FROM THE EDITOR
Amy Marvin

CONVERSATION
Nicholas Whittaker and Marquis Bey
“Everybody and No-body Are Allowed in on This”: A Conversation with Marquis Bey

CALL FOR PAPERS

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS
Editing this journal in 2022 strikes me as both aspirational and grounded work. Beginning with the aspirational, I am hopeful to sustain this venue for cutting edge conversations in LGBTQ+ philosophy and theory, broadly construed. Of note in this context is the change of name from the Newsletter on LGBTQ Issues in Philosophy to APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy. This transition reflects a set of aspirations for the journal while I serve as its steward, including the development of a peer review process for essays alongside innovations and experimentations in form, as featured in this current issue. I aim to continue fostering this as a space for more traditional essays and reviews in philosophy while also encouraging more flexible formats such as regular freewheeling conversations between philosophers without much editorial interference. The shorter issue below is thus a demonstration that often studies in LGBTQ philosophy can take the form of an interesting conversation among peers. This too reflects the situation of this journal as a distinctly APA journal: What is a good conference talk without an even better conversation afterward over lunch?

Now to the ground. I write this introduction after a record heatwave just before the semester begins amidst the continuing spread of COVID variants and an increase in cases of monkeypox. Anti-LGBTQ backlash has been erupting across the country especially through accusations of corrupting the youth, and just down the street from the coffee shop where I write is the office of a politician who hopes to achieve governorship so they can restrict which bathrooms trans people can legally use (among other plans). Such rising threats to LGBTQ public life and education is also a threat to venues such as this and professors such as I, as this pushback can speedily lead to less support both institutionally and interpersonally due to mounting inconvenience. It is with this uncertain grounding that I want to again reflect on the change in name. I do not wish to leave the newsletter format completely behind. I am looking to the prevalence of the newsletter format housed in LGBTQ+ archives, bringing together a disparate and often disconnected group of stigmatized people together like a raft upon turbulent waters in the form of updates, thoughts, disagreements, letters, reports, and many formats that do not find themselves easily adapted to a recognizable academic format. I hope that for this reason the journal looks to the experimental, flexible spirit of the newsletter even as the work of establishing a respected place in scholarship continues. It is also in this spirit that I break with tradition to write a longer than usual introduction section, following in the tradition of a “Letter from the Editor.”

Looking to the past of the newsletter also has me reflecting on the work Grayson Hunt accomplished as the previous editor of this journal since the fall 2018 issue. Hunt steered the journal while working simultaneously as a program coordinator, lecturer, and associate director of LGBTQ Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is now the director of equity outreach and resources in the Office of the Vice Provost for Diversity. Publishing this newsletter for the past years as part of his award-winning record with academic service at his university and his commitment to LGBTQ research in philosophy, Hunt especially stood out as an editor who encouraged increased publications in trans philosophy. I hope to continue Hunt’s work by showcasing new developments in trans philosophy in addition to LGBTQ philosophy more broadly.

Looking to the present, this brief issue features a conversation between Marquis Bey and Nicholas Whittaker titled “Everybody and No-body Are Allowed in on This.” On one level, this interview is an introduction to the work of Marquis Bey as featured in their book Black Trans Feminism and developed in Them Goon Rules, Anarcho-Blackness, and their newest book, Cistem Failure, published in August 2022. Whittaker does excellent work as an interlocutor by drawing out some of the philosophical and pragmatic commitments that Bey aims for through their project.

The interview also showcases some potential sites of future elaboration, debate, and disagreement about Bey’s work. Bey’s understanding of anarchism and gender abolition leads them to critique identity politics and restrictions of black trans feminism to the standpoint of individual black trans women as a centered source of authoritative knowledge. Whittaker also challenges Bey to consider their work in the context of transracialism, which has certainly been a site of controversy in philosophy. Throughout the conversation Whittaker provides a charitable reading of Bey’s work that simultaneously does not shy from pointing to potential disagreement, drawing out different ways of engaging with a major contemporary ongoing project in LGBTQ philosophy that has wide uptake beyond philosophy as well.

I hope that readers will find this interview to be a helpful introduction to Marquis Bey and Nicholas Whittaker as philosophers, as an elaboration of some of their ideas for
CONVERSATION

“Everybody and No-body Are Allowed in on This”: A Conversation with Marquis Bey

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NICHOLAS: I wonder if we can start with a bit of a tough request; for the folks reading who may not be familiar with your work—both/either your general projects, swirling across your different manuscripts and teaching work and conversations with comrades and colleagues, and/or your newest book, Black Trans Feminism—and for our sakes, to set the conversation of a shared ground, how might you sum both up? Maybe let’s start with the general and move to the particular next. Paraphrase is weird and tricky, and will always leave some stuff out, but how might you describe your work in the past few years? What have been the common threads, questions, guiding lights? What, maybe to put it as simply as possible, do you write about?

MARQUIS: What an excellent way to begin, and I’m appreciative of this start, too, because it allows me to reevaluate the trajectory and intentions of my work. So to your poignant question: What do I write about? There is, as you’ve alluded to, no simple way to describe it. And I quite dislike attempts to simplify and reduce the complexity of thought—indeed, one of my most despised words is “basically.” So to try to maintain the complexity of the thoughts and ideas and politics that have been gifted me—because I am always thinking in conjunction with others, others who have tilled the soil to permit my inhabitation of it in a certain way—I would say that the threads running through my work are fugitivity, blackness, nonnormative gender, abolition, and life. Those are the things I find myself constantly returning to, turning over and re-turning over to gain additional insights into how we might move more softly, radically, graciously, intentionally. I write about the ways blackness might be reconfigured around not the epidermis but, instead, as a modality of refusal; I write about how transness and gender nonnormativity are not affixed to a specific anatomical or medico-juridical positioning but are the abolition of gender as a vector through which one is required to emerge into sociality; I write about how black feminism necessarily exceeds the parameters of racialized gender and insists on imaginative worlds that refuse the terrors of the world in which we live.

And with all of this, I try always to think about how it might become ever more possible to be together, to become together with others in ways that do not carry forms of violence into the very world we seek to cultivate. Through vitiating normative and thus harmful ontological impositions and imagining, truly imagining, outside of the current extant apparatuses we have to define and understand, we can, I think, approach something like life lived otherwise—which would then be, maybe, a bit hubristically, the first time we’ve been able to truly live.

NICHOLAS: You’ve given me so much to ask about here, but first I want to pause and draw something out. I love the way you describe the re-turning process of intellectual thought. I was once asked by a young would-be philosophy student how to read black studies texts; she’d been trying to read folks like Moten and Wynter, but had been having such trouble entering the miasma and figuring out what the arguments and claims were. I gave her this advice: read them like you’re on a spiral train track, constantly drawing nearer to the “destination” but only by returning to the same points on a circle again and again. You have to give up the hope that you can leave a point or location, leave a thought or an idea, once and for all. She had to keep writing it, again and again, in different ways. It’s not (just) about difficulty; it’s about trying to think and offer something up to be thought about in a different, non-linear way.

Black studies seems like it’s doing a Heraclitus thing, a Nietzschean eternal recurrence thing; you gotta keep coming back, because you’re different when you arrive again, and that makes the thought or idea different, and you never have a grasp on what Moten or Wynter or Bey, for that matter, are trying to tell you if you’re not willing to let it keep being different. This kind of sentiment pervades all of your work, in both form and content. What does it feel like, to try to do theory in this kinda aimless, kinda obsessive, kinda non-teleological way? How and why do you try to write and read and talk in this spiral, and why not write and read and talk linearly? Why not just give us your definition of blackness or abolition and then move on to the next thing? (Especially when this is the exact kind of progress report finality that university publishing and grading structures encourage. . . ?)

MARQUIS: Damn, I love this. Yes, it’s very, very much about coming back and reading again and again; it’s very much, as you so aptly say, “not (just) about difficulty; it’s about trying to think and offer something up to be thought about in a different, non-linear way.” This I love so much. Because that’s one of the things, right, one of the things that is often brought up by folks who aren’t living amidst this discourse
or who, sometimes, demand being a part of this discourse only to find out it takes work: “Why can’t they just write clearly? Why can’t they just say what they mean in plain (typically) English?” And, truthful, that shit pisses me off (am I allowed to say this, both the proseyness as well as the question?). I’ve learned from people like Moten and, as well, Judith Butler that the difficulty is necessary; the difficulty is not difficulty for the sake of difficulty—though even that would be okay, I think, because the words and lives of black and queer and trans folks need not be readily digestible and intelligible—but rather it is an attempt to exceed the semiotic grammar of what we’ve been given. Insofar as we have inherited a certain language and world, or in Heideggerian fashion been “thrown” into the world, that dictates what is possible to think and know. If we are, then, trying to think and know and become in ways that attempt to imagine something quite different, that will require that we write and speak and mobilize ideas in language that is not readily transparent—a transparency, we know from Glissant and Denise Ferreira da Silva, that is endemic to the colonial imposition. We need, in short, to break language. What Moten and Wynter and Butler, and now me, if I may be so bold, are writing in is broken language. Broken in service of something else.

So, more pointedly, why not just give my definition of blackness, of transness, of black feminism once and for all? Why write so circularly? It is because I am, always, practicing. I am trying out different ways of saying something, different ways to have something felt and understood, or more accurately misunderstood and un-understood. I am discovering what it is I am trying to move through in the writing itself, which some kind of self-editing process would undermine. I am trying to speak on different registers with the hope that one register will invite one kind of encounter and another will invite a different one, perhaps with the same cast of participants as the last encounter or perhaps a different cast, a cast for whom this register is more aligned than the last. I am trying to be, sometimes, precise with the language I use—because to say “blackness” is not the same as saying “African American” and “refusal” is not the same as saying “resistance.” I remember talking to my partner about this and they brilliantly responded, “Very few people are bringing these claims of intelligibility to, say, medical practitioners, so why is it being brought to us as humanities scholars? It’s not just your ‘knee,’ it’s your patella; it’s not just your ‘back,’ it’s your latissimus dorsi.” Similarly, in my case, it’s not feminism that centers black trans people, it’s black trans feminism. And whole books are required to tease out that precision.

And lastly, to draw this nearer to a close that will never close, this is not so much about having a super precise definition of any given term. Surely, I try to say what I mean and, as many know, I can be quite discursively loquacious. That is not, however, an attempt to know something ultimately, finally; it is, I want to wager, an attempt to allow the ideas and modalities to emerge in different possible ways and have different effects. I cannot, in the end, say what abolition “is” because what it is is a number of things that do things.
mark someone as incorrect if they think differently; I am concerned with bringing folks along for this ride, looking and feeling at this or that, how it moves differently via this way of thinking and seeing and feeling, what is opened up or foreclosed or wildly different were we to continue along this ride. Come on in, I want to say, come on in, come and experience what this might be like. Everybody and non-body are allowed in on this. Some might not want to get in on it, others might leave halfway through. And I will thank them for that, always. And others still will stay and be invigorated by the ride. For me, all of that is possible and, maybe, necessary. And it’s able to happen because everybody was invited.

NICHOLAS: And what I love about that answer is how it embodies this kind of humanism (a gauche word in black studies these days, I know!) that’s been pervading the conversation thus far. All I’m trying to say with that word is that I’m so heartened by the way your notion of and experience of doing philosophy is centered on the philosophers, on us; on those of us who think, and invite others to think. So often, it feels like we’re obsessed with perfecting the products of our philosophizing—the words we say, the arguments we construct, etc. And the danger of that mode of thinking is, of course, that if the product is imperfect then the philosophizing has been a failure. But you’re offering us a way to love philosophizing because of what it does for the philosopher: where it takes us, and who it takes us to. Maybe this is a bit pat, but as you’re describing it, we don’t think in order to write a final product; we write and write in order to keep thinking. “Producing philosophy” is the imperfect thing we keep trying to do so that we can keep changing, as the people we are, and get close to others, and change them too, and be changed by them. If every written philosophical text disappeared from the world, all of our hard work wouldn’t have been a waste at all. I really love that!

MARQUIS: Yes, precisely! I love that. I truly do write in order to continue thinking, to discover and invent and create and forge thinking in different ways. How can we continue to write and philosophize in service of ideas that allow us to become together in different, perhaps more robust ways? And that project is one, I’m coming to insist upon in burgeoning ways, that is done by an expansive array of beings. What I’ve been gifted with being able to think must always, in some way, even if only a small way, be an attempt to make conditions more livable for all of us, and even, as I say in the Black Trans Feminism book, for those who are not yet considered part of “us.”

NICHOLAS: And this feels like it’s really at the heart of that book. So let’s move there! I have a thing I want to ask following up on this precise point, but let’s take the long route there. First, to circle back to that tough, weird question we opened with: what is Black Trans Feminism about? What are you trying to do with and in this book, in particular?

MARQUIS: That is the question I’m never quite good at answering, even though it is, of course, one of the first, most sensible questions to ask. I’ll begin with this: I wrote Black Trans Feminism out of two equally powerful feelings: love and exhaustion. To the former, I encountered a number of ideas and people and texts and language that simply enraptured me and made me want to live in and through them. I encountered—truly encountered, in a sense that carries with it a being struck, a being affected, being moved—C. Riley Snorton, both on the page and in the classroom (not to mention the university office or the coffee shop), Susan Stryker, Judith Butler, Fred Moten, Hortense Spillers, Cathy Cohen; and, too, someone like Gilles Deleuze. Encountering them allowed me to encounter a kind of love that moved me to, as Snorton once told me, take thoughts and ideas as seriously and as deeply as I could. That seriousness and depth is what I move through. To the latter—the feeling of exhaustion—I found myself more and more reading or listening to folks recapitulate things I found either boring or off or misguided. Surely this is the nature of academia: we have intellectual disagreements and sometimes write those things down as the basis for an argument. But there was also an exhaustion I began to feel with the way that radical politics and sociality was being instantiated. It is no surprise that I depart, sometimes slightly and sometimes substantially, from many of the mainstream and even purportedly radical modes of thinking within the fields I move through. I depart from things like intersectionality (lovingly, let me be clear), like “cite black women,” like defining black trans feminism as “centering” black trans women, like identity politics—all of these things have complex understandings and definitions that I do not want to flatten, and I also don’t want to throw shade or malign these deeply important ways of thinking. But for me, what I attempt to do in Black Trans Feminism is offer a different, and to me more radical way of articulating justice and imagining the world differently. Black Trans Feminism is about what happens when we emphasize politics over purported identification, or what happens when we look elsewhere for how to relate to others. It is about allowing Hortense Spillers and Gilles Deleuze to talk to each other—hell, it is about actually reading Hortense Spillers and not simply throwing out buzzwords from that one and only essay it seems people have read of hers. It is about fugitivity and abolition, nonnormativity and radicality, hope. And in the text, it all requires that I reconfigure what is even meant by blackness, transness, and (black) feminism; it requires that I do not simply rehash common knowledge; it requires that I take ideas as seriously and as deeply as they’ll go. And that has led me to some quite interesting places in the book.

NICHOLAS: I wanna sit with your use of “exhaustion,” as opposed to, say, “disagreement.” We’ve all felt that, as academics; this experience of a field of literature, an institutional structure, hell, a conversation, as exhausting, as draining in this kinda precise and somewhat peculiar way that exceeds merely finding something people are saying or doing to be incorrect. If something about the ways of thinking of blackness, transness, feminism, and more generally our ways of articulating justice are exhausting, then they’re not just wrong. What are these ways of thinking and doing that you find exhausting, and what do you think you’re saying—about them, about scenes of conversation, about yourself—when you call them exhausting? What are we doing that’s draining, and why is it draining? Does that
make sense? I’m trying to find a way to articulate what it is you’re inviting people away from in the book by figuring out what it means to motivated to do so by exhaustion, this peculiar and precise word, you know?

MARQUIS: Yes, precisely. It’s not just “wrong,” at least in my estimation; exhaustion is something a little more particular. So what are those exhausting things? Well, one might be the ways that intersectionality is made recourse to over and over without much, if any, critical articulation. To me, it’s often expressed as a formulaic math problem: How many marginalized identities do you have? More than this person? Congratulations! You are the person who is to be listened to, who is right, who can have nothing said in opposition to them, etc. Or, another might be how blackness is theorized as definitionally deathbound, as always already known as the “black body” that is automatically given to social and political death, as nothing. Or, another might be the ways “ungendered” is mobilized as a buzzword without much consideration of the trans implications, without much consideration of what is happening in trans studies. Or lastly, another might be the presumption of “identity” as the thing we must always be thinking about and working toward more clearly articulating. That because the Combahee River Collective said something about their identities being the foundation for their politics and because so many black women in particular, and black people in general, have made constant recourse to the importance of their identities, then it is an overwhelming good that we simply need to continue regurgitating. I find all of these things, and more, quite, quite exhausting.

But now I feel compelled to clarify a bit, if I may. I know how all this sounds; I know how I sound saying these things, and I feel the urge to set a few things straight, knowing that I cannot set it all straight (though the book, I think, does a good job at that). But just for the record, I do not intend to align myself with the political right, nor with those who promote racial “colorblindness,” nor with people who castigate identity politics as an unthinking mob mentality. And further, I do not intend to align myself with black or trans conservatives, nor with those who pejoratively use phrases like “social justice snowflakes” or “woke moralists.” Let that be clear. Those who do or say these things often have an image of the world and relationality that seeks to preserve what is currently in place, are hostile toward radical change, are conservative—or liberal too, because liberalism is trash as well (let us be and become, as forcefully as possible, radical)—or are white supremacists, cisnormative, patriarchal, anti-choice, environmentally vicious, and extractive. My intention in departing from the discourses mentioned above is in fact to radicalize the left: How can we push harder and more forcefully toward the abolition of fundamentally harmful things, namely, categorical impositions, modalities of ontology? How can we not simply center the ever more marginalized and refuse that very logic of margin and center? Because in my understanding, the very logics of categorical imposition, of hierarchical inside/outside logics, of discrete individuation are all, at base, colonial impositions. So if we wish to fundamentally change things, we must undermine those logics, not merely the symptoms.

NICHOLAS: I’ll find my way back to the point, I promise, but first I’m pulled by yet another meandering tangent! What does it feel like, to have to make that last clarification? I’m often having to make the same kinds of clarifications—in my work on horror, for example, where I’m constantly saying things like “black people are horrific/monstrous”—and it’s always an odd rhetorical and conceptual move; but not necessarily a bad one! On the one hand, it’s frustrating to always have to be on the defensive, to have to always be cognizant of the way one’s pursuit of radicality might sound to bad faith actors, or the material ways in which our philosophical work, when they sound a certain way, can become fodder for brutality. But on the other hand, I find that there’s something genuinely exciting and fruitful about having to think, how does what I’m saying sound like what people who wanna do evil are saying? Why is it not that? What are these kinda subtle differences between radicality and evil? Why do people who wanna do evil sound so much, sometimes, to a lazy or bad faith or simply mistaken ear, like me? How do you navigate having to, and perhaps wanting to, or perhaps wishing you didn’t have to, make these clarifications?

MARQUIS: I really love these questions, and I love them in part because they are so difficult to answer. But you are absolutely right that these things sound so much like what people who want to do evil are saying, and there is work to be done to clarify the distinction (though, as we’ve established, it is exhausting work), but there is also work to be done precisely by those with lazy or bad faith or mistaken ears. And when that work is not done, I would wager that that is when it gets exhausting—it is exhausting when the conceptual, intellectual, philosophical work is imbalanced. So how I navigate that depends on those factors and others: Is the audience I have in this moment laboring with me to think, to philosophize in liberatory and radical ways? Is this audience simply here to have their assumptions reaffirmed (which is okay sometimes)? Is this audience looking to antagonize me and wait for a “gotcha” moment in order to undermine my entire philosophical project? I cannot know these things from the outset, no matter what shorthands many want to try to promote as a way to assume solidarity and togetherness. Those shorthands are always imprecise and unable to hold the grand capacities of what is needed. So I am often a bit timid when interacting with others because I am never certain, from the jump, where someone is at, never certain of the extent to which I’ll have to curtail potentials for intellectual (and perhaps even physical) violence. And on the one hand I don’t mind this timidity because that is simply another way to say that I am suspending assumptions and allowing for the burgeoning moments of interaction to characterize the kind of relationship I can have with another; timidity is simply another way to say, in this scenario, pause. And I love that a lot, it’s actually one of the things I say in the context of my departure from tenets underlying what is deemed “identity politics.” Let us not presume that because this other person is, ostensibly, “like me” that automatically means they are like me, have the same relationship and view of power, occupy the same positions, have the same politics.
But it is nonetheless tiring. So, on the other hand, I want so desperately to be able to not have to explain myself, to defend myself at each turn. I keep my mouth shut sometimes because I have a strong feeling that what I think is not welcomed—I would be the Debbie Downer if I were to say something I thought right now, so I’ll just say nothing, go back home, and write furiously for a few hours about all the things I wanted to say. That can be cathartic, sure, but what would be most cathartic, I think, is not even agreement with me on all things—that’s kind of boring—but something a bit more humble: Can you cultivate space for us, whoever “us” is in this moment, to truly meet each other and be invited into a coalitional gathering where we are without presumption and are here only because we wish to engender the possibility of emerging just a bit more freely? I continue to hope for that.

NICHOLAS: That’s fantastic, you just gave me words for that exhaustion I didn’t have! It’s the exhaustion of disproportionate work; it’s the exhaustion of being on guard. Being surrounded by people who believe the contrary to you may be exhausting in some sense, but not, I think, in the sense we’re talking about. This is an almost internally directed exhaustion, an exhaustion stemming from constant self-regulation and self-surveillance. It’s sad to describe it that way, but I think that’s how it feels. And now I have to do the very same kind of clarification by noting that I’m in no way trying to latch onto cancel culture discourse, or free speech whinings by the elites! What’s going on here is less a fear of being canceled and more a constant awareness of the way our discursive and grammatical resources are so limited for what we’re trying to do, so we have to do the extra work of trying to do it within that paucity. And it’s exhausting because that extra work—the affects of good faith and humility, the willingness to think through an odd-sounding radical claim—is often disproportionate, as you say. So actually, to remix the diagnosis of self-regulation and surveillance I just mentioned, maybe we could say that the exhaustion you’re feeling, the exhaustion Black Trans Feminism is trying to do something about, is not the exhaustion of always having to be careful or timid, but of often, in these conversations, being the only one who’s careful and timid. I’ve noticed that in my writings against modern “antiracism,” the words that often bubble up are words like “smug,” “smarmy,” “self-assured.” I feel like in doing so, I’m trying to say something like what you’re saying here: humility is, in fact, a radical virtue, and the congealments of, say, identity politics might be seen as symptoms of, or made possible by, the flight of studying and thinking about race and gender injustice from a metaphilosophical orientation of humility into one of self-security.

MARQUIS: Yes! The exhaustion of being the only one who’s careful or timid. That’s exactly it. I so deeply want others to be more precise, or rather more capacious and open, more experimental and curious and inquisitive. Because I often find that when I say things like blackness is a primordial mutiny against imposed ontologies available to anyone, or transness is the critique of gender as such, or that feminism—which is always a black feminism and a trans feminism—is the undoing and abolition of gender norms, and then find myself uninterested in “female” “empowerment” or championing all things black or validating incessantly any and everything a trans woman does, people often come at me with, “But I thought you were a feminist!” or “You’re supposed to be all about black power” (two things I’ve had hurled at me on more than one occasion). Those responses evacuate thinking and the possibility of these things meaning something radically, critically different. They’ve already pinned down the definition, an immutable definition, and when I do not align with it there is no carefulness in how it is being articulating but in fact a very blunt and imprecise deploying of a sort-of definition one has never really thought about. It’s frustrating, to say the least.

So the emphasis on humility is key for me. One of the reasons why, briefly—and still kind of, though in a very particular way—I developed a love for someone like Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was, at least in one sense, all about the “perhaps.” And I love that, a kind of Gianni Vattimo “weak thought” (“I’m really digging into my continental philosophical archive now!). And of course, this is what I learn, too, from black studies—from undercommon study and fugitive planning—or from trans feminist theory—from a refusal to let normativity hold uncritical sway. A love for deep thought: And perhaps here is one of the most acute links between the philosophical tradition from which I come and this intellectual sentiment of care and precision: if some of the most radical thinking, genuine thinking has come from, in my estimation, trans theory, black feminist theory, black studies (“all thought,” writes Jared Sexton, with whom I of course quibble in other regards, “insofar as it is genuine thinking, might best be conceived of as black thought”), and if Martin Heidegger—twentieth-century continental philosopher extraordinaire—notes in his later years that “the most thought-provoking thing about the times we live in is that we still are not thinking,” then how can one not do being intense metaphilosophical work when thinking the questions and implication of the black, the trans, and the feminist?

NICHOLAS: It’s funny, because I’m seeing another weird “analytic philosophy crossover” here. Another way to describe the thing that those folks you’re exhausted by aren’t doing is defining, or letting you define, your terms! There’s certainly an overfetishization of defining one’s terms, clearing the conceptual ground, in analytic mainstream philosophy, but you’re hinting that there’s something to that kind of precision. And a thing you’re revealing is that it’s not just that such precision allows us to get “closer to the truth,” but that it’s kinder! It’s more social, it’s more generous, it’s more loving, to ask someone “What do you mean by x?” instead of assuming we know what they mean. This is something running through a lot of my work these days: if someone is asking you to think deeply with them, then surely—in addition to the intrinsic value of deep thought that you’re pointing out—it’s cruel, antisocial, to refuse! We teach children to listen with open ears and closed mouth, but of course that’s wrong. To care about what someone says is not just to hear it, but to ask more about it, so that you understand it better.

So then, here’s a chance for you! In the book, and throughout our conversation, you’ve returned to a series of claims: that
the names we give certain social categories—black, trans, queer, feminist, etc.—can and should be used differently than the way contemporary identity politics uses them. This is a way of using those names that aligns them with an abolitionist project—a project of refusal—about race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. In doing so, we reveal that blackness, transness, queerness, feminism, all exceed—are more than—what contemporary identity politics take them to be. If this rearticulation of what you’re after in the book sounds good to you, then here’s me listening with an open mouth: What do contemporary identity politics tell us that blackness, and transness, and womanhood, and queerness are? And given that, what is that politics—what is that kind of feminism, and black “radicalism,” etc.—interested in doing or accomplishing in the world? What is the vision of the world, and our identities, that your book is inviting us away from?

MARQUIS: There certainly is something to that precision. It’s a precision that is not quite interested in “mastery”; it’s not a precision to get things proper and in order. Rather, for me, it’s a precision that has an ethics, as you’ve alluded to. Precision in service of mitigating harm and violence. It is kinder and more compassionate to sit with another and listen, to ask “What do you mean by x?” or to continue to invite them to say more (indeed, the thing I always say—and that my partner would corroborate this in a heartbeat—when I have more questions or even when I think someone is completely off about something, is “Could you say more?”). In this truly is a deep sense of care: I care enough to engage.

So you’ve tasked me, it seems, with caring to engage on the page, explicitly, and I am so grateful for that. What it seems to me that contemporary politics regarding identity defines the terms at hand as, overall, is one of fixity and knowability: I know what it is to be black, to be trans, to be a feminist, and I know that because I’ve already decided what it is, and further still, it cannot change. Contemporary politics says that blackness is fixed and rooted in the epidermis and that, too, is tied to—solely to—a history of abjection and captivity. Contemporary politics tells us that to be trans is to have undergone “the surgery” or to feel “trapped in the wrong body,” to be a “man” who feels like a “woman” or a “woman” who feels like a “man.” Contemporary politics tells us that a feminist is someone who is all about “women’s empowerment” and “leaning in” and voting for Hilary Clinton. Surely there is more to these definitions and they are strict in certain ways, but this feels very much like the refrain I hear over and over. And it bubbles up in so many subtly insidious ways: you’re black, so you must be in agreement with this other black person about race; you didn’t vote for Hilary Clinton—you’re supposed to be a feminist; you disagree with this black trans woman?! It disallows so much, and it in fact disallows thinking, a critical apparatus; it disallows pushing further and more radically. Like, no, I’m actually not okay with any and all genders or gender proliferation—I’m interested in abolishing the whole regime. So I would actually say that those who promote this loose kind of identity politics, i.e., because one is a purported race or gender then on those grounds one is in solidarity or agreement with them, in fact do not do politics.

Let me explain myself, because I know that sounds wild. To note implicitly or explicitly that one ought to or does have an affinity for something on the grounds of a bestowed or claimed identity evacuates capacity within subjectivity. In other words, there is no room to move—which is to say, agitate, engender other kinds of relations, think, do the political—when one is confined to their identity and unable to do something outside of the circumscriptions of that identity. The way I understand identity is that it is an imposed ontology, it is given, enforced—nonconsensually. Before we are even permitted to exist—indeed, in order to even be said to exist—we must accept unwaveringly these categorizations that have preceded us. There was no say in being something else. This is what identity is, on my reading. And, too, this is a violent act—a primordially, ontologically violent act. So, because I am interested in abolishing any violent mode of existence and relationality, that necessitates the abolition of identity as well. I want to invite us into daring to imagine what life could be like were we able to imagine ourselves for ourselves from the jump, rather than already within a system of confinement. If “identities” definitionally cannot not be chosen, what would it be like to choose something else?

The vision of the world, I think, that I and Black Trans Feminism invite us away from is not just a world that is obviously bad (characterized by white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, transantagonism, and the like; the easy targets) but also one in which people still say “Sir” and “Ma’am” and check “African American” or “White” on surveys and promote incarceration as “justice.” So I think I’ll end here by quoting myself, as gauche as such a move is (please forgive me). I just want to show that all of what I’m saying is also actually said in the work itself; it’s right there in print—which was a terrifying thing to do—and I feel compelled, at least for now, to stand by it. So, in the Introduction, I write:

Black trans feminism cannot abide such classificatory violences, so it urges us also to abolish the categories we may love, even if they have not always been received well. If the aim of the radical project of black trans feminism is abolition and gender radicality, which is the case I will be making, it is imperative to grapple with what that actually means. We cannot half-ass abolition, holding on to some of the things we didn’t think we would be called to task for giving up. If we want freedom, we need to free ourselves, too, of the things with which we capture ourselves. The project at hand is interested in a thoroughgoing conception of freeness, and it seems like black trans feminism, to call on Saidiya Hartman, “makes everyone freer than they actually want to be.”

NICHOLAS: This is fantastic, and if you’ll allow me, I’m gonna give you the gift of an incredibly irritating, but I think really fruitful, expression of curiosity that’ll sound like a “gotcha.” I hope we’ve built the trust to know it’s not that!

Is Rachel Dolezal imagining herself for herself from the jump? (Why don’t we suspend, if possible, all the exhausting squabbles about the distinction between
transracial and transgender identity, and just try to isolate this one case.) Because to a certain ear, one in bad faith or one having trouble picking up what you’re putting down, it sounds like you’re saying she is. It’s quite clear to me, both from our conversation and from the book, that you’re not, or not quite, and I have an inkling about what you might say in response to this. But I wanna offer you this chance to work through this question yourself. Are you inviting us to a vision of human life whereby “freedom” from classificatory violence looks like what Rachel Dolezal is doing?

MARQUIS: This is a super thorny question, but an exciting one—one that I’ve in fact answered at length in my article “Incorporeal Blackness: A Theorization in Two Parts—Rachel Dolezal and Your Face in Mine.” So I’ll answer this in two parts, first, a little lazily, with a passage from that article about my general sense about Dolezal; and second, more directly to your question posed here.

To Dolezal. In that essay, at length, I write:

I attempt to extricate “good feelings” or feelings of sympathy for her from seeing her as an occasion that highlights how we might reassess our intellectual and socio-political understandings of subjectivity, of ontology, of what is possible for us to be in the world. I actually do not like her, to be honest. She does not strike me as someone with whom I would be friends, nor is she to me a “good” person. If I may, she is quite annoying, antagonizing at times. And yet, I cannot get away from her. . . . My aim, then, is to proffer blackness’s incorporeality as a vector through which to complicate the worn narrative surrounding Dolezal and transracialism, delinking the argument from whether racial mutability is “a thing” and moving toward a conception of blackness (not “race”) as conditioning a certain ontological mutability and instantiating the possibility, and radicality, of mobilizing a blackness to trans effects.²

That’s the aim with Dolezal, understanding her as a provocation—an imperfect and difficult one—to think other things as possible.

To your question directly: “freedom” from classificatory logics is not simply an open electivity whereby people can choose to identify however they wish. That is a misguided reading of what I seek to do (and I appreciate so much how you’re not doing that). I think this kind of freedom is not really “any person, any identity” but rather, much more than that, the vitiation of such categorical alignments as requisites for social viability. In other words, I’m looking for a way to be in relation that is in fact not predicated at all on having to choose this box or that box; a sociality that is open in the sense that we need not “be” this or that in advance precisely because we emerge as legible or viable in the relation with others, without presumption and circumscription, without, as a philosopher might say, existing ahead of ourselves.

NICHOLAS: And that brings us to what is, to and for me, the heart of your book, and a perfect place for us to move from this conversation to whatever comes next. Throughout the book, your reimaginations of blackness, transness, and feminism orbit around a fervent commitment to praxis: to doing things in the world, things that make it better for all of us. When the commitment to existence ahead of ourselves—to say once and for all what it is to be ourselves, where that must take hold of static taxonomies to work—is abandoned, I hear you saying, our senses of selves—our identities, if such a word must still be used—become entangled with what we do. It’s no wonder, to me, that your formulation of “black trans feminism” doesn’t read “black trans womanhood,” that you undergird all of the ontological work you’re after with a political project. In this, I’m reminded of recent work in philosophy of race that’s pushing us towards the same kind of renewed commitment to centering political activity in our theorizing: I’m thinking about work from Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò and Briana Toole, in particular.

So I have two related questions for you, to round us out here. First, how is, if it is, the work of actually living and doing in the world snaking throughout our conversation, in what we’ve left unspoken here, to be found in the book? Where does praxis hide in what we’ve talked about so far together?

And then, the crucial next step, to those reading, wherever and whoever and however they may be, those who may be so used—we all are, at least sometimes—to a way of doing academia that centers on knowing instead of doing. What do you want them to do with what we’ve said here? Not just what you want them to know or to think about: How do you want these words, and your book, to enter their lives? They may not do it; perhaps they won’t want to, or will not know how, or will think they have a better idea, or will in fact have a better idea. But what do you, yourself, wish for them? If praxis is all wrapped up in what you’re thinking about, then how do you want people to take hold of it?

Does that make sense?

MARQUIS: I think this is a marvelous way to bring this conversation to “whatever comes next,” as you’ve beautifully said. And I’ll do my best to respond to the two questions genuinely.

To the first, living and doing in the world (or perhaps the worlds) can be found in the book in numerous ways, I think. Most obviously in the final chapter, the conclusion, wherein I meditate on “fugitive hope.” To me, black trans feminism invites an insistence on living, and with that living a certain disposition toward hope. It is not a glossy, naive hope but rather a fugitive one, a hope that is informed and steadfast and, we might say, grown. This is markedly concerned with life and livability. There is a robust discourse of death, social or otherwise, and nothingness in black studies in particular—a necropolitical penchant, so to speak—that I am moving away from. I want to speak about and think about and care for life and living conditions. And it is through fugitive hope that this happens. It is a hope, too, that invites us to care about how we are with each other here, right here, and to thus insist on doing something about what here is and might be precisely because here is
not what we need it to be. So fugitive hope, that concluding chapter, demands that we do not lose sight of sociality in the here and now and to come, because this is what we have and where we are, and we demand better of it, can only emerge into the kind of existence we so urgently desire if it were better.

Also in the book, doing and living is deeply embedded in the philosophical and metaphilosophical, I want to assert. All this “high” theory and philosophizing is intimate with the social life of things: to think and do philosophy—which is very much a praxis; a critical disposition is embedded endemically with praxis, how to move and act—is to practice how to be in the world better with ourselves and others. So when I discuss the trans/figurative or becoming-black-woman or indeed abolition and gender radicality, my hope is that these ideas move others to, for example, refuse to resort to calling the police, to stop using gendered pronouns when addressing someone who has not gifted them with their (un)gendered relationship to the world, to stop balking at the ways people subvert the assumptions of ontological immutability, to love more fiercely and courageously, to cultivate more room for conditions that open up possibilities. These are all things we must do.

To your second question, I suppose I’ve already started answering it. But more pointedly, how do I want those reading these words to be moved and entered by them? In small and large ways, spectacular and quotidian ways. Having read this, you may very well now call yourself an abolitionist and join abolitionist organizations or be out on the front lines during a protest. Very good. You might find yourself no longer saying “That guy over there” when you don’t actually know if that person is or desires to be a “guy.” And very good. You might discover that this is the first time you’ve been able to think of yourself as not having to be a “man” or a “woman” and begin, in whatever way, moving away from those or other designations of yourself. Very good too. Or you might have more courage to pick up a molotov and throw it through a window when there is yet another eruption of white supremacist or transantagonistic or patriarchal violence. And, to that too, very good. Do any number of these and other things. The point is that you

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NOTES

CALL FOR PAPERS

APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy invites members to submit papers, book reviews, and interviews, conversations, and more experimental writing formats for publication in the spring 2023 and fall 2023 editions. Submissions can address the areas of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, asexuality, gender, and sexuality studies, as well as issues of concern for LGBTQ people in the profession. The journal seeks quality paper submissions for review. Reviews and notes should address recent books, current events, or emerging trends. Members who give papers at APA divisional meetings, in particular, are encouraged to submit their work. Please pitch the editor before the deadline if you have an interview or more experimental proposal.

DEADLINE
The deadline for submission of manuscripts for a spring edition is December 15, 2022. The deadline for the fall edition is May 1, 2023. The editor may choose to move submissions from the spring edition to the fall edition depending on the number of submissions received.

FORMAT
Papers should be in the range of 5,000–6,000 words, with 7,500 words maximum permitted. Reviews and Notes should be in the range of 1,000–2,000 words, with 3,000 words maximum permitted. All submissions must use endnotes and should be prepared for anonymous review.

CONTACT
Submit all manuscripts electronically (.doc or .docx format), and direct inquiries to Amy Marvin, Editor, APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy, amarvin@gettysburg.edu.

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