fully understand the implications of her discussion of the possibilities and limits of, for instance, "disagreement" that she spins out in chapter 4. In this section of the book, she claims that disagreement under the rubric of white complicity functions as a mechanism of white denial, a distancing strategy that works to deny the experience of the Other. To make this case, Applebaum calls on Lynn Weber's controversial course guidelines that require both an acknowledgment of systemic racism (and sexism and the like), but further requests an agreement to combat them. Certainly, as the case study Applebaum provides, the function of disagreement does exactly what she argues it does—it works to erase the presence of systemic oppression and recenter whiteness. Yet the example is different from the opening example this section of the book begins with: "After presenting some of my work on white complicity to a philosophy of education reading group of which I am a member, a colleague queried whether my arguments leave open the possibility of disagreement" (102). To follow this question with the Lynn Weber example produces, in effect, the answer to her colleague's question: no, in fact you cannot disagree with claims to, or theories of, systemic racism. While certainly this answer is not offered directly in the book, it is implied (and the notion of engagement and listening that concludes the book does nothing to grant the white subject the possibility of meaningfully disagreeing). I'm left puzzled. On the one hand, I do believe, as does Applebaum, that while a white student offering a disagreement appears to be "just stating an opinion, the discourse also works to redirect the conversation away from having to consider how systemically privileged students might

be complicit in systemic injustice" (109). She is, of course, right. Yet, on the other hand, this means that white folks are therefore essentially unable to ever read a situation dealing with matters or claims of racism in any way other than through agreement (or through careful engagement and listening that situates them as only ever witnesses to power's production). I'm not sure how I feel about this, especially since there is not a nuanced example of her claim—by relying on Weber (as opposed to a more mundane example that is messier, more complicated, and situated), the question of who gets to define, in all terms, what is "real" is the person with the claim to racism.

Consider this hypothetical moment: A white teacher gives a student of color a failing grade on a paper that was submitted after the deadline printed in the syllabus. The student makes an argument that the systemic nature of racism (from the construction of the policy to the enactment of it without regard to the circumstances of her/his late submission) is at the root of the decision, regardless of how "fairly" the rule is enforced across the group. This example is a rich, textured one that, unlike the Weber example, does not easily put the teacher's potential disagreement with the claim of racism as just a recentering of whiteness. Even if the teacher listens and tries to understand the student's claim, her/his decision to uphold the policy, under this framework, only can mean the teacher is complicit in reproducing racism. I would like to see how to play this out so that Applebaum's seemingly binary frame on disagreeing is displaced for a more tensive one that recognizes that these matters are never as clear as we might like them to be.

This leads to the second key question I have, which ultimately builds from the first. How are we to understand not the white constituted subject in this argument, but the subject of color? Is the person of color not also constituted within a frame of white complicity? If the white subject is said to be constituted through the regulatory norms of the social, are we not all so constituted? This is not to say that part of that constitution produces embodied experiences that, as Yancy (2008) notes, shows the historicity of racism in the lived body, but it is to also say that to argue that only white subjects come to see the world within the framework of white supremacy is to radically reduce the potential of seeing subjects as performatively constituted—rather than a subject constituted, this would essentialize the subject and reduce power to a zero-sum relationship based on the materiality of the body itself. I'd like to see a more complicated way of seeing the subject as constituted here that accounts not only for the production of white complicity in the white body, but as a reiterative system that produces us all in different ways with different consequences.

Finally, I end the book with the above questions and then get to the end of the book hungry for some context or example in which I can see a dedicated teacher working with students—I hope to see an imperfect (perhaps even troubling) example of social justice pedagogy. What I get instead are relatively broad ways of listening and engaging that, absent any context, feel like the recommendations we have had for the past twenty years of this research: be vigilant, be aware, be humble, etc. I would have loved, again, a complicated example of these issues in context—if the discussion of white complicity cannot be addressed in the moment of a classroom, then as a teacher I'm not sure how to make the arguments and insights in this book material, to have them really affect my teaching and research in ways that uphold what I think is not only a cogent but correct assessment of white complicity. While I appreciate the resistance to "lesson plans" (197), I don't think that asking for a textured lived example is the same request.

I end this book, ultimately, smarter than when I started—the book is incredibly well-written, smart, and detailed. As a philosophical take on these matters, the book more than achieves its goals; it stands as an ongoing challenge to live better, to research better, to teach better. I never stopped appreciating the care and passion in Applebaum’s book—it is that passion that sparks my questions and I hope it is in that vein that we can continue to forge more socially just pedagogies that meet power in ways that interrupt power and chart spaces for hope.

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CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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