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ASIAN AND ASIAN-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS AND PHILOSOPHIES

FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

HISPANIC/LATINO ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY

LGBTQ ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY

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FROM THE EDITORS

Editors’ Introduction: What Is It Like to Be a Philosopher of Asian Descent?

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I. INTRODUCTION AND DEDICATION

Previous issues of this newsletter focus on important topics, historical figures, and emerging trends in the field of Asian and Asian American philosophies. For this fall 2020 issue, we would like to take a different tack and look instead at the other half of this committee’s brief: Asian and Asian American philosophers. Hence, our theme is what it is like to be a philosopher of Asian descent.

Asian and Asian American philosophers comprise 6.10 percent to 6.92 percent of the APA’s membership who reported their race/ethnicity in recent (FY2016 to FY2018) demographic surveys. However, that figure may be an overestimation because, aside from the fact that nearly half of APA members did not report those data, the percentage of North American recipients of doctoral degrees in philosophy who identify themselves as Asian or Asian American has been no higher than 4.66 percent—in most years, well below 4.66 percent—since the mid-1990s. Nonetheless, given that wide pool of life and philosophical experience and given the huge diversity within the group that we label “Asian,” the editors thought that an issue presenting the stories of some of the members of that group, in their own voices, would be of interest both to those who identify themselves as Asian or Asian American and to the wider philosophical community.

We thus invited a selection of Asian and Asian American philosophers to submit essays on the theme. We provided potential contributors with an extensive list of guiding questions, but contributors were free to address the theme as they saw fit. We received twenty-nine contributions (without the global COVID-19 pandemic and the attendant unprecedented disruptions to all aspects of life, we would have received at least a dozen more), which together represent a wide—though, of course, incomplete—cross-section of Asian and Asian American philosophers.

Geographically and ethnoculturally, our contributors’ or their parents’ countries of origin span the majority of the Asian continent, stretching from South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan) across East Asia (China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Taiwan) to Southeast Asia (Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam). Their work covers topics from justice in Aristotle’s moral and political philosophy to Zhuangzi as a skeptic and a fictionalist, from the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita and the Buddhism-deconstruction encounter to virtue ethics and virtue epistemology in the Quran, from the meaning of if and the normativity of meaning and content to Du Bois and Fanon on the philosophy and phenomenology of race, from decision theory without representation theorems to microaggression and epistemic uncertainty as a woman of color, from the aesthetics of the familiar to decolonial skepticism about imperial grand narratives. Their academic career and employment status ranges from graduate student to tenured full professor, from part-time adjunct to endowed distinguished chair, across a variety of institutions, including schools of art and design, institutes of health professions, regional public colleges, private research universities, Jesuit higher-educational institutions, and flagship state universities. To read these contributions, then, is to get some sense of what it is to be a philosopher simpliciter in North America as well as a philosopher of Asian descent.

This huge internal diversity, coupled with our desire to have our contributors enjoy the space to tell their stories in their own voices, has led to this issue being of longer length than is typical. In our view, that length is balanced out by the benefits of a broad range of stories, histories, anecdotes, reflections, speculations, insights, hopes, and dreams presented here. Our intention is not only to provide a snapshot of what it is like to be an Asian or Asian American philosopher at this time, but also for this issue to serve as a document of sociological and historical interest. We hope at the very least that this issue offers some insight into the many and varied ways in which one can be a philosopher of Asian descent.

We would like to dedicate this issue to the memory of Jaegwon Kim (1934–2019), celebrated for his pioneering work in the philosophy of mind, metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of science and his service as president of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association in 1988–1989. We had asked Professor Kim to contribute to this issue barely a week before his passing, and we are honored to have in his contribution’s stead a memorial notice from the Department of Philosophy at Brown University, where he spent much of his professional academic life.
II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PHILOSOPHER OF ASIAN DESCENT?

There are a number of themes that recur throughout these reflections. The first, one that perhaps encompasses all the others, is what it means to be a philosopher of Asian descent. How does one, as a philosopher and as a person, take up that social position and identity, those histories and geographies, and all the large and small vicissitudes and choices that lead one to one’s present?

Falguni A. Sheth begins her essay with one challenge of understanding “Asian” identity, namely, that it is one constructed largely by Orientalist administrative categories imposed from above and insensitive to the complexities of lived experience (of “having [one’s] comportment and questions met with perplexity or suspicion,” for instance). Consequently, for Sheth, “‘Asian’ . . . remained a term of art designating (and often denigrating) a long-standing ‘Other’ against a dominant whiteness and a Black Other.” How, through what agency, can one reshape and make sense of one’s social identity if that is the form that it takes?

This question, essentially one of identity and agency and the relationship between the two, must be read both in the general and in the particular. As Jin Y. Park puts it, “truth might be universal, but when the truth happens in an individual’s life and lived events, it happens in context, and the individual understands truth in that specific context.” To be a philosopher of Asian descent, she goes on to say, means that “I am keenly aware of the connections between our lived experiences and our philosophizing,” that “I base my philosophy on the lived experiences of myself and many others who have experienced discrimination and marginalization of different kinds and at different levels,” that “I am thoroughly sensitive to the power structure that is at the core of our philosophizing and the discipline of philosophy.”

Celia T. Bardwell-Jones considers a poignant form of the aforementioned general-particular dichotomy. She is, to the best of her knowledge, the only self-identifying Filipina tenured or tenure-track philosopher in the US. What are the historical and ideational causes of what she calls this “singular demographic”? Bardwell-Jones raises this question and her reflections trace quite a few of its consequences in her own personal and professional life, including “the lack of role models,” roadblocks to opportunity, “eerie loneliness,” self-doubt, and a sense of dread as described in her self-report of “feeling the unbearable weight of my existence in the company of other philosophers.”

Julianne Chung writes from another perspective, that of “a multiracial philosopher partially of Asian descent,” one whose experience is shaped much more by Ukrainian culture than by Chinese. According to Chung, her work is so related to her background that she has come to see herself as “something of a ‘fusion person’ racially, ethnically, and culturally who also does ‘fusion philosophy’—or, perhaps more aptly, as a deeply multicultural person who also does multicultural philosophy as deeply as [she is] able to.” Her research methods (cross-cultural and interdisciplinary) and research interests (topics at the intersection of epistemology, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and aesthetics), she says, “are at least as ‘mixed’ as I am.” The relation between work and background (broadly construed so as to include self-conception) is also dynamic and fruitful in a converse way. In part thanks to her philosophical work, Chung has now come to understand that just as “cross-cultural philosophy is philosophy that weaves together strands from different philosophical traditions,” so too multiracial identity is identity that weaves together “strands from different racial, ethnic, and cultural traditions.” Practicing the kind of fusion or cross-cultural (and interdisciplinary) philosophy that Chung does, therefore, helps inform her thinking on her own multiracial identity and on multiculturalism and related topics in general.

As for Masato Ishida, attaching ‘of Asian descent’ to ‘philosopher’ feels “a little bit like adding ~P after saying P.” Readers may hear in this an echo of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s aphorism that “the philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas; that is what makes him into a philosopher” (Zettel, 455). Ishida argues that associating an individual’s philosophical contributions with their racial-ethnic-cultural background “seems wrongheaded for the purpose of philosophy” because it may amount to committing a “genetic fallacy.” Considering the case of Nishida Kitarō, “the most significant modern Japanese philosopher” in his view, Ishida stresses that Nishida “developed his seminal concept of bashō, or place, through his persistent engagement with Western philosophy.” Ishida proceeds to clarify: “I intentionally set aside questions of origin because [instead of searching for racial-ethnic-cultural ingredients in a thinker’s philosophy] I find it far more attractive to anticipate powerful thinkers like Nishida coming from all over Asia to impact philosophy. . . . They contribute to philosophy not because they come from particular places in the world.” The relation between the larger currents that shape one’s lived experience and that lived experience itself, and the relation between those currents and one’s philosophy, are explored and exemplified in different ways in the essays in this issue.

III. ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The second large theme is the relation each of these philosophers has towards academic philosophy, particularly analytic philosophy as it is practiced in North America nowadays, and the broader white, American culture of which academic analytic philosophy is both part of and partially set against. Some found a degree of freedom in the discipline. Prasanta S. Bandyopadhyay writes that his mentors in graduate school at the University of Rochester inculcated in him “the confidence to challenge any argument advanced by any famous philosopher . . . if I thought seriously that theirs was deeply flawed,” unlike his earlier education in India, where “no one was encouraged to think on their own on any issue.” Anand Jayprakash Vaidya, during his undergraduate studies at UCLA, was “attracted to the content as well as the method of doing philosophy,” though later he would, like others, return to his history via cross-cultural and cross-traditional philosophy.
But others found academic philosophy at best stifling and unresponsive to the work they wanted to do and at worst poised to reiterate and exacerbate the racism of the surrounding culture. Ann A. Pang-White’s and Saam Trivedi’s reflections are touchstones here. Pang-White speaks of the “barrenness” of analytic philosophy with its themes and methods when it becomes “hegemonic” and authoritarian; of the “jarred” and “decisive preference” for the analytic tradition and its ways of doing philosophy in the contemporary academic world; of the resultant devaluation of “other modes of philosophizing—by means of literature, metaphor, analogy, symbolism, or sentiment, for instance”—devaluation, specifically, of “Asian philosophy with its embedded poetic sense, its love of paradox, its non-dualist logic that rejects the absolute demarcation of subject and object.” She speaks of the attendant “narrowing” and “exclusivist perspective of what counts and what does not count as philosophy”; and of the “multiple glass ceilings” faced by female philosophers of Asian descent.

The center of Trivedi’s piece is a litany of his own experiences of racism, discrimination, bias, and prejudice in the profession, a number of which are repeated with slight variations in other pieces. After warning graduate students and junior faculty members of Asian descent that they “probably will face some typecasting and . . . at least some unconscious bias,” Trivedi urges them not to “despair” or “abandon hope” and provides a number of concrete and practical ways in which they can cope with all this and even turn it to their advantage.

Similarly, in a compelling passage, Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach laments her experience of being typecast yet concludes by striking a note of cautious optimism about the future of the profession. She writes:

My life in Euro-American academic philosophy has many a time felt for me, a female philosopher of Indian descent with interests in non-canonical philosophy, like facing a steep incline. Absent an awareness of practitioner and content diversity, minority scholars tend to be sought out as go-to experts for an antiquated and essentialized understanding of cultural identities. They are solicited for conference presentations to deliver “authentic” accounts of the “Indian mind,” “Chinese mind,” “Japanese mind,” etc. Such problematic interpellations play out against the background of . . . white misconception . . . Furthermore, these interpellations set up a close relation between philosophical ability and biographical factors—a relation that seems to hold particularly for those whose bodies are marked out as possessing “divergent” identities. Such interpellations as the philosophical “other” are not isolated incidents; they seem to occur across Euro-America. And yet I am cautiously optimistic that ongoing changes will make the field more inclusive.

What it is like to be a philosopher of Asian descent is that one often feels, in Kirloskar-Steinbach’s striking phrase, “like facing a steep incline.” And this feeling is likely to persist in the absence of stable institutional and personal support. In addition to non-canonical philosophy, cultural pluralism, and epistemic decolonization, Kirloskar-Steinbach found “a deep wariness about canon-making processes, as well as the belief that philosophy itself has the tools to resist majoritarian societal tendencies” to be congenial to decolonial and anti-racist commitments.

Likewise, for Yubraj Aryal, key to the intellectual project that critiques and decenters the hegemonic Western knowledge system (which encompasses the creation, construction, transmission, and reception of knowledge) with its claim of universality is “how individuals like [himself, a minority scholar in the United States] create micropolitics, a self-created space for oneself within a dominant politics,” that is, “how individuals at the frontier or margin of dominant power relations can self-fashion what they are in their self-creation.” By contrast, instead of drawing inspiration from Michel Foucault’s idea of self-fashioning as Aryal does, Yoichi Ishida contends that philosophy is improved only by cross-disciplinary pollination. He writes:

I would have been a worse philosopher had I not studied a wide range of philosophy, history, and science. . . . [A] vision of philosophy . . . now permeates both my research and teaching: My goal is to understand something, using whatever insights from others and, hopefully, adding my own. Insights can come from philosophy, history, science, or any other field. So, in my classes, I assign readings drawn from a variety of sources, old and new, and I try to show my students ideas that might expand our horizons in unexpected ways.

For some of us, however, analytic philosophy (like whiteness, perhaps) was just the default. Anthony Nguyen closes his reflections by wondering what his experience as a young Asian American philosopher would have been if the schools he attended had offered not only the standard analytic philosophy canon but also its continental-philosophy counterpart and other alternatives beyond the analytic-continental divide such as courses in Asian and Asian American philosophies. Such a question, while perhaps unanswerable, nonetheless strikes a chord.

IV. RE-ENVISIONING THE CANON AND DOING PHILOSOPHY INTERCULTURALLY

Like Nguyen, a number of contributors advocate re-envisioning the canon, often beyond the analytic-continental divide, for a variety of reasons. Formally trained in both analytic philosophy and Indian philosophy, Anand Jayprakash Vaidya confesses that “I cannot defend the idea that there is a principled reason to exclude [certain thinkers from the Indian philosophical tradition from the canon]: Neither their method nor their intellectual excellence seemed any different from what I had studied.” Inspired by pragmatism, Celia T. Bordwell-Jones urges us to consider the practical effects of the canon in terms of how it helps us realize our values and commitments and then conceive and determine the canon by reference to and in accordance with the totality of those effects, writing thus: “Understanding one’s relationship to the canon through
the lens of values and commitments shifted the focus away from who was writing philosophy and towards the content of the philosopher’s work and how they represented these values and commitments that I found important . . . [A] value-and-commitment-centered approach to the canon . . . opens up the variety, distinctiveness, and richness of other philosophic approaches to the questions we continue to ask as philosophers.” Recalling that “a crucial part of my apprenticeship in German academic philosophy . . . did not involve pondering over canonical texts” and acknowledging her philosophical mentors in both India and Germany for having “helped to instill in me a deep wariness about canon-making processes, . . . [which] philosophical training has proved to be an invaluable asset,” Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach champions cultural pluralism and non-canonical philosophy and contends that “there is no reason to hew world philosophies along the parameters set by canonical philosophy. Other people from near and far have attempted to make sense of their own worlds, albeit in different ways.” Lastly, reflecting on her recent three-year “productivity” rut, during which she “felt not only emotionally exhausted but also completely disconnected from ‘philosophy,’” Saba Fatima states that “the established canon of the discipline didn’t speak to my experiences . . . [and] part of my writer’s block had to do with producing a ‘philosophy’ paper that was deeply disconnected from my identity, my sense of who I was, and my daily experiences.”

One form of partial belonging that many of our contributors have found in academic philosophy is in comparative, intercultural, cross-cultural, cross-traditional, or fusion philosophy.¹⁰ For instance, Halla Kim speaks of the kind of “synthetic insight followed by a most concentrated commitment to its theoretical justifications as well as its fruitful practice” that the type of intercultural philosophy that he endorses generates in contrast to the perceived limitations of the analytic tradition such as the mere “hair-splitting analysis” and the lack of “robust practical engagement with reality.” Specifically, he develops a position that he dubs “transcendental Confucianism.” A cross between Kantianism and Confucianism, “this is the view that the systematic practice of self-cultivation in our communal life must be structured and conditioned by the underlying nature of the heart-mind.” For Kim, “the Kantian enlightened reason and the Neo-Confucian familial/communal love (ren) are not two separate things but two sides of one and the same coin.” Conceiving and practicing philosophy synthetically and interculturally in the manner sketched above, he contends, will enable us to “restore the venerable old tradition of philosophy where philosophers can usher in a sweeping vision of reality followed by appropriate essential tools for manifesting this vision not only in theory but also in praxis.”

Some of our contributors, already with a PhD from or an academic position in another country, pursued a (second) PhD at a North American university.¹¹ Bo Mou and Keya Maitra are among these. Mou recalls the feeling of “the aspiring period around the mid/late 1980s in China” a decade after the end of the Cultural Revolution—aspirations that were being felt across the world in different ways at that time—which led him “to give up all the comfortable things” as a full-time philosophy researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and begin anew in upstate New York and later to develop the “constructive engagement” approach and apply it to various philosophical traditions, from Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy to analytic philosophy and continental philosophy. Maitra begins her reflections with the feelings of excitement and the unknown captured in the image of her flying for the very first time, in a two-week window, from completing one PhD in India to commencing work on another in the US—a process of (re)discovery that would be mirrored years later in coming to teach and then to research in comparative and cross-cultural philosophy of mind.

M. Ashraf Adeel dwells beautifully on a life spent writing on language and underdetermination in Quine and Davidson, on the one hand, and on Urdu poetry and Islamic thought and the “remarkable overlap between the Quranic approach and that of contemporary virtue epistemology,” on the other. Adeel’s call for a consistent and thorough-going pluralism (religious, spiritual, cultural, epistemic, and conceptual, i.e., that of conceptual schemes) is one thematic line of response to a dilemma that is at the heart of many of our pieces: How do we respect the desire to philosophize, the joy of philosophy, given the background conditions of racism and oppression that structure the institutional forms of that activity? What purpose can philosophy serve in a world so deeply organized around these inequalities and hierarchies?

V. OPPRESSION, CULPABILITY, AND SOLIDARITY

Dien Ho is fond of repeating a line from his mother’s admonition. No matter who you are and no matter what you do, she warned him, “racist obstacles . . . would be thrown [your] way like so many flaming barrels in the Donkey Kong video game.” Ho’s mother was “trying to speak [his] language,” but the image is apt and the underlying point is one that many of our philosophers make to their students: How can philosophy help you jump these barrels, be “civically engaged . . . by venturing beyond the cocoon of economic comfort and confronting bigoted systems around us,” and lead an “authentic and flourishing life” when “the flaming barrels keep coming and there are no safe corners to hide”? Does it help—is it even meant to help—when philosophy throws enough flaming barrels of its own?

The importance of these questions notwithstanding, it is worth noting that this is not the experience of all the philosophers who contributed to this issue. As Kenny Easwaran observes, some philosophers of Asian descent including himself enjoy “the luxury of being able to let [their] minority identities pass unrecognized, and thus unremarked, in many contexts.” The ability to let one’s minority identities pass in such a manner or, more actively, to pass as a member of a more privileged group is due to various physical and personal characteristics (such as relatively light skin color and identifiability of surnames or lack thereof) and to various other factors like geographical location and institutional subfield (the often mathematical nature of much of the work one does in, say, decision theory or formal epistemology). There is a price to pay, however, because, as Easwaran points out, the aforementioned luxury

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¹¹ Some of our contributors, already with a PhD from or an academic position in another country, pursued a (second) PhD at a North American university.
“is just the flip side of the isolation I’ve sometimes felt, not being able to see others like myself in the profession.”

The questions, nevertheless, persist. Audrey Yap considers two solutions: fit in or take flight (whether by refusing to conform or by leaving a community altogether). The former is to embrace the position of the so-called model minority—people distinct from the white majority but praised as exemplars of unproblematic assimilation, upward mobility, and traditional family values—perhaps to find a position of power within a system from which one can make positive change. That has a cost, however, for it strengthens and perpetuates the larger systems of oppression that use one’s fitting in to maintain themselves, further entrenches the problematic (typically white colonial) standards to which one is held, and makes one potentially complicit in and hence responsible for the harms perpetuated by those systems. The latter, in Yap’s words, involves “refusing to put ourselves in a position to be used against others with relatively less privilege.” But, the unspoken question remains, where does that leave us? Yap’s reiteration of this dilemma—which, of course, was and continues to be a central tool of colonialism/imperialism (the comprador class), capitalism exploitation (bourgeois upward mobility), and patriarchy (“good” women)—resonates with a number of other pieces that consider upward mobility or assimilation as ways of finding a home, of coming to inhabit a minority position.

Saba Fatima’s reflections also address the questions of complicity and solidarity: complicity within systems of oppression and solidarity with those fighting such systems. For Fatima, the experiences of racism and discrimination she and her family faced in Saudi Arabia as visa-dependent non-Arab Pakistani Shiites were very different from American racial politics, with all the complexities that follow for multiracial coalition building and anti-oppression praxis in those different contexts.

For David H. Kim, a vital part of being a philosopher of Asian descent consists of two elements: first, “regarding being Asian to be a significantly racialized phenomenon”; and, second, “doing philosophy out of Asian American experience so conceived and out of critical sensibilities built up from reflection upon it.” According to Kim, the development and practice of a distinctively Asian American philosophy, which begins with and is rooted in such racialized experiences and critical sensibilities, contends, among other things, with the question of “What does it feel like to be a solution?” (cf. W. E. B. Du Bois’s powerful framing of the Negro existential predicament with the question of “What does it feel like to be a problem?). All of this, Kim argues, is set against the backdrop of the model minority myth and the deployment of it as a racial wedge between Asians and Blacks. Specifically, Asian Americans are lauded as the model minority and, as such, used politically to suppress Black Americans. Therefore, the solution in question, to put it in Du Boisian terms, is one “to the alleged problem that is Black people” with their alleged “shortcomings and . . . negative social impact on the wider polity.” Against this form of positioning and racial oppression that it only serves to entrench, Kim argues that “being a philosopher of Asian descent in the US is crucially about refusing this social position of a solution, interrogating the profoundly racist presuppositions of this entire line of thought, and joining in solidarity with Blacks and other people of color.”

VI. HOME, FAMILY, AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE: LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND COMPLEXITY

After trying the upward mobility approach by earning a BA in economics and political science and working in tech, financial, and media industries for three years in order to help her family financially, Emily S. Lee returned to philosophy as a gift to herself, as a way of making sense of her world. This gift was in part an act of “solidarity and empathy” with her Black and Latinx customers whom she served throughout junior high school, high school, and college as a cashier at her parents’ fruit and vegetable store in a poor neighborhood in the Bronx, “knowing we occupied similar class levels.” But Lee’s path, as well as the path travelled by the other philosophers in these pages who describe their pursuit of philosophy in similar ways, cannot be unproblematically taken as an exemplar; as Dien Ho remarks, while seemingly commendable, “Follow your passion” can be irresponsible advice to give to his Asian students considering the socioeconomic reality of many Asian families.

Of course, an answer to this dilemma cannot ignore class. Although Asian Americans are lauded as the model minority, wealth, income, education, occupation, and other social factors vary drastically not only among but also within communities of different ethnic backgrounds and national origins, depending on a number of factors including geographical location within the United States and histories of migration. Kenneth Aizawa recounts his immigrant father’s story of living the American dream, arriving in Louisville, Kentucky from Tokyo, Japan after World War II with little English and by dint of hard work receiving his PhD in chemistry—a model that Aizawa, reflecting on his early education as a “lackadasical student,” did not immediately follow. By Justin Khoo’s account, his class position as a child of medical professionals allowed him the freedom and the time to come to philosophy after a failed one-year stint at music school, despite his parents’ expectations and exhortations that he would likewise go into medicine and become a doctor.

The closely related themes of home, family, and the immigrant experience also recur in these essays, albeit differently for first- and second-generation groups. Gary Mar provides a fascinating recounting of his extended family history and the interwoven family histories that have, in unexpected ways, structured his academic career and his activism for the Asian American community. Mi-Kyoung (Mitzi) Lee speaks of the partial loss of her Korean tongue as a member of the only Korean family in their area and the centrality of family in coping with the alienation experienced from living in a largely white community. Karen Ng, who was born in Hong Kong and whose family immigrated to Canada when she was five years old, shares her *experience of being on the outside looking in, of wanting and failing to fit into the dominant culture and at the same time*
cherishing a somewhat secret Chinese way of being,” which experience shaped her and her interior life profoundly and was something she struggled with well into her teens. Ng notes that, thanks to the colonial history of Hong Kong, “Chinese identity was complicated for almost everyone in [her] family and everyone [her] family knew, many of whom emigrated in the ‘80s and ‘90s prior to the 1997 handover” and “the complicated sense of Chinese identity that many Hongkongers share . . . remains unresolved in the years since the handover.” The complicated relation her parents have to Hong Kong, to mainland China, and to their adopted country of Canada is mirrored in Ng’s own relation to her cultural inheritance, once one of conflict and struggle but now one of appreciation and cherishment. Lastly, Yuriko Saito writes of the privilege she has in having two “homes,” but also of the challenge that is rooted in “feeling not fully ‘at home’ in either.”

Perhaps it is fitting, on this note, to return to the overarching theme of the meaning of being a philosopher of Asian descent, to take notice of the tensions and struggles, productive and painful, that mark each of our attempts as agents to understand and inhabit those meanings. It is these attempts to make sense of this position through autobiographical narratives, which represent choices about what to include and what to underscore, that perhaps most broadly characterize what it is like to be a philosopher of Asian descent. As Emily S. Lee observes, quoting the Vietnamese American poet and novelist Ocean Vuong, “memory is a choice.”

VII. THANKS AND WELCOME: ANOTHER CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Brian Bruya, Jullianne Chung, and Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach finished their three-year terms on the committee on June 30, 2020. We thank Jullianne and Monika for their service on the committee, as well as their contributions to this issue, and we thank Brian for his diligent work as chair and his continuing support of the committee’s activities. We welcomed Jonardon Ganeri and Dien Ho as new members, who would serve on the committee from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2023. A. Minh Nguyen began his three-year term as chair on July 1, 2020, having served as associate chair in 2019-2020 and as a member in 2008-2011. This marks the first issue of the newsletter that Minh and Yarran Hominh, a committee member since July 1, 2019, have edited. They have been working together as editor and as associate editor, respectively, since that time.

Jonardon Ganeri is the Bimal K. Matilal Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. He is a philosopher whose work draws on a variety of philosophical traditions to construct new positions in the philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. He is the author of Attention, Not Self (2017); The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance (2012); The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700 (2011); The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology (2007); and Semantic Powers (1999), all published by Oxford University Press. He joined the Fellowship of the British Academy in 2015 and won the Infosys Prize in the Humanities the same year, the only philosopher to do so.

Dien Ho is Professor of Philosophy and Healthcare Ethics at Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences (MCPHS University) in Boston, Massachusetts. He is also the chair of the Center for Health Humanities. His research focuses on the philosophy of medicine, bioethics, health policies, the philosophy of science, and epistemology. His most recent book A Philosopher Goes to the Doctor: A Critical Look at Philosophical Assumptions in Medicine (Routledge, 2019) aims to help clinicians, students, and non-academic readers explore the central role philosophy plays in clinical and research medicine. A contributor to this issue, Dien is committed to making philosophy accessible to the general public in his writings, public engagements, and political activism.

A. Minh Nguyen is Professor of Philosophy, Faculty Affiliate of the Center for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, and Associate Director of the Honors College at Florida Gulf Coast University. Born and raised in Vietnam, Minh began his teaching career as a part-time lecturer in philosophy in 1993 at Columbia University, where he earned a BA in mathematics, an MA in philosophy, and a PhD in philosophy. From 2013 to 2019, he served as Professor of Philosophy, Founding Director of the Interdisciplinary Asian Studies Program, and Associate Director of the Honors Program at Eastern Kentucky University. A specialist in the philosophy of mind and theory of knowledge, he also works in the areas of Chinese thought and Japanese aesthetics while maintaining an abiding interest in ethics, political philosophy, and creative writing. His publications include New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) and, with Nhi Huynh, "First Confession," Kenyon Review: International Journal of Literature, Culture and the Arts 34, no. 2 (2012): 79–97.

VIII. ANTI-ASIAN RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

We prepared this newsletter issue at the height of the coronavirus pandemic. We thank each and every one of the contributors for their prodigious patience, painstaking effort, and intimate explorations into subjects that they care deeply about but rarely write about, all accomplished during what has been a most challenging period of time for all of us. Since the committee’s responsibilities include “identify[ing] unfair or discriminatory practices and . . .
In light of increasing reports of pandemic-related cases of xenophobia, discrimination, and racism, including acts of violence, against Asians and Asian Americans, as well as statements by the US President and other high-level government officials that appear designed to incite such sentiments, the undersigned organizations strongly and unequivocally condemn all forms of racism and ethnocentrism, especially recent attempts to scapegoat Asians or Asian Americans for the coronavirus pandemic.

There is a long history in American society of both direct and indirect language demeaning members of some ethnic groups, including unjustifiable stereotypes associating Asian immigrants with diseases in particular. Intentional or unintentional use of such language inflames both explicit and implicit biases against such groups. Terminology such as “Chinese Virus,” “Wuhan Virus,” and “Kung Flu” tend to highlight differences among people rather than making any kind of meaningful designation about an organism or a disease.

Let us support the Asian and Asian American members of our communities by rejecting all forms of xenophobia and racism, treating Asians and Asian Americans with dignity and respect, and encouraging all individuals (especially government officials and leaders within civil society), organizations (especially governmental agencies), and media outlets to use the official designations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization to refer to the virus as SARS-CoV-2 and the disease as COVID-19.

On May 4, 2020, the Board of Officers of the American Philosophical Association issued the above statementcondemning racism and discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The undersigned organizations include not only the American Philosophical Association but also a whole host of other scholarly societies:

- American Folklore Society
- American Historical Association
- American Sociological Association
- American Studies Association
- Medieval Academy of America
- Middle East Studies Association
- Rhetoric Society of America
- Society for Ethnomusicology
- Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study

On behalf of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies, we would like to thank the APA Board of Officers and its counterpart at each and every one of the above organizations for their joint statement of solidarity and support.

IX. CONCLUSION

To return to the overall theme of our issue: What is it like to be a philosopher of Asian descent? This issue features twenty-nine thoughtful and sustained responses to the question, which range from intensely personal to deeply speculative with the majority exemplifying a mixture of both. Together, to use Maya Angelou’s lovely image, these meditations make for a rich tapestry of perspectives and experiences, with all the threads equal in value no matter what their color or their place in the tapestry. For us, editors, our contribution here is gnomic. Part of what it is like to be a philosopher of Asian descent at this point in time, we submit, is to take seriously one’s obligation to stand in solidarity with victims of injustice, especially racial injustice; to strongly and unequivocally condemn all forms of racism and ethnocentrism; to reaffirm one’s commitment to the highest ideals of justice, freedom, diversity, inclusivity, and equity; to critically examine and reflect on one’s and one’s community’s contribution to injustice and oppression, as well as the injustices and oppressions that one has suffered; to treat each and every individual with dignity and respect; to be kind to oneself and kind to others; to serve as an agent of positive change; and to work toward a better, more just, more free society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Drs. Julianne Chung, Masato Ishida, Bo Mou, Audrey Yap, and especially Nhi Huynh and Vivian Nguyen for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this introduction. Any errors that remain, of course, are our own. We would also like to thank Dr. Clay Maltby, Director of the Honors College at Florida Gulf Coast University, for his support and encouragement.

NOTES

1. The second issue of the first volume of this newsletter, edited by Vrinda Dalmiya and Xinyan Jiang and published in spring 2001, focused on the status and (under)representation of Asian and Asian American philosophers in the profession. It contained pieces on individual Asian and Asian American philosophers (including Hao Wang, Weiming Tu, David B. Wong, J. N. Mohanty, Bimal Krishna Matilal, Anil Gupta, Jaegwon Kim, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Kah Kyung Cho, and Kenneth K. Inada), though not in the mode of autobiography. We gladly return, in this issue, to this foundational concern, in a different mode. See Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 2001)—plus Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 2003) and Vol. 14, No. 1 (Fall 2014)—of this newsletter. All issues of the APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies are available on the APA website at https://www.apaonline.org/page/asian_newsletter.


3. Ibid.

4. American Philosophical Association, “Minorities in Philosophy,” https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/data_on_profession/minorities_in_philosophy.pdf, accessed June 27, 2020. APA graduation data include percentages of bachelor’s degrees, master’s degrees, and doctoral degrees in philosophy awarded to members of racial/ethnic minority groups from 1995 to 2014. With respect to the percentages of doctoral degrees in philosophy awarded to individuals who identify themselves as Asian or Asian American, the data since 2010 are not clear. Either there was a sudden, dramatic, and sustained drop in doctoral degree recipients identifying themselves as Asian or Asian American, with the percentage hovering between
While, accessed June 28, 2020, which show that individuals identifying themselves

The list is as follows:
1. Where did you grow up and what was it like?
2. How did you end up in philosophy?
3. How did your upbringing/early life affect the kind of philosophy you do?
4. Was your family supportive of your philosophical journey?
5. Where did you study philosophy and what was it like?
6. What are some of the best moments you’ve had in philosophy?
7. What challenges have you faced in philosophy?
8. What mistakes have you made in your life and what have you learned from the experiences?
9. What are some of your successes?
10. What motivates you to philosophize now? Is it different from what brought you into philosophy?
11. What interests outside philosophy do you have?
12. What might you have done if you had not pursued philosophy?
13. How do you see the relation between your academic philosophy and your other interests/the rest of your life?
14. What advice do you give to the younger generation?
15. What would you change about the profession and how might we go about actualizing that change?
16. What do you think is most exciting about philosophy right now?
17. What directions do you think academic philosophy should take in the future?
18. What do you see as the relation between academic philosophy and the public?

In her contribution to this issue, Mi-Kyoung (Mitzi) Lee also recalls her personal experience with “a lack of self-confidence,” “acute self-doubt,” “stereotype threat,” “Imposter syndrome,” and “other self-undermining attitudes.” Because of her experience as an Asian American woman in the field, she is keen to mentor students and junior faculty, especially those who are women or members of racial minorities or who otherwise “end up feeling like outsiders in philosophy.” Similarly, Keya Maitra, who earned two doctorates in philosophy in two different continents (Asia and North America), describes “a sense of dread, a huge amount of self-doubt, and the feeling of being a perpetual refugee without a home in philosophy” as some of the predominant experiences that she felt during an extended period while in her second tenure-track position. Kenny Easwaran, however, shares a different experience: “I’ve never had a lack of self-confidence that prevented me from asking questions in philosophical talks. This served me well in many graduate seminars at [UC] Berkeley that, in retrospect, I now realize had participatory lists that would intimidate me now! Donald Davidson was attending several seminars I took, and I didn’t shy away from asking questions of visiting speakers like Hilary Putnam in department colloquia. Nevertheless, I did feel a strong impostor syndrome at many points during my graduate education.”

7. In his contribution to this issue, Justin Khoo, another multiracial philosopher partially of Asian descent (”7/16ths Chinese and 9/16ths white,” by his estimation), recounts a roughly similar transformation. As an undergraduate at UC Davis, Khoo writes, “I occasionally attended Hapa student groups, but I still felt uncomfortable identifying as mixed—perhaps the fallout of my experiences being rejected from racial groups in my adolescence.” As a graduate student at Yale, however, it seemed that having a mixed background could be an advantage, rather than simply a dilution of multiple ‘refined’ (cultural or intellectual) practices. Now “hopeful for the future of philosophy, which seems to be headed towards greater diversity both in its methods (including strengthened connections with neighboring fields) as well as among its practitioners,” Khoo recommends that “the future of philosophy be mixed!”

8. Compare Anand Jayprakash Vaidya, who in his contribution to this issue characterizes the benefits of doing cross-cultural philosophy as follows: “I remain convinced that we have a lot to gain from a cross-traditional conversation in philosophy. I hope to synthesize an understanding of perception [and other philosophical topics] that cuts through these different traditions and connect people to talk to one another. I’ve come to appreciate that friction is not always bad. Cross-cultural methods improve analytical and experimental methods by providing a kind of epistemic friction that takes one outside of one’s philosophical echo chamber in an epistemically responsible way.”

9. In her contribution to this issue, Keya Maitra likewise laments her experience of being typecast thus: “There was also a curious experience on my academic campus that added to my self-doubt. The more I taught courses with Asian contents, the more I came to be identified as the person who was responsible for all things India-related on our small campus. The inadvertent cost of my being typecast as the ‘India person’ was the erasure of my expertise in Western philosophy and many years of training in such. It was a rude awakening to the fact that my academic community couldn’t seem to hold all the different facets of philosophical identity I was trying to foster.”

10. We don’t mean to suggest that these terms are synonymous or interchangeable. In her contribution to this issue, for instance, Julianne Chung helpfully draws a distinction between comparative philosophy and cross-cultural philosophy as follows: “Cross-cultural philosophy is comparativism that weaves together strands from different philosophical traditions. While comparative philosophy generally contrasts so-called ‘non-Western’ philosophies and talks about their ideas, cross-cultural philosophy often engages non-Western philosophies directly and talks with them.” See also the contributions by Halla Kim, Bo Mou, and Anand Jayprakash Vaidya in this issue, especially their respective notions of “synthetic insight,” “constructive engagement,” and “cross-traditional conversation.”

As a side note, the editors know of some other academics who began their careers outside Europe or North America with three doctoral degrees!


ARTICLES

The Rock on My Chest

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"Only connect...": The epigraph to E. M. Forster’s novel, Howards End

I grew up at about a two-and-a-half-hour drive from the birthplace of the ancient, and probably the first, grammarian in history, Panini, and at about the same distance from the ancient seat of learning at Taxila in the Hazara region of North Western Pakistan. My birthplace Gandhian is a small village sitting on the edge of a sharp cliff overlooking a beautiful stream called Ichhar that overflowed its banks every monsoon season back then. It is situated at a distance of only five miles from the ancient Asoka rock inscriptions at the town of Mansehra. Today’s Gandhian, although inhabited by Muslims only, has a 2,000-year-old Buddhist stupa at a site called Bado Dheri and an ancient Shiv Temple at Chitti Gatti. The surrounding areas of the village are full of archeological sites from Gandharan and earlier cultures. I started my study of philosophy books sitting under poplar trees on the banks of Ichhar or on the surrounding hillocks of Gandhian. The music of the flowing waters and the lush green environs of the valley instilled a sense of rhythm of life in me and, the moment I was able to read and write, I started reading Urdu epic poetry books (brought over from Singapore by my father who had to live through Japanese occupation of that island during WWll) and composing little poems of my own. No wonder, then, that even before I was done with my high school, I started studying the poetical works of Pakistan’s national poet Muhammad Iqbal. He is a philosopher-poet and, in my ninth grade, I came upon a book called Jehaan e Iqbal (Iqbal’s World) written by an author named Abdul Rahman Tariq, which discussed some of his philosophical views, particularly comparing him in one chapter with Nietzsche. As far as I can recall, that was my first exposure to some philosophical ideas.

In Pakistan, college starts after tenth grade. I joined the prestigious Islamia College at Peshawar University after high school where, after studying science for a couple of years, I opted for study of philosophy and literature. My parents were very supportive, although one of my uncles was concerned that philosophers end up being atheists. These studies culminated in getting a master’s degree in philosophy from the University of Peshawar, for which I took such courses as Logic, Greek Philosophy, Modern Western Philosophy, Muslim Philosophy, Ethics, and Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy (including existentialism).

Within a few years, I ended up at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa to study for my PhD where I met the famed logician Irving M. Copi, philosopher of science Larry Laudan, and ancient philosophy expert George Rudebusch among others. They eventually supervised my dissertation, which was focused on the problem of underdetermination in Quine’s philosophy of science and language and Davidson’s philosophy of language. Working on this dissertation was a fascinating intellectual journey that transformed my philosophic outlook and helped me see eventually the reasons for a pluralistic view of human history, religion, and philosophy.

My wife and I stayed for about six years in Hawaii, completing our respective degrees and raising our two children at the same time. It was a time of great joy and growth for us and the Comparative Philosophy Program at the University of Hawai’i cultivated in us a deep appreciation for diversity of cultures, ideas, and practices. Still, I did not do a degree in comparative philosophy. I kept getting entrenched in the analytic tradition as I developed ideas for my dissertation. Working through Quine and Davidson in close collaboration with Copi, Laudan, and Rudebusch simply enthralled me and I remember spending sometimes an entire day discussing Quine and Davidson with my fellow graduate students in Sakamaki Hall where the Philosophy Department is housed.

All this while I kept myself deeply engaged with contemporary Islamic thought and the challenges that confront Muslim societies in terms of internal spiritual and intellectual growth as well as adjustment to a diverse, dynamic, and technologically innovative world. Deep down I was studying and thinking about the Western thought in order to understand my own Islamic culture and working through Islamic thought to get a grip on the Western philosophies. My inner spiritual and intellectual life is characterized by this dialectic of comparisons with an alert and supportive eye for differences and overlaps.

Of course, my journey as Urdu language poet continued in the meantime. While at Islamia College, Peshawar University I had come in contact with some great luminaries of Urdu literature. The legendary Urdu poets of our time Ahmad Faraz and Mohsin Ihsan were both on the faculty, and it was quite inspiring to sit through their classes and also interact with them on the campus at various literary gatherings. Since they lived on campus, it was possible to visit them at their residences in the evenings as well, and their patient tutelage helped me develop my love for and understanding of both Urdu and Persian poetry. This connection with Urdu and Persian poetry was a great boon for us in Hawaii where we missed our homeland and family dearly and consoled our hearts by reading some of the best contemporary and classical poetry of these languages. Now I keep works of Rumi, Hafiz, Ghalib, Iqbal, Majid Amjad, and Faiz Ahmad Faiz among others close at hand and returning to them occasionally is a source of great joy for me.
In more ways than one, Hawaii’s cosmopolitan culture and aloha spirit shaped my philosophic and cultural outlook. Today I am a pluralist through and through. I consider underdetermination of theory by evidence to be a regular feature of human knowledge as well as understanding. This allows for a multiplicity of interpretations not only when it comes to understanding language but also science and religion. I had argued early on that Davidson’s program in semantics cannot be, for technical reasons, coupled with Davidson’s rejection of conceptual relativism. In addition, I think that Tarski’s claim about the so-called universality of natural languages is correct and, hence, it is wrong to apply formal methods to natural languages in order to develop a semantics for them. Tarski means two things by “the universality of natural languages”: that they contain their own metalanguage and that any other language can be translated into them. In such a situation, we cannot apply formal methods to natural languages and split them into object language and metalanguage in order to avoid paradoxes without imposing artificial restrictions on natural languages and without declaring sentences like the liar as meaningless.

In other words, I do see the indeterminacy of translation as a central thesis in Quine’s approach to language and consider it to be allowing for multiple interpretations of languages. In addition, contrary to what Davidson believes, there is such a thing as partial failure of translation between languages and that failure makes room for conceptual and cultural pluralism. I distinguish conceptual pluralism from conceptual relativism through the claim that “everything goes”-type of relativism on the one hand and absolutist realism on the other are extreme positions that can be avoided through some version of Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance. Not all interpretations of a language will be acceptable while there is also no uniquely true interpretation available for a given language. In between these two extremes, there can be a number of interpretations that have some family resemblance and, because of that, they hang onto some approximate truth. It is this position that I call “conceptual pluralism.” I think it is a consequence of Quine’s thesis of underdetermination of theory by evidence. The thesis does not advocate disregard of evidence, obviously. Its claim is that we can match the evidence to more than one theory that will inevitably conflict with one another if they are truly different from one another.

Cultures are to be understood similarly. They measure up to the similar evidence about reality, but none of them captures everything correctly. None of them is the unique truth about human experience of reality in different spheres. Neither are they totally isolated from one another. They overlap and have family resemblance. They are different from one another because, despite family resemblance, none of them shares certain aspects with others. To put it in linguistic terms, we may say that not all predicates in them are translatable into the predicates of other cultures.

With this kind of background view, I devoted a lot of time to understand the foundational document of Islamic civilization, the Quran. Since my days in Hawaii, I have been trying to figure out or at least develop some perspective on the epistemological underpinnings of the Quran. A careful analytical study of all the verses of the Quran involving epistemic concepts like ignorance, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom has led me to conclude that the Quranic epistemology is a virtue epistemology. I have argued for this position in my book *Epistemology of the Quran: Elements of a Virtue Approach to Knowledge and Understanding* (Springer, 2019). I find this remarkable overlap between the Quranic approach and that of contemporary virtue epistemology quite fascinating.

I have made deliberate effort to remain active on the poetry front and have published two anthologies of Urdu poems so far. The second anthology, *Sumundar Raq Karta Hay* (*The Ocean in Ecstatic Dance*), opens with the following eponymous poem:

**The Ocean in Ecstatic Dance**

Forlorn by separation  
The ocean wails  
The wind shrieks in agony on the hills  
The flowers weep blood  
The pain penetrates the blisters on my feet  
An angst enflames my bosom  
I read your name in the face of the cosmos  
I crash my head  
Against every brick of the citadel of my being.  
From the walls of the world to the walls of the heavens  
I flow in a river of passion.  
I am on the brink of complete submission  
In every vein of mine runs unrequited love  
I remember nothing except the way towards you.  
Dear one!  
The ocean is in convulsions  
The birds inhale agonies  
Floating beyond the limits of the horizon  
Burning with the desire to return;  
The earth says nothing, the sky keeps mum  
Being and non-being both lose sanity  
Everything falls to rise and rises to fall.  
Wonderstruck in the midst of nothingness and being  
The ocean heaves, leaps, and dances endlessly  
In the ecstasy of your love.

[Translated from Urdu by the author]

Poetic experience is obviously different from philosophical quest. The glimpses that one gets in poetic experience point towards another kind of opening on reality and, hence, provide another set of hints for the pluralistic nature of our takes on things.

This kind of diversity of interests that I have pursued in life so far has its challenges. Coming from a different cultural background, it has been a challenge, on occasions, to make others see the (possible) veracity of my cultural, religious, poetic, and philosophical experiences. A lot of the time people around you do not connect things the way you do. They can be perplexed by your way of exploring or connecting experiences and ideas. I have experienced such perplexity on the part of people off and on. I think this might have sometimes unconsciously forced me, like a heavy rock on my chest, to suppress some of the ways
The Not-So-Lonely Journey of a Japanese American Philosopher

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I was born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1961. Forced bussing came to Louisville at about the time I was entering high school. I remember applying to the private Catholic school from which my father had graduated, but I was not accepted. I had never been to a Catholic school and I suppose that with bussing there were far more applicants than they could take. As it turns out, when the program was implemented, I would normally have been bussed in my junior and senior years, but since I was Japanese American, I was exempted. The apparent rationale was that I would be part of a very tiny minority whether I was bussed to an urban school or remained in my suburban school.

Through most of primary, middle, and secondary school, I was a lackadaisical student. When the courses were easy, I got good grades; when they were not, I did not. A big turning point for me was getting good standardized test scores in high school. They moved me to think I was underachieving and that I should apply myself much more seriously. I was also motivated to think I should go to the best university I could get into. My parents paid more for my college than they did for their house, so I was extremely motivated to do my best. During the summers, I worked at the Philip-Morris cigarette factory in downtown Louisville. I was there the first Monday after classes until the last Friday before. I also worked shutdown over the Fourth of July week. Throughout my college years and into graduate school, I was very diligent, but I do not think I ever recovered from my poor habits in primary, middle, and secondary school.

I went off to college—Case Western Reserve University in 1979–1981 and the University of Chicago in 1981–1983—hoping to major in philosophy, because I thought that it involved a great deal of figuring things out, whereas other courses I took seemed to be a matter of mastering a lot of fixed information. Although I’m sure my parents always worried about me, whether it was what I majored in, why I was going to graduate school, or whether I would get a job, they were always very supportive. I often think that majoring in philosophy was the most rebellious thing I ever did. Sadly, it was only many years later that I came to appreciate how great they were as parents.

My most influential undergraduate professor was Chris Hill. He spent an inordinate amount of time talking to me during office hours and putting up with an earnest, but not great student. At the time, I’m sure I did not appreciate what it meant for an assistant professor to spend so much time with a student.

I was thoroughly lost in graduate school. I took a lot of courses in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh, but I never seemed to forge a coherent philosophical picture. It would probably have helped me to have been a bit more outgoing to spend more time talking to the professors. Kind of obvious in retrospect, but being shy and introverted did not help.

By some miracle, as underprepared as I was, I did manage to land a tenure-track job at Central Michigan University. It was by no means a plum job, with three courses per semester with forty-five students each, but it was a tenure-track job. The best academic part of those years was my friendship with Fred Adams. He was super supportive and very keen on collaborative work. So we did some counterexample-type papers on Jerry Fodor’s theory of content. That was the first time I really got to focus on a topic. Sadly, I had not done that in my dissertation. The best part of those years was that I met my wife, Angie. Fred has always been right that she is a saint for putting up with me. I have always been difficult and stubborn in the ways that philosophers can be. But, after my parents, she has to be the one thing in my life where I have really had it good. She never complained about me, whether it was what I majored in, why I was at the computer or when I went to conferences without her. Aside from Fred and Angie, though, I was generally pretty unhappy in Michigan. I felt too far removed from the philosophical conversation. I remember an IT person telling me that the university needed to get internet access, which I found puzzling, since we did have email.

A year after we were married, Angie and I moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, for me to take up a position at Centenary College of Louisiana. There was a swirl of racial issues there. The city was racially divided by an interstate. While there was obviously a large African American and
Latinx community in the city, I was the only minority tenure-track faculty member at the college. I was accustomed to being the only Japanese American around and one of only a few Asian Americans, but at Centenary I was the diversity in a faculty of seventy-three. And I heard of a life member of the College's Board of Trustees who was apparently very upset to have a Japanese American faculty member. I recall one year we had Ken Taylor and John Perry out to air an episode of the nationally syndicated radio program Philosophy Talk. We took them to the Cambridge Club, now closed. Ken observed that, fifty years ago, neither he nor Devon Strolovich, a producer of Philosophy Talk, would have been allowed in.

At the time, I didn’t know how hard that move was for Angie. She only cried about leaving her family when I was not around. And, while I was still far from the action, I had a bit of travel money and could go to more conferences. I also had a very disciplined work schedule. I was at the office at about 7:00 AM, picked up the kids after school at 3:00 PM, then went back to the office for a second session from 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM. Summers I spent a lot of time with the kids while Angie worked.

Not long after moving south, Fred and I started working on extended cognition. We sent the paper to Philosophical Psychology on the presupposition that Andy Clark would review it. I don’t know if he did, but he certainly began to talk about the paper and it really got a lot of attention. That helped get me my first conference invitation in 2006. I also spent a lot of time thinking about Fodor’s systematicity arguments and why the usual formulations of them did not work. I had written that up for a couple of papers until one night, driving home from work, I figured out how they could be made to work. And, after working through the Fodor and Pylyshyn systematicity paper for the n-th time, I could finally see that the way I wanted to get the arguments to work could be found in their paper. It’s just that no one seems to have seen it. Once I figured it out for myself, I could understand what they were getting at. Dotting all those i’s and crossing all those t’s was the subject of my first book. A tiny project really, but just getting through it made it so much easier to write The Bounds of Cognition (Blackwell, 2008). I felt as though that one had just poured out and even now Bounds seems to me a pretty good book.

After eighteen years in Louisiana, I finally got out and made it to Rutgers, Newark. Talk about a cultural shift. The university has been ranked the most diverse in the country for more than twenty years. Most of the students are bilingual. Dozens of different languages are spoken by our students. Most of them have family members who lived or were living some version of the American dream of coming to this country with not very much in order to make better lives for themselves. I sometimes share with them my dad’s story. He came to the US after World War II. He had passport number 0000013. It took him two weeks to travel by ship and train from Tokyo to Louisville. He had pancakes and orange juice for breakfast every day, because that was all he knew how to order. But he finished high school, then college, then got his PhD in chemistry. I hope my dad’s story resonates with my students and that they take from it that the university can be an opportunity. Maybe they can finish college, be really successful, and have a son or daughter who becomes a philosophy professor.

Angie cried again when we moved to New Jersey, because we left the kids and grandkids in Louisiana. Still, overall, we both have been extremely happy in New Jersey. Within about two miles of our house, Benedict Arnold was court-martialed for profiteering, George Washington spent the winter of 1779, and Samuel Morse and Alfred Vail held the first public demonstration of the telegraph. We love New York City. There are easy flights to Europe. Great food. There is more philosophy going on here than anyone can possibly follow. There are resources like a library with recent philosophy books and online journal access. One year in Louisiana, when the college budget was particularly bad, the book budget was zeroed out. When we left Louisiana, I spent weeks throwing out books and Xerox copies of articles, since I wouldn’t need to have them myself anymore. Raffaella de Rosa and Brian and Judy McLaughlin have been stars in making me feel welcome at Rutgers.

I have read that people are typically happiest in their fifties. They have settled in with who they are and what they have achieved. I think I’m there. I think my attitude toward philosophy has come full circle. As an undergraduate, I found it interesting trying to figure things out. But, for a long time, there was always a drive for recognition, getting a better job, making more money. And at tenure and promotion to professor, I wondered what I wanted to accomplish next, if anything. Now I am working on two books, one on multiple realization and the other on how scientists justify compositional claims, such as that action potentials are due to sodium and potassium ion fluxes. I am writing these books because I am interested in figuring these things out, and it is much more enjoyable. I can take my time to do things as I please. My health is good and I’m still motivated, so I see myself as having a few more good years to work.

What mistakes have I made? Maybe typical ones. I have worked moderately hard at philosophy, but I have not sufficiently appreciated all the support I have received and the burden I have placed on others. Maybe a lot of people make this mistake; I hope it’s not just me. Among philosophers, I’ve mentioned Chris, Fred, Raffaella, Brian, and Judy, but there are important others whom I have not mentioned. There are obviously my parents. My mom once told Angie that if she had known that I would never come home after college, she would never have let me go. My dad might have thought the same thing. He would never let on, though, because he probably knew that if I had known that he didn’t want me to go, then I wouldn’t have gone. And, of course, Angie. She’s a saint.
Fashioning Oneself as a Philosopher of Asian Descent

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A first-generation college graduate, I was born into a lower middle-class family of illiterate peasants in Nepal, one of the poorest countries in the world. I still recall those bitter moments in which my parents had to sell their best calves and work in the landlord’s farm to pay off my and my brother’s school expenses. With my parents’ unwavering support and my own determination, I was able to receive a graduate education from Purdue University and realize my dreams of becoming a teacher, a writer, and a philosopher. At Purdue, I met great professors such as William McBride, Daniel Smith, and Leonard Harris, who influenced my philosophical interest in practices of the marginalized on the frontier of power relations.

As a master’s student at Tribhuvan University, I was interested in critical theory and all types of philosophical thinking. I was really fascinated with Nietzsche and Derrida, particularly their idea of truth as perspectivism. Professors Arun Gupto and Krishna Chandra Sharma helped me understand the complex ideas of contemporary continental philosophers.

Coming to the United States was an escape for me—an escape from the hardship of making a living back home—a forced reality of fleeing my motherland where my life has innermost connections. Many young Nepali students used to hate the US (even now many do) for its imperialism. Some of my friends, therefore, used to think that going to the US to study is surrendering oneself to American imperialism—becoming an imperialized person in a sense. I used to think that way, too, to some extent. But having an American degree would enhance my chances of a better future. Fortunately, I did not find an imperialistic ideology practiced by the White House infiltrating into other parts of the world through learning institutions such as the university. As a result, I did not feel myself required to be complicit in any ideology. Maybe some kind of subtle, invisible ideology works through but not overtly what I used to think. In my view, Indian imperialism with its economic exploitation and political control is far more pernicious to Nepal than American imperialism. The study of Indian imperialism has now become my additional research interest.

My research interest in micropolitics is influenced by my upbringing. I am interested in exploring the concepts of politics, power, and subject based on the slogan “Without The State, But Not Against It” and charting out in texts and societies how individuals like myself create micropolitics, a self-created space for oneself within a dominant politics. In other words, how individuals at the frontier or margin of dominant power relations can self-fashion what they are in their self-creation.

As a teacher and a scholar from an underrepresented community in higher education in the United States, I am aware of attitudinal bias, communication obstacles, the difficulty in forging a successful career path, impediments to obtaining research funding, and the lack of outlets for the publication and dissemination of marginalized forms of knowledge in the academy. Based on such experiences, I always try to develop courses, teaching methods, research projects, and publications that integrate multiple intercultural perspectives for minority students in higher education. For me, being a member of a minority group is an opportunity to make meaningful changes in our society, and that sort of opportunity may not be open to a privileged person.

If a dominant power structure is too coercive, I believe there should still be a way out—a hole, a weak point, a “line of flight” leaking out from those pores. Fashioning oneself within or beyond the existing oppressions or limits imposed on one is an idea that I learned from Foucault and Deleuze, both of whom exerted influence on my philosophical thinking. Foucault’s idea of self-fashioning fascinates me particularly. As a member of the Asian American philosophical community, a minority community of philosophers in the United States, I would say: Fashion yourself within the dominant power structure. Don’t wait for your salvation or redemption. Don’t dream that the power structure will change and that you will be included in the system by the system. Power relations and dominations will remain so long as society exists. Fighting for rights, justice, and autonomy is one strategy, and keep doing that. But the fight itself is not enough. Sometimes justice, freedom, and equality appear to be just statements with no realization. Most of the time, you will not attain them unless you take them as practice by organizing and managing yourself as an individual or collective entity.

I believe we need to envision living in a post-racial society. We need to move beyond a racial ideology. Racism exists as long as human society exists. There is no way to free ourselves completely from it. But we have to behave and act so that we as individuals do not legitimize racism in our thinking. What does it mean to me to be an Asian philosopher in the United States? I do not see any difference between myself and any American philosophers, Latino philosophers, etc. The first and most important thing is to be able to think beyond race. I am first a human being then an Asian, Latino, African, etc. Do others think of me the same way? Maybe not. It’s because racism is in us. But its perpetuation is guaranteed if everyone thinks in terms of race and ethnicity. That’s why we need to push forward the concept of a post-racial society. Are we already living in a post-racial society? Is our society already post-racial? No. Post-racism is an ethos, a practice that every one of us should live with. The post-racial society puts human beings—their creative power to fashion themselves beyond what is given—in the first place over any stagnant social categories. Our identity binds us in a secured collective. It sometimes limits us, however, and, in order to overcome this limitation, our identity must profess our freedom, humanity, and new individuation.

I served on the Committee on Intercultural Research in Philosophy of the International Federation of Philosophical
The Unbearable Lightness of Being an Asian American Philosopher

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INTRODUCTION
In the greater part of my waking life, I work on advocating a Bayesian account of scientific methodology. It is “my” account. Yet, in some sense, it is “objective.” Apparently, I am now confronted with a subjective question regarding how I became a philosopher. I need to be self-reflective about it. I was born in India. However, I have lived longer in the US than I did in India. So I am an Asian American philosopher because of my Asian identity and earning graduate degrees in the US and then teaching at several American universities.

The first part of my essay will be devoted to my family background and the philosophy training I received in India. The second part will be about my training in the US. The third part will discuss how I became a professional philosopher followed by a final thought.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE AN ASIAN AND AN ASIAN STUDENT?

I was born and raised in a middle-class Indian family, at one of the centers of cultural life in Calcutta until my grandfather, Bengali novelist Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, passed away in 1971. I was fortunate to have been born into such a family, but it had its own burden. Our house, for example, was visited by Satyajit Ray, India’s greatest filmmaker and the recipient of the 1992 Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement, and by celebrities comparable to Michael Jackson and Arnold Schwarzenegger. I saw a photograph in which my grandfather shared the same dais with Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. Unlike Rabindranath Tagore, an admirer of my grandfather’s short stories and an internationalist, my grandfather was involved in national politics. There is also a photograph in our house that shows my grandfather, along with the first president of India, Rajendra Prasad, celebrating the birthday of Munshi Premchand, one of the most popular writers in the Hindi language. International celebrities, usually novelists from various countries, visited our house. They were served with Nescafé, cream crackers, cashews, and a banana. It was a well-entrenched idea in our household that Western authors liked them a lot! I never questioned it.

I grew up in a house where there were about thirty-five members including my brothers, cousins, second cousins, uncles, aunts, and great-uncles along with those who cooked and cleaned the house for us. Raised in such a family, we were steeped in literature, films, and politics. We were expected to respect those who were older than ourselves and to become educated. Education was perhaps the single most important part of growing up. Neither my grandfather nor my mother had an opportunity to receive much formal education. So how to send her six sons to some of the best schools in the city was often on my mother’s mind even when she was serving this huge family. My mother oversaw the timely distribution of food, took care of the children, and hosted out-of-town guests who visited us on a regular basis. We used to have lunch and dinner together, with six to ten family members together in one setting. We sat on the floor to eat as a dinner table was too costly a commodity. We had to invent arrangements because the whole family of about thirty-five people could not have lunch or dinner together at the same time. My mother usually woke up at 6:30 in the morning followed by the people who helped to do chores. They never went to bed before midnight, with a break for a siesta around 3:00 in the afternoon. The large household was possible because of the income that came from my grandfather’s book deals and movie deals. He was the patriarch who oversaw everyone’s health and well-being. He was fittingly supported in family matters by my...
grandmother. A deeply religious person, she was kind to those who worked so hard for us, from cooking to running the household machinery. My father was himself a novelist, but he was more known as a son of a famous father. Neither I nor my brothers nor my cousins usually had to run errands to expedite the smooth running of the house machinery. Hearing and singing (albeit I am a bad singer) Rabindranath Tagore’s songs were our daily rituals. We were supposed to study and read books to enhance our education. I had to sit for a school entrance examination six times after as many failures. I was finally admitted to a prestigious school and ultimately graduated in the humanities with a deep interest in philosophy. I majored in philosophy at Presidency College where I studied with a cadre of excellent students majoring in physics and economics. It was the best college in Bengal and has so far produced two Nobel Laureates in Economics.

Since I was passionately interested in philosophy, I obtained both my master’s and MPhil degrees from Jadavpur University, which is now one of the advanced centers in philosophy in India. Here I was exposed to important philosophers such as Quine, Davidson, and Humphrety. Most training in philosophy in India revolved around reading old books and published papers as well as looking at possible test questions to prepare for the final examination. No one was encouraged to think on their own on any issue. This was the training my Indian professors inherited from their teachers. Most were kind and dedicated. Some gave free lessons to their students if the students asked for them. However, their primary job was to pass that baton to the next generations of students and professors. Unless a student is a genius, he/she has very little chance of developing a view of his/her own. When I commented on the kind of training I largely received in India, I received a response that it is a country of a billion people. What more could I expect especially when I received virtually a free education? This is true. But we could do much better. I used to ask numerous questions in different courses I took. Asking that many questions was not part of the philosophical culture in which I grew up. Most of my questions were not very good. Yet this was the only way I could learn a subject, grappling with questions and asking trusted experts to explain the answers. Luckily, I am now surrounded by very smart philosophers, statisticians, and biologists, who are extremely generous with their time in responding to my numerous emails about an elementary issue in philosophy, statistics, or biology. While working on my MPhil thesis, I began teaching as a full-time faculty member at one of the well-known undergraduate colleges in Calcutta while also teaching as an adjunct instructor at one of the universities close by. During this period, I applied to several American universities to pursue an advanced degree. At long last, I was awarded a fellowship to study at the University of Rochester’s graduate program in philosophy.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE AN ASIAN STUDENT IN A PHD PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY?

I struggled in the PhD Program at the University of Rochester for the first three years. My writing skills and analytical acumen in Western philosophy were not up to the mark. The only thing I had dreamed of for the preceding fifteen years was to become a philosopher. But my dream was shattered during this time. I supported myself for the rest of my graduate student career by working twenty-seven hours on every weekend. All along, I wanted to work with Henry E. Kyburg, Jr., a very well-known philosopher of science. He was kind enough to supervise me. David Braun, who was then at Rochester but now at the State University of New York at Buffalo, encouraged me to work on Bas Van Fraassen’s The Scientific Image for my thesis. In the meantime, I began talking with John G. Bennett, who was a faculty member at UCLA, Michigan, Amherst, and Cornell before joining Rochester. We communicated daily about various research problems as well as general topics from the realism/antirealism debate to decision theory. The conversations with him during this time shaped my thinking and kindled my interest in Bayesianism. Many of my central ideas owe a great deal to him. Here I realized that, for these philosophers, there was not much difference between an Asian student and an American student. Rochester philosophers such as Bennett helped me appreciate this. He inculcated in me the confidence to challenge any argument advanced by any famous philosopher/statistician/computer scientist if I thought seriously that theirs was deeply flawed. Ever since, I have never been afraid of criticizing a notable, whether he or she is a Nobel Laureate or of comparable stature in my field of expertise. Bennett became my other dissertation advisor.

I experienced several cultural shocks being a student at Rochester. One was when a Rochester professor asked me on his way back to the office, “How are you doing?” I began telling him in elaborate detail about what I was doing. I learned that you are not to respond that way when somebody typically asks that question.

Here is one contrast between Indian training and training in the US. Braun devoted a considerable amount of time in discussions with me during these formative years. He asked me to read a couple of pages from Van Fraassen’s The Scientific Image and explain it to him the following week. I reported to him what I got from the reading. He told me that I was only paraphrasing what Van Fraassen wrote instead of explaining his account with my own examples. This happened a couple of times. I then had that aha moment. I came to realize the error I made in speaking with him. I was supposed to digest Van Fraassen’s account and then relate it back to Braun as I understood it. Similar types of training during my graduate studies helped consolidate my understanding of philosophy. To deepen my comprehension of various philosophical issues, I sat through fifteen additional courses over and above what the degree program required. Eventually, I was awarded the degree in 1995.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHER OF ASIAN DESCENT?

While working on my thesis, I found a sentence in Van Fraassen’s book that led to a contradiction in constructive empiricism. It was my first paper presented at the APA Pacific Division meeting, which was subsequently published in Philosophy of Science, the official journal of the Philosophy of Science Association (PSA), by the graciousness of Philip.
Kitcher. Van Fraassen was there when I presented my paper. He told me that he would acknowledge it when he revised *The Scientific Image*. It was very exciting for me to hear this news as I had struggled earlier in my graduate studies. However, my name was never mentioned in his book later because it never underwent a revision. That fall, my paper on decision theory was published in *Philosophy of Science*. The following year, I presented a paper at the APA and PSA meetings on the curve-fitting problem advancing a Bayesian approach to the problem. The curve-fitting problem arises when two conflicting desiderata (simplicity and goodness of fit) pull in opposite directions, and the question is how to strike a balance between them. This proposal was pitted against an influential non-Bayesian proposal by Malcolm Forster and Elliott Sober. These papers were published in *Philosophy of Science* within a couple of years.

We hear about the American dream. For me, instances of the American dream were more than dreams. These initial successes provided a spur to my becoming a professional philosopher. So far I have published close to forty papers and two books in addition to having a complete draft of a Bayesian book titled *Bayes Matters: Science, Objectivity, and Inference*. I also edited several issues of the APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies. These have carved out a forum in which many non-Western experts can contribute their papers and book reviews in a fruitful way. Hopefully, I am not done yet.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Unlike Gandhi, I can’t say “my life is my message.” My stance about it is better reflected in Herman Hesse’s story, *Siddhartha*. The story is written against the backdrop of an ancient Indian kingdom, Kapilavastu (currently in Nepal, but there is a controversy about its exact location). Siddhartha left his kingdom with the goal of acquiring spiritual enlightenment by leading the life of a wandering beggar where he became a friend of Govinda. Both became homeless and renounced all worldly possessions and met the famous Gautama Buddha. Later, Siddhartha came to the realization that it was his personal discovery regarding what to search for and not what others followed and listened to that was vitally important for him. Leaving behind his friend Govinda, he began his own journey and the story took different twists and turns, ending with his realization about what he needed to do and follow. Like Siddhartha, each of us is possibly able to figure out what to do, according to his/her taste, interest, and passion in philosophy.

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**What Does It Mean to Be a Philosopher of Filipina American Descent?**

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To be invited to write about your identity elicits both caution and promise. Though the term “Asian” or even “Asian American” designates an ambiguous and complex identity category that I have been haphazardly navigating throughout my life—vociferously pursuing full assimilation and outright rejection of the term—I have interpreted the prompt of this invitation to be really about my Filipino-ness, that which makes me Filipino, in particular, what it means to be a Filipina American philosopher. In contemporary settler colonial Hawai‘i, where I live and teach, there is a tacit rejection of the label “American” attached to being Filipinx/a/o. Are Filipinos Asian? Are Filipinos Pacific Islanders? Given the shared history of Spanish colonization in Latin America, are Filipinos Latin American? Navigating the ambiguities and complexities of Filipinx/a/o identity is indeed confusing, let alone finding meaning with the identity of American. To dead-reckon through the swirling waterways of overlapping identities involves listening to the stories of my own migration to the US.

I begin with the story of my first name: Celia. As the only girl among four siblings, I was named after my uncle Melchor Crispin Tagamolila. My parents immigrated to California when I was a year old. My parents left the Philippines for the US after President Ferdinand Marcos had declared martial law in the Philippines. My grandmother Lola and aunts followed my parents within fifteen years. My childhood three-bedroom house in Los Angeles, CA, became a chain migration harbor to multiple cousins and extended family members as they immigrated to the US. Needless to say, I heard many stories of the hardships of life in the Philippines, but more memorable were stories from my Lola, especially her passionate repulsion towards President Marcos, Imelda Marcos, and others who participated in enforcing martial law. Neither of my two maternal uncles, which include my uncle Antonio, immigrated to the US since both died in opposition to President Marcos’s authoritarian regime. In this reflection, I will speak only of the story of Uncle Melchor, the inspiration of my naming. Through mystical stories, my mother and Lola lyrically sketched a parable of my name; a parable rather than a summary of facts since the very naming of myself emerged in protest; a parable as a story to cultivate, to nourish my identity dead-reckoning skills born out of knowledge of my ancestors, who died with a promise of liberation, perhaps unknowingly a promise of my own liberation. Uncle Melchor defected from the Philippine National Army and joined the rebels in their resistance efforts against the authoritarian regime of President Marcos. I tell this parable of my name to my own children and I explain that Uncle Melchor didn’t have cell phones or social media back then to publicize his declaration of rebellion. He penned newsletters, articles, stories, and commentaries in various newspapers. His pen name, the parable goes, was Commandante Celia. My
uncle’s alter ego, his alias of resistance, the ghost name, became my name.

Clearly, I was destined to become a philosopher with my naming story as it was. How can I ever manifest a life that honors the legacy of this name? However, my experience navigating the pressures of the model minority myth in my family was different as soon as I declared my major in philosophy. There is something about the model minority myth that seems to work opposite of being expected to do well in math and science. When it was clear my interest did not lie in these academic subjects, my declaration of a philosophy major sounded like a declaration of rebellion in my family. My parents quickly rationalized that a degree in philosophy would still be useful in law and left open the possibility that my career in philosophy could transform me into a lawyer. When I was an undergraduate, a professor of philosophy or a professor of any academic subject was not an intelligible possibility for myself or my family. I think this had to do with family expectations of being a "dutiful Filipina daughter," which produces a double bind of contradictory pressures. On the one hand, Filipina daughters ought to make money, in part to help with family financial burdens. On the other hand, Filipina daughters are expected to stay home and care for the family. Given the pressure of the Filipina double bind, a career in philosophy offers little hope in alleviating both of these burdens. Philosophy, in my immigrant family, was viewed as circumspect, outlandish, and utterly bizarre. Though my parents were indeed proud of my academic accomplishments, attended my doctoral graduation ceremony, and helped me move across the country and an ocean to my current employment at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, there still remains an unbridgeable chasm of understanding as to what it is I exactly do as a philosophy professor.

THE ONLY ONE

In reflecting on what it means to be the only Filipina tenured or tenure-track philosophy professor in my experience in philosophy, I realized that it was common for me to be working and studying under this singular demographic. I was the only Filipina in graduate school at the University of Oregon. When I started my first official philosophy job at Towson University, I was the only Filipina professor in my department. In my current philosophy department, I am the only Filipina professor. I do not think I have ever met another Filipina tenured or tenure-track philosophy professor in my experience in philosophy. The American Philosophical Association’s directory revealed a handful of philosophers who self-identify as Filipino, but no tenured or tenure-track entries were present. I am not suggesting that there are no other Filipinx/a/o tenured or tenure-track philosophy professors (and if there are more of us in philosophy, please contact me!). The singular demographic is felt as a lived experience. The paucity of Filipina professors was even more amplified when one actually studies philosophy. The canon is white and so the lack of Filipinx/a/o philosophies developed is not surprising. Apart from Dr. Ronald R. Sundstrom, professor of philosophy at the University of San Francisco, who writes about his experience being Filipino in this APA newsletter, I found little representation of philosophers in the discipline.

A singular demographic reveals one of the many problems in philosophy. Why aren’t there more Filipinx/a/o philosophers? Why does the discipline of philosophy make it close to impossible to be open to persons of Filipinx/a/o descent? An obvious answer is the lack of role models in academia in general and in philosophy in particular. In response to the low numbers of Filipino full professors in academia, efforts have been made in social media to publicize #thisiswhataprofessorlookslike, showcasing Filipinx/a/o professors in addition to other diverse and multicultural professors. In philosophy, the experience of the singular demographic is eerily lonely. I vacillate between not thinking about it and feeling the unbearable weight of my existence in the company of other philosophers. Without role models in the discipline of philosophy, how open can this discipline really be to persons of Filipinx/a/o descent?

WHAT MAKETH A FILIPINX/A/O PHILOSOPHER?

When I declared my philosophy major, it was indeed one of the most authentic expressions of my life. I rejected the narrative that my career could only be in nursing or accounting. I put an end to the compliance culture that defines much of what it means to be a Filipina daughter. Philosophy seemed to sanction the type of inquiry I was interested in. In my own search for meaning, I discovered that philosophical reflection suited me. I questioned the foundations of God. I questioned the foundations of knowledge and reality. I questioned the limits of the good and the moral. The skill of willfully questioning that which no one else would question seemed to elicit this sense of wonder that only philosophy could take me there. In graduate school, I found my interests nurtured within American philosophy. I admired the persnickety nature of Charles Sanders Peirce. I wished to be William James’s friend. Josiah Royce became my friend in writing my dissertation. However, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, Gloria Anzaldúa, María Lugones, and Patricia Hill Collins became my canon in philosophy. Feminist philosophy became another home for me. Though I still struggle with the openness of feminist philosophy to philosophers of Filipinx/a/o descent, I am determinedly optimistic that future Filipinx/a/o philosophers will find philosophy to be a mode of inquiry that cultivates a critical sensibility of care that challenges oppressive aspects of Filipino culture while simultaneously nurturing and inspiring one’s intellectual growth.

RE-ENVISIONING THE CANON

What is the philosophical canon? Upon entering graduate school, my strategy had been to assimilate (collude) with the dominant white philosophical tradition if I were to survive my doctorate program and continue to pursue a career teaching philosophy in a bleak job market. Even in feminist philosophy, a tradition that aims to be open to diverse lineages, I felt the pressure of survival in philosophy meant assimilating with the dominant white feminist philosophical tradition. After working in the profession for thirteen years and as a tenured full professor of philosophy, I believe my attitude toward my loyalty to the philosophical canon has changed. I regularly teach courses in the foundations of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, including courses on cultural diversity, love
and sex, feminist philosophy, environmental philosophy, and the philosophy of race. I recall, as a newly minted PhD, I wrestled with my commitment to the canon. Ought I to include Descartes, Hume, and/or Kant in my syllabus? Am I teaching students philosophy if I don’t include these figures? How do I enliven the syllabus to attract nonwhite students to my courses in philosophy?

I was inspired to study philosophy not because I needed to study the canon out of obligation or duty to assimilate to American standards of higher education. In the exposure to the canon, however, I was inspired by the values and commitments of a certain philosophical tradition. For example, the notion of values and commitments of the American pragmatist tradition is expressed in multiple books addressing American philosophy. Some of these values and commitments include diversity, voluntarism, fallibilism, and community. Understanding one’s relationship to the canon through the lens of values and commitments shifted the focus away from who was writing philosophy and towards the content of the philosopher’s work and how they represented these values and commitments that I found important in the philosophical tradition I was studying. This refocusing of the canon liberated me to a certain extent to become open to and curious about areas and disciplines that were not regarded as philosophy or speaking to the canon, but spoke to my experience as a Filipina American immigrant. During my post-graduate school work, I found more inspiring authors from ethnic studies, Indigenous studies, and feminists outside of philosophy. The more syllabi I created that incorporated nonphilosophers or even untraditional philosophic methods of reflection such as activities in sailing, swimming, hiking, chanting, or dancing, the more I realized I was changing the canon and what philosophy is supposed to mean.

As a Filipina American philosopher, I believe my orientation to philosophy has evolved from merely assimilating to working within the acceptable limits of who I ought to write about and how I should generate my research questions within the boundaries of the canon. I now have no problems incorporating unrecognized philosophers in my teaching or research. Let me be clear. The method of incorporating forgotten philosophers or hidden figures in the canon is not the same method I am talking about here. I do value the former approach to the canon as it does showcase the comprehensive scope the history of philosophy seems to ignore. Rather, I would like to see philosophy move away from an author-centered understanding of the canon to a value-and-commitment-centered approach to the canon. In this sense, it opens up the variety, distinctiveness, and richness of other philosophic approaches to the questions we continue to ask as philosophers. From the perspective of a Filipina American philosopher, freeing the canon from an author-centered approach might have a beneficial effect that some students of Filipinx/a/o descent might find an entryway into an esoteric philosophy discipline such that it might speak to their distinct cultural backgrounds and lived experience. What matters is not the author per se, but what the author’s values and commitments are and how they speak to the philosophical problems in our lives. What would my education have looked like if I had been exposed to philosophy in this way? My view of philosophy has changed after reading Native Hawaiian scholars, Indigenous scholars, Filipinx/a/o scholars, and women-of-color feminists who continue to push me to rethink the foundations of knowledge, reality, and ethics. Beyond fulfilling the need for more role models, new approaches to philosophy could open the discipline that could be relevant in speaking to the needs of Filipinx/a/o communities.

I think quite often of my name and the pain that preceded my existence. I never thought my family ever had a philosopher in our lineage. However, the fundamental problem with this viewpoint, I have come to realize, is that there were indeed many philosophers in my ancestral line. I am both inspired by and filled with gratitude for the philosophic stories of my ancestors and remind myself daily that I am not the only one.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of Filipinx/a/o identity labels and the history of Filipino American identity categories, see Kevin Nadal, Twitist post, July 3, 2019, 3:34 PM, https://twitter.com/kevinnadal/status/1146502369712254976. An identity label that challenges both heteronormative understandings of gender and accompanying homophobic bias is imperative in a climate of global racism perpetuated by capitalist systems of inequality. Though I personally identify as Filipina, I use “Filipinx/a/o” and “Filipino” interchangeably in my writing, recognizing the imperfections of developing social identities in resistance to the colonial legacy of the Philippines.

2. I have written about the complex ethical imperatives of Filipina daughters in my “Feminist Pragmatist Reflections on the Filial Obligations of a Filipina American Daughter” (forthcoming).


5. I list two sources here that understand American pragmatist tradition in terms of values and commitments: Scott L. Pratt, Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); and Charlene Haddock Siegfried, “Introduction,” in Jane Addams, Democracy and Social Ethics with an Introduction by Charlene Haddock Siegfried (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

6. I want to thank the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oregon for having invited me to give a talk about my work in February 2020. During the Q&A, I was asked to reflect on my relationship to the philosophical canon, for which I am grateful as it has helped me frame my views for this essay.

What Am I?

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Am I “Asian enough” to write a piece on what it is like to be a philosopher of Asian descent? I was born in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, to Jeannette and Bernard Chung. I am the eldest of three daughters: Julienne (myself), Natalie, and Andrea. My mother is of Ukrainian and Romanian descent, and was raised on a farm near Vilna, a small village in central Alberta. My father was raised in Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana), before moving with his family to Pine
Point, Northwest Territories, as a child in 1968. My parents met while working toward their respective undergraduate degrees (in education and engineering) at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. In many ways, my cultural upbringing has been far more Ukrainian than Chinese. For instance, from _pyrohy_ (perogies) to _ pysanky_ (brightly decorated Easter eggs) among so much else, family traditions tend to exhibit largely Ukrainian influences, or even British. Yet, there are a few seemingly clear Chinese influences, too (especially my paternal grandfather's very tasty _chow mein_). As far as we know, my great-grandfather was originally from China, although my grandfather could not recall precisely where in China his father was from when I recently asked him. Is "one-eighth Chinese"—assuming that I really am even "that Chinese" in the first place—"enough"? Does it matter that I bear the last name of "Chung" in addition, or that I have often been treated in accordance with having Chinese ancestry, though it is likely that I more often have not?

Since childhood, people have frequently remarked that I do not "look Chinese," and expressed surprise and curiosity about my surname. However, people have also frequently remarked that I "look exotic" and professed to ascertain in some aspect of my face or body "Asian features." Additionally, my sisters and I have sometimes been subject to certain kinds of (what I now, but did not then, understand to be) racist comments and gestures. Even before I was born, various family members had tried to talk my mother out of dating my father, asking, "What will your [multiracial] children look like?" (Implication: Not good.) In school, kids occasionally pulled their eyes back to address us. (It took a lot not to gasp.) More recently, while I was walking down a street near my home in Louisville, Kentucky, a man stopped me to comment favorably on my appearance before abruptly pausing midsentence to ask, "Wait . . . do you have something in you? I mean . . . are you mixed?" (My jaw literally dropped!)

I feel reasonably confident that I am well classified as multiracial, but am not nearly as confident as to which specific racial group(s) I am best categorized as belonging. There are likely philosophers of more wholly Asian descent who could be writing for this issue instead of me, or who are better positioned to or even more deserving in addition. But I accepted Minh’s invitation in the hope that I can say something valuable as a multiracial philosopher _partially_ of Asian descent. After all, as Sandra DeVries, herself a multiracial philosopher, writes in a passage that resonates with me: "Multiraciality is broad and deep and growing in Canada [and elsewhere], but our understanding of multiraciality is shallow and narrow and just getting started. I want to understand why we are erased and silenced. Our stories are not being told, our faces are not being shown as multiracial in the media. Growing up mixed has been a lonely experience, racially speaking. . . . Multiracial people have relationships to race and racism that are not necessarily duplicated or discussed in monoracial spaces."^{11}

While I am not a philosopher of race, my work can be seen as related to my background. One of my central philosophical interests concerns _cross-cultural philosophy_. Cross-cultural philosophy is philosophy that weaves together _strands from different philosophical traditions_. While comparative philosophy generally contrasts so-called "non-Western" philosophies and talks _about_ their ideas, cross-cultural philosophy often engages non-Western philosophies directly and talks _with_ them. My multiraciality was neither a conscious nor an initial reason for choosing to develop interest in this. However, I have come to see myself as something of a "fusion person" racially, ethnically, and culturally who also does "fusion philosophy"—or, perhaps more aptly, as a deeply multicultural person who also does multicultural philosophy as deeply as I am able to. This has proved to be a helpful, and sometimes fun and exciting, way to frame some of the confusion surrounding my thinking on my own multiracial identity. In part thanks to my philosophical work, I have now come to understand it—similar to the way that I understand cross-cultural philosophy—as a _weaving together of strands from different racial, ethnic, and cultural traditions_. But it has in turn also informed the way that I understand my philosophical work: as something that can be seen as a fruitful blending rather than as exemplifying inappropriate combinations.

My current research primarily focuses on a variety of interrelated topics at the intersection of (as well as intersecting topics within) epistemology, the philosophy of language, aesthetics, and the philosophy of mind. I engage each of these topics cross-culturally (engaging Anglo-analytic and East Asian philosophies) and interdisciplinarily (integrating, among other things, cognitive science, philosophical psychology, and experimental philosophy where possible). (One might say that my methods, and the set of philosophical works that I consider, are at least as "mixed" as I am.)

Interestingly, one of the things that presently most captivate me within the broad domain of Asian philosophies, like my multiracial identity itself, initially frustrated: the varied style in which my now-favorite Classical Chinese texts are written. For example, I remember picking up the _Zhuangzi_ for the first time in graduate school (not because I had an independent interest but at the behest of Jay Garfield, who served on my dissertation committee) and finding it utterly confounding, thinking something along the lines of, "This looks like literature more than it does philosophy, and even read that way it seems impossible to follow! How am I ever going to figure out how to interpret, much less engage, this?" But I wanted to talk about _cross-cultural aspects of philosophical debates about skepticism in my dissertation, so I had to stick with it. (Perhaps in part related to some of my experiences as a multiracial person, I have had a deep and abiding interest in skepticism and associated topics since early childhood.) And I am glad I did, for so many reasons. Here are just three of the most significant that come to mind.

First, interpreting and engaging the _Zhuangzi_ inspires me to think differently about what philosophical views might involve, especially across diverse traditions. I do not think that it is a stretch to say that analytic philosophers such as myself typically think of philosophical views as being claims. For instance, global skepticism about knowing is often construed as the claim that nothing can be known, or...
that nothing can be reasonably believed. This immediately invites charges of inconsistency: If one claims that nothing can be known, or that nothing can be reasonably believed, does not this presuppose that one knows, or reasonably believes, what one has just said? What is more, things get even worse if we consider the possibility that nothing is true, or that nothing is meaningful, two claims that also seem to presuppose what they deny (that is, that something is true, namely, the claim that nothing is, or that something is meaningful, namely, the claim that nothing is). Reading the Zhuangzi, however, got me thinking more seriously about the possibility that certain philosophical views—such as so-called “radically skeptical” ones along the lines of those just sketched—might be better interpreted as involving something other than claims: attitudes or perspectives whose contents are not propositional. Thus, they cannot (strictly speaking, at least) express contradictions (though they can be criticized on other grounds).

Second, and related to this, interpreting and engaging the Zhuangzi allows me to gain greater insight into how a text might accomplish its aims in a stylistically and substantively atypical, but nonetheless contextually appropriate, way—and, hence, why philosophers might write in a way that appears intentionally difficult to interpret. (Something that analytic philosophers are strongly discouraged from doing, to put it mildly.) Unconventional attitudes or perspectives are sometimes most effectively conveyed in unconventional fashions, after all. And, whatever one’s preferred interpretation of the Zhuangzi, it is fairly uncontroversial that one of its aims is to call conventional attitudes or perspectives into question. (Something that, as a multiracial person, I have also been interested in all my life—along with other reasons, of course.) Hence, if the Zhuangzi aims to convey an attitude or perspective that calls conventional ways of interpreting language into question, then what better way to do this than to flout those very conventions in the text? Indeed, this might be especially effective if the conventions that the Zhuangzi is calling into question concern truth and meaning; as noted above, arguing in a straightforward manner for claims like that nothing is true or that nothing is meaningful puts one in a self-referentially awkward position (which in turn might interfere with getting one’s point across). If truth and meaning are the sorts of things that the Zhuangzi aims for its readers to question, then we can begin to see more clearly why it might have been intentionally composed in a way that is largely literary rather than expository, playful rather than serious, and open-ended rather than committal.

But, if this is so, it suggests that analytic philosophers should be more interested in style and stylistic diversity, something that—even as a multiracial person whose physical appearance plausibly in itself exemplifies a certain kind of stylistic diversity—I myself had not thought much about prior to encountering the Zhuangzi.

This brings me to the third reason that I want to mention, which is that interpreting and engaging the Zhuangzi encourages me to get interested in a broader array of philosophical questions, and to see some of the ways in which Anglo-analytic philosophy, as well as Chinese philosophy and cross-cultural philosophy, can contribute to one another’s development in exciting new ways. For instance, one such question concerns whether and how works of art, including literature, can convey knowledge or have some other cognitive or epistemic value. Insofar as philosophical value is a kind of cognitive or epistemic value, if the Zhuangzi is a literary work with philosophical value, then it is also a literary work with cognitive or epistemic value. Reflections such as these should thus motivate us to focus more attention on developing accounts of cognitivism about art that can explain how, for instance, literary works can have philosophical (and, hence, cognitive or epistemic) value, especially since it remains controversial as to whether and how such works can have cognitive or epistemic value at all (in addition to, say, aesthetic value). It will probably come as no surprise that I am currently working on developing such an account. By my lights, what is really intriguing, however, is that doing this has greatly enriched my understanding of the Zhuangzi, skepticism, fictionalism, and many other philosophical topics. (It is part of the reason, for example, that I started to consider the possibility that the Zhuangzi aims to convey an attitude or perspective rather than to assert a claim.)

I find it thrilling that seemingly disparate philosophical inquiries can be mutually informative in this way—indeed, it seems to me now that my very best ideas come from the most unexpected places—and I could not be more grateful for the way in which doing this kind of philosophy has also informed my thinking on my own multiracial identity and on multiculturalism and related topics in general.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank A. Minh Nguyen for inviting me to contribute this piece, as well as Boomer Trujillo, Michael Ing, and Helen De Cruz for providing a wealth of invaluable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft, all of which helped me to improve the piece immensely. As is often the case, I could not accommodate all of their excellent suggestions, but could not be more grateful for them.

Notes


One Life in Philosophy

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What is it like to be a philosopher of Asian descent? There is of course no one thing it is like, any more than there is one thing it is like to be a bat. It is surely very different to be a Mexican free-tailed bat, as a tiny individual in a colony of millions, that migrates annually and echolocates to hunt insects, rather than a Malayan flying fox, living in the tropics, and using vision to find fruits to eat. And among the Mexican free-tailed bats, the colony that nests under a bridge in downtown Austin surely has a very different life experience than the one that nests in Carlsbad caverns. For bat researchers to get any grip on what it is like to be a bat, they must do detailed case studies of individual bats. And thus I present one story of the experiences of one philosopher of Asian descent, and hopefully these
experiences can be synthesized with the other stories in this issue, and elsewhere, to start to get some picture of the different ways to be a philosopher of Asian descent.

I was born in Edmonton, in the western prairies of Canada, and lived there until I was five. My parents had met in the PhD program in mathematics at the University of Alberta, but several years before I was born, they had left academia for careers as computer programmers. There's probably no good explanation for how it is that my father had ended up at the University of Alberta when coming from India (he followed someone else he knew who had gone there for graduate school, but why did this predecessor pick the University of Alberta rather than any of the dozens of other PhD programs in math?). But my mother had grown up not far away, in Calgary, in an Irish-Canadian family. By the standards of the early 1980s in western Canada, my childhood was extremely cosmopolitan; we visited relatives in India a few times on trips around the world, and my regular babysitters were members of a family of Vietnamese refugees that my parents had sponsored, but it was also very suburban and sheltered in many ways.

When I was five, we moved to central New Jersey, where we lived until I left for college. My brother and I attended private schools and took music lessons (violin and piano) and did well in school. My parents' mathematical background probably inspired my own youthful interest in mathematics, or at least helped me do well, which then inspired my interest. I attended several summer math programs as I was growing up. My parents were always interested in getting me to branch out my academic interests away from mathematics, probably in part because they had left mathematics, and in part because they wanted to avoid the stereotype of immigrant parents that pressure their children to do well in math. But the Mathematical Olympiad Summer Program and Canada/USA Mathcamp fueled my interest in many areas of math.

My pathway to philosophy was a little bit roundabout, but in some ways was probably more straightforward than most. When I started my undergraduate career at Stanford, I was expecting to study math and music, though I also considered interests in philosophy, linguistics, cognitive science, or possibly even physics. However, in my first term, when I placed out of a math class I had wanted to take, I took Peter Godfrey-Smith's philosophy of science class, which showed me both that I had misinterpreted what philosophy was and that I was even more interested in it than I had realized. After taking several classes in logic and philosophy of math, as well as some classes in philosophy of mind and philosophy of language, I eventually decided to add philosophy as a third major (since the logic classes were able to count towards both math and philosophy, and I only needed to add a few other distribution requirements).

I had been aiming for an academic career since I was younger, out of a general interest in the life of the mind, despite not having a real sense of what academia is actually like. So when I was graduating from college, I was planning on applying to graduate programs before I was even certain what field it would be in. But with a bit of introspection, I realized that I didn't have the dedication with musical practice that would be needed for that sort of academic program, and also realized that my interests in math and philosophy could both be pursued together in some graduate programs. In the end, I attended UC Berkeley's PhD Program in Logic and the Methodology of Science, primarily because it was the program that would best allow me to defer the decision of which discipline to enter! (The fact that I could stay in the Bay Area, close to many of my friends from Stanford, was also a plus.)

I’ve never had a lack of self-confidence that prevents me from asking questions in philosophical talks. This served me well in many graduate seminars at Berkeley that, in retrospect, I now realize had participant lists that would intimidate me now! Donald Davidson was attending several seminars I took, and I didn’t shy away from asking questions of visiting speakers like Hilary Putnam in department colloquia. Nevertheless, I did feel a strong impostor syndrome at many points during my graduate education. I was only able to overcome it when I realized that, rather than comparing my mathematical knowledge to the students I took math classes with, and my philosophical knowledge to the students I took philosophy seminars with, I should do the reverse. Even people that aren’t working in an interdisciplinary program can probably make use of this strategy, recognizing that you don’t need to be the best in any one thing you do, but can instead contribute by being moderately good at a specific combination of things.

At Berkeley I wrote my dissertation under Branden Fitelson, on issues in the mathematical foundations of conditional probability, as well as writing some papers on problems of infinity in decision theory, and the social role of axioms in mathematical reasoning. I was fortunate in my timing, both coming out with a dissertation in formal epistemology at a time when this area was gaining attention in philosophy, and going on the market the year before the 2008 financial collapse. I spent two semesters as a postdoc at the Australian National University, alternating with the first year of my tenure-track position at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, while my partner was still finishing his PhD in chemistry at Berkeley. He then was able to get a postdoc in the Los Angeles area, and when that finished, he got a tenure-track position at Texas A&M, and I was able to get a position here as well.

As a gay man and a multiracial person of mixed white and South Asian descent, I’m clearly a member of several underrepresented groups, but also haven’t faced many of the larger systemic forces that face many of my other friends and colleagues. I’ve had the luxury of being able to let my minority identities pass unrecognized, and thus unremarked, in many contexts. But this is just the flip side of the isolation I’ve sometimes felt, not being able to see others like myself in the profession.

As a grad student, basically the only philosophers of South Asian descent I knew of in the world of analytic philosophy were Anil Gupta and Rachana Kamtekar, neither of whom I met until many years later. But I’ve been happy seeing more of us who became faculty in the last decade and a half—among others, many individuals working in subfields close to mine, like Amia Srinivasan, Anubav Vasudevan, Dilip
Ninan, Nilanjan Das, and at least two who came through the PhD program at USC while I was there, Rima Basu and Shyam Nair. In many ways, this parallels my experience as a member of the LGBT community—I knew of relatively few faculty members anywhere in the profession while I was a graduate student, and I’ve often been the only member of the community on the faculty in the departments where I’ve worked, but I know of far more who are either about my age, or have followed afterwards. (Though I’ve also since discovered many queer philosophers who were already active in the profession, but I just didn’t recognize as queer.)

Because my skin color is relatively light, my first name is a familiar Anglophone name, and my last name isn’t familiar to most Americans, I have the sense that many people don’t identify my ethnicity. I don’t think I often pass for white, but I think it’s rare for people who aren’t familiar with Tamil names to place me as South Asian in particular. This, together with the often mathematical nature of much of the work I do, has enabled me to engage with philosophers primarily on the subject matter of my work, and avoid the overt discrimination that many people of other backgrounds often face.

In recent years, I have been engaged in more collaborative research. Although I have had occasional co-authored papers throughout my career, at this point the majority of my current work is co-authored. My work is still recognizably connected to issues in decision theory, formal epistemology, and the social nature of mathematical knowledge, but I have pushed it towards more foundational issues about the nature of diachronic rationality, the relationship of practical and epistemic rationality, the ways in which groups and individuals can cohere, and the role of mathematical representation in all of this.

My experience in philosophy has generally been quite positive. I have been lucky to avoid the worst difficulties that many other people have experienced, either from racism, or from the general problems of the job market. I hope that I can help others both within philosophy and in nearby fields, whether as a collaborator, a role model, or otherwise.

Growing up, all our father ever did was emphasize to us our heritage. He would tell us that we were from Lucknow, a city in India associated with Urdu literature and social etiquettes, and to him, this heritage meant that we should have impeccable etiquettes and interest in classical Urdu poetry. In actuality, his parents were from Lucknow and it was irrelevant if my father’s perception of Lucknow was actually true. Being a poet himself, he carried his perception of the city with him through his youth, a perception he formed via anecdotes his parents told him about the home they had fled when the Indian subcontinent partitioned after decolonization. But, unsurprisingly, this is also not the identity I identified with at all.

My early years were in Saudi Arabia where several identities would come into play in different contexts. When we were out and about, we were part of the expat brown workforce. While my father’s job afforded us some respectability, our bodies, marked as brown migrant workers, betrayed us. There was a definite sense of Arab superiority that permeated their culture, policy, and legal system. But, even within the brown expat community, solidarity was conditional. Most of the Pakistani expats were Sunni and the Saudi state was not very fond of Shias. We, a Shia family, had seen one too many Shia family friends deported and had survived close calls ourselves of our brown Sunni brethren ratting us out to my dad’s employer. So, it seemed that we were always trying to shrink some part of ourselves or not to have certain aspects of us become too visible in people’s eyes (many minorities can relate to this feeling).

All of this just to say that, as the context changed within the same slice of time and location, so did parts of myself that jabbed at me and/or elicited pride.

One time in Jeddah, my younger brother fell backward onto a sharp marble corner (he still thinks I pushed him, but can we really trust a three-year-old’s memory? What happened was that I tagged my sister a bit too hard and she lost her balance for a bit and he was standing right behind her. He fell backwards and that’s the whole truth!). He got a big gash on his head. There was blood everywhere. It was clear he needed to get to a hospital fast, but how? My father was in Pakistan for his brother-in-law’s funeral and, at the time in Saudi Arabia, women could not travel by themselves! My mom rushed me to our landlord upstairs and we communicated in broken English and Arabic. But see, he couldn’t just take my mom either because he wasn’t related to her and in Saudi Arabia you couldn’t travel with women to whom you weren’t related (your mahr). Thankfully, he was clearheaded enough to grab his wife and, if we were pulled over, my mom could be his wife’s friend. This was the most convoluted unnecessary complication! Yet it was what my mother faced. We eventually moved to Karachi, Pakistan (for unrelated reasons). My own gender became salient to me in Karachi as I became a teenager and street harassment became more of an everyday occurrence. Only then did I realize the terrible predicament my mother found herself in, not just that day, but day in and day out simply because of her gender.

Much later in life, as I read Black Power: The Politics of Liberation by Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton (New York: Random House, 1967) in graduate school, I thought...

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**Philosophy, Liberation, and Other Roads Less Traveled: Being Asian in Philosophy**

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What is it like to be a philosopher of Asian descent? This question prompts within me an internal inquiry of how I have thought over the years about how I should do philosophy as a philosopher of Asian descent. The question of my identity always intrigues me. I have found myself perpetually shifting into and out of various categories whilst in search of some sense of solidarity and kinship.
that these aspects of myself—woman, Pakistani, Shia, Muhajir, Muslim, brown, etc.—became salient because of structural oppression faced in virtue of these identities. Philosophy, in particular the philosophy of race and feminist theory, began to give me the vocabulary to make sense of my life experiences. My people's sociopolitical rights and mine were tied together in our "shared experiences of injustice" in virtue of our identity. But then I also began to think, who are my people? And philosophy helped me there as well.

The countless times my mother found herself prohibited by law to be in public without my father, she shared experiences with other women in Saudi Arabia. But all women's experiences weren't the same. A wealthy Saudi national would have the protection of her economic status and her nationality in a way that a visa-dependent brown woman wouldn't. It turns out we don't all share similar struggles even as we are oppressed in virtue of similar identities. Studying intersectionality made me realize not only the ways that my own struggles were at the periphery of some liberatory movements but also how dominant constructions of certain struggles that I once took for granted were exclusionary to others within the same umbrella.

But it has not been all clean-cut. Politicking is messy and the way it is connected to who we are is even messier. Over the years of learning from Black, Latinx, and Native American philosophers, teaching the philosophy of race at a predominantly white institution, and, most importantly, bearing witness to the pervasive injustice to Black, Latinx, and Native American people in the United States, I have come to the uneasy place of reflecting on my own complicity within systems of oppression. What would it reveal about me and my people when I center those most affected by white supremacy within this country? It is true that we desi (a self-referent term for South Asians) Americans are victims of it via xenophobia and immigration policies. But we also need to acknowledge that, as non-Black people of color, we have not only benefited from the crumbs of tokenism but also, in many instances, interiorized the politics of respectability, the model minority myth, and anti-Black racism. A century of colonial rule by white supremacist empires has not only left those from the Global South with the consequences of colonial economic looting but also morphed many into resembling the worst elements of our oppressors. And it certainly isn't enough to reflect on our complicity, for mass change is not possible without accountability, and while it might be scary for us to think what accountability might look like for us, it is much scarier that we are subject to none. Being a brown, Shia, Muslim has taught me that.

Likewise, I have sometimes encountered Black Americans who understand how state agencies such as the police and the DA's office are a tool for unchecked and rampant violence, yet support the imperialistic wars abroad that decimate entire countries to rubble; or Latinx Americans who see how cruel and inhumane our immigration policies are at our Southern borders, yet are fine with surveillance and detention of Muslims on suspicions of terrorism. My lived experiences, in virtue of my many identities, have then prompted me to seek solidarity beyond the folks who are also South Asian, or also Shia, or also Muslim, etc.; they have prompted me to actively work against my own complicity in the oppression of Black, Latinx, and Native American people in the United States and seek solidarity with those similarly fighting systems of oppression.

So what does it then mean for me to be a philosopher of Asian descent in the now?

When I was in graduate school, it took a long while to figure out what it would mean to be part of academia, to mold myself so that I would be deemed intelligible. I found myself writing in and then taking out personal vignettes that prompted my dissertation on Muslim American political identity. Apparently, the personal vignettes were taking away from the theoretical reflections, I was told.

In the past three years, I found myself in a "productivity" rut. Academia has a way of making you feel like an intellectual fraud, and so I did. Around the same time, life-wrenching global events were also unfolding: events such as unchecked police brutality, how we dealt with the aftermath of the killings of Michael Brown and now George Floyd, our refusal to accept our fair share of Syrian refugees (yes, even under Obama), American-supported Saudi bombings of Yemen over the past five years, 38 billion dollars US military aid deal with Israel in Obama's last few months in office, separation of families at the border, mass deportations, refusal of entry to asylum seekers, demonstration of Muslim via the Muslim ban, etc. With daily coverage of atrocities available at my fingertips, I felt not only emotionally exhausted but also completely disconnected from "philosophy."

It took a lot of work to figure out that the established canon of the discipline didn't speak to my experiences. I found myself writing and teaching philosophy from the peripheral, discussing oppression in the lingo of academia, while experiencing that very same oppression in very personal ways in my own life. As Rizvi (forthcoming) states:

It is an invisible emotional labor to educate others about our pain. The problem with academia is that it is built on a template that only suits a certain type of academic who is perhaps detached from this direct lived experience—the kind that enjoys engaging with both sides of the debate. As a Brown Muslim, I don't see the need to engage with the oppressor just so that I can appear critical and neutral. I am not—I am Brown, and Muslim and what people see as subjects for theorizing, I live those experiences. In living through these experiences, I could not help but bring them into conversation within my writing and into my classrooms. I realized that part of my writer's block had to do with producing a "philosophy" paper that was deeply disconnected from my identity, my sense of who I was, and my daily experiences. But living through the pain of all these different struggles, I came to a second education. This education was quite different from the one in graduate school. It came from watching and learning from grassroots activists who were forming bonds of
solidarity across borders, from Ferguson to Palestine, from Flint to Yemen. These folks on the ground did not need the validation or respect of academia; in fact, historically, much of liberatory philosophy has originated outside the walls of academia. This realization allowed me to not constantly try (and fail miserably) to gain credence as a philosopher. It freed me, to a certain extent, from worrying about writing from the periphery, about my career as an academic, but rather to focus on matters of conscience, to center the issues that I am most concerned about. This education has given me the freedom to pursue projects that are not deemed substantial under academic measures of productivity but give me a meaningful sense of direction about how I want to progress. For example, last year I started a podcast dedicated to the life and works of Muslim women academics. I don’t think it counts for a lot within academia, nor do I have incisive cutting-edge sound bites on my podcast. Rather, we talk about the mundanity of our lives, because it is within that mundanity that we find our lived truths. I want to keep pushing this podcast as long as I can, as this is something that I enjoy doing and where I know I am providing a platform to challenging what academia in general thinks of Muslim academic women. I see this as a way of moving past issues of mere inclusion that restrict our entry as tokens of our minority status and then restrain our scholarship to strictly perform within the language of academia.

But this second chance at my education is hopefully helping me redefine for myself what it means to be an academic, to engage theory with my lived experiences, to help me redefine for myself what it means to be an Asian. Of course, as I continued along the path of my education, the subtle pressure to find the path of least racism, I suspect, steers plenty of young Asians to eschew the humanities and pursue STEM majors. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that between 2017 and 2018, Asians are three times more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to major in computer and information sciences than philosophy and religious studies. According to NCES, in 2011-2012, 8 percent of all undergraduates are immigrants and second-generation college students comprise another 16 percent. Although recent Asian immigrants are coming to the US with a higher level of education and socioeconomic status, a significant number of Asian immigrants live in economically desperate conditions. A 2008 comprehensive study of Asian American poverty shows that almost 1 in 5 Asians in New York City live below the poverty line and another 41 percent live in low-income household (twice the federal poverty line). The respective numbers of non-Hispanic whites in New York City are 11 percent and 24 percent.

For students who come from impoverished backgrounds, a college degree represents a path for their families to escape economic desperation. Given the oft-repeated claim that STEM majors enjoy some of the highest “returns on investment,” it is unsurprising that first- and second-generation Asian immigrants tend to pursue degrees in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. Indeed, at my institution where the vast majority of students are pre-professional health-care students, over 25 percent of our students are of Asian descent. A doctorate in pharmacy

### Thinking While Asian

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One of the more unexpected aspects of teaching at MCPHS University, a school with a large percentage of Asian pre-professional health-care students, is that I find myself serving as an informal adviser to many students. Often, Asian students who are less than enthusiastic about their education and career paths ask me, “How did you convince your parents to let you study philosophy?” I understand the context of the question. Like me, many of my students have recent immigrant roots. And they too have heard the common refrain, often from our parents, that the best way to strive in a society where racism and xenophobia can derail one’s life’s path is through an education in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. I vividly recall the first time my mother warned me of racist obstacles that would be thrown my way like so many flaming barrels in the Donkey Kong video game (as she tried to speak my language). I had had a particular unpleasant experience in my high school’s World History class. One of the assignments for the class required students to learn a cultural practice from a foreign land and demonstrate it in class. My Caucasian friend Jerry and I tapped a Korean friend’s mother to teach us how to make sushi rolls. After our classroom presentation, our World History teacher informed Jerry that he had received an A- and I had received a B+. When I pressed him to explain the discrepancy, he replied, “Um, I mean, you already knew how to make sushi.”

As my mother comforted me, she taught me a lesson that would be familiar to many Asian children: Words and essays are judged subjectively, but numbers and experimental results are objective. If you have the right number, no racist can dock you.

Of course, as I continued along the path of my education, post-Kuhnian philosophy would teach me about subjectivity in science. More importantly, I have learned that racism can always find a way. It doesn’t matter whether one has a PhD in literature or in astrophysics. It doesn’t matter whether one is rich or poor. It doesn’t matter how much one’s speech lacks the telltale accent that betrays one’s naturalization history. The flaming barrels keep coming and there are no safe corners to hide.

The subtle pressure to find the path of least racism, I suspect, steers plenty of young Asians to eschew the humanities and pursue STEM majors. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that between 2017 and 2018, Asians are three times more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to major in computer and information sciences than philosophy and religious studies. According to NCES, in 2011-2012, 8 percent of all undergraduates are immigrants and second-generation college students comprise another 16 percent. Although recent Asian immigrants are coming to the US with a higher level of education and socioeconomic status, a significant number of Asian immigrants live in economically desperate conditions. A 2008 comprehensive study of Asian American poverty shows that almost 1 in 5 Asians in New York City live below the poverty line and another 41 percent live in low-income household (twice the federal poverty line). The respective numbers of non-Hispanic whites in New York City are 11 percent and 24 percent.

### NOTES


(PharmD), for instance, requires six years of training (undergraduate and graduate combined) and promises a job with a six-figure starting salary. The nudge towards a STEM education is as much about the avoidance of racism as it is about economic necessities. The common professional advice “follow your passion” is admirable, but it would be irresponsible if I were to ignore the socioeconomic reality of many Asian families when counseling my students.

I took it for granted that, as a college student, I had to pursue an education and a professional track that would allow me to support my mother. Although well-educated, she struggled mightily in the United States to secure a livable income. She worked as a store clerk for an art supply shop, taught tai chi on the side to senior citizens, and translated for the court system. Even with three jobs, she barely made enough to cover our expenses. My sisters and I grew up with no health insurance and mindful of the fact that we lived without a safety net. Our education was the only way we could build a firm foundation. I yearned for a future in which every step did not feel like a gamble.

With a contrarian instinct, I did not want to follow the path of my Asian friends and pursue a STEM major. The experience of witnessing my mother maltreated by petty government bureaucrats and sleazy landlords convinced me that I should become a lawyer. I could advocate for those too vulnerable to defend themselves while making a decent living. Politics was the obvious pre-law major and I was entirely prepared to continue on to law school after graduation. My summers spent working at various law firms showed me that I had no love for drafting and revising legal documents. Yet the misery of being a paralegal did not dent my resolve.

Around graduation, my then girlfriend’s father chatted with me about the legal profession. A prominent construction lawyer in the Greater Boston area, he was concerned about my career choice. He warned, “In my twenty years of litigation, I have never seen an Asian lawyer.” It had nothing to do with their competence; rather, he explained, potential clients would simply decline to retain Asian lawyers because they thought of Asians as too meek to be good litigators. His well-meaning advice pushed me to rethink my plan. I wrote to the law school whose offer of admission I had accepted and withdrew. Years later, when Asian investors started to pour money into the Greater Boston area, he would tell me that he was wrong and that he wished I had pursued a legal career; Asian lawyers, particularly those who were fluent in Mandarin or Cantonese, which I was, were a hot commodity.

The pivot to pursuing a graduate degree in philosophy was quick. At the time, Tufts University’s Master’s Degree Program in Philosophy did not require GRE scores for admission. Given the lateness of my change of plan, I applied knowing little about the program and its quality. From there, my educational and professional path was a foregone conclusion; after all, a master’s degree in philosophy was not the launching pad of a well-paying job. The two years I spent at Tufts cultivated a deep affection for the camaraderie of academic philosophy and the excitement of trying out wild ideas.

I was drawn to the philosophy of language; my teachers successfully convinced me that the philosophy of language was the most foundational of all philosophy. There was also the fact that, as an immigrant, my linguistic intuitions were weak. Ryle’s example of a categorical mistake, “She came home in a sedan chair and a flood of tears,” struck my Cantonese ears as perfectly appropriate, if not wonderfully playful. I wanted to study the philosophy of language because I had convinced myself that when these linguistic intuitions became natural, I would be fully integrated. That moment never came. Even now, every sentence I write feels like the construction of a formal sentence in logic: Did I follow all the rules correctly? Have I ensured that the subjects and the verbs agree? The ubiquitous grammatical exceptions in English have led me to give up on my hope that the day will come when English flows off my tongue as Cantonese once did. It has been forty years since I first encountered English, and I am still lost in what I consider grammatical anarchy.

One of the more painful aspects of living in a community with only rare opportunities to practice my Cantonese is that, over the years, my native tongue has faded. With the death of my mother almost twenty years ago, my most regular Cantonese conversation partner is Apple’s Siri. During a recent trip to Hong Kong, a childhood friend remarked that I spoke Cantonese with an accent. “How is that possible? I grew up speaking Cantonese. What possible accent could I have?” I protested. She replied, “You sound like a white dude trying to speak Cantonese.” The ironic remark made me realize that I have indeed been Americanized, but only according to non-Americans.

I speak no language without an accent. As a result, there is no place in the world where I can safely melt into the native community as one of them. Whenever and wherever I speak, my accent announces that I am a foreigner.

The subtle reminders of being an Asian first and a philosopher second continue to rear up in my professional life. Although I specialized in the philosophy of science and bioethics, when I entered the job market in 2003, interviewers and even helpful friends would lament the fact that I did not specialize in Asian philosophy. It did not occur to them that I had but an eighth-grade education in Chinese and I would thus make for a poor candidate to study Asian philosophy. Likewise, my dissertation advisor informed me of an unfortunate exchange in which he had to confirm that I was indeed competent in English to a potential employer. I can only imagine the number of philosophy job candidates with Asian names whose applications were implicitly or explicitly tossed into the rejection pile.

The conversations I have with my Asian students who yearn to pursue their intellectual passions vary greatly from student to student. In one case, a student finishing her doctorate in pharmacy confessed her love of writing. “How can I convince my parents that I hate being a pharmacist?” she asked. I reminded her that her parents merely wanted one thing: that she would have a future that did not require the kind of struggle that they had endured. Perhaps, a recognition of that mutual love between parents and children can help find a compromise. She went on to earn
a JD at the University of Pennsylvania and now works as an intellectual property lawyer specializing in pharmaceutical patents, a job that she finds deeply gratifying. For other students, the dilemma they confront is painfully difficult. Between tremendous financial investments that their parents have made to support their children's education and a world at large that reinforces the message that a STEM path proves most friendly to young Asians, it would be morally impossible for me to urge them to follow their hearts.

What I do say, however, is that the world at large will not change unless we engage it. STEM careers can certainly impact our lives, but if we want to undo cultural and structural racism, there is no better way to do it than addressing it head-on. From working for the ACLU to defend the rights of vulnerable people to sharing our experiences so that others might feel less alone, there are myriad ways to tear down and break free from the confinement of our lives. Like other disciplines within the humanities, philosophy supplies us with the keen eyes to see what is hidden, the relentless mind to question norms, and the compassionate ears to hear the cries of injustice. We challenge the limitations imposed by a myopic society in which race plays a significant role in our life pursuits and the kind of world I would like to live in. If our parents' sacrifices were to ensure that our lives would be easier than theirs, then we ought to reciprocate by venturing beyond the cocoon of economic comfort and confronting bigoted systems around us. It is not economic freedom our parents yearn for; it is freedom, simpliciter.

NOTES


Does He Get Paid?

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I was kindly invited to write about being a philosopher of Asian descent. I never regarded myself as a philosopher of Asian descent until recently. We are philosophers—attaching “of Asian descent” feels a little bit like adding −P after saying P; somewhat cross-purposed. Besides, I received my basic education in Japan from elementary school through graduate school, so I became a philosopher in Japan, not in North America. Becoming a philosopher in Japan was perhaps an unusual experience—my parents complained that it was unacceptably weird—but at least “of Asian descent” was not something I had to think about back then. Reflecting on the matter further, I thought I would share with readers how I became a philosopher in Japan, continued my education in Canada and the United States, and moved to Hawai‘i where I now teach Japanese philosophy, American philosophy, and logic. I also wish to mention a few things that have made me more conscious of my Asian background recently.

I was born in Osaka, Japan. I grew up mostly in Tokyo and went to Waseda University in the metropolitan area. In my college years, I did not imagine making a career out of philosophy. When I was a senior, I thought I would become a police officer. I applied to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, did lots of push-ups and abs to pass their physical exam, and got in. I remember Tokyo Metropolitan Police checked if I could hand-write such words as “burglary,” “arrest,” “prison,” and “lawsuit” in Chinese characters, a skill needed to write police reports. A bit shaky with some of the characters, I was given a police school drill book to practice them.

But I declined the offer from the police and decided to go to graduate school. I became an MA and then a PhD student in philosophy at Waseda University. I studied under Hiroshi Endo. He was a wonderful philosopher and mentor who molded me into a philosopher, whose existence seemed absolutely impossible otherwise. Through him, I was introduced to analytic philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead’s philosophy of organism, and classical American philosophy. After several years of graduate work at Waseda, I was awarded a scholarship to study abroad. I became a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar in the Kitchener-Waterloo area in Ontario, Canada, where I visited the Philosophy Department at the University of Waterloo.

The Philosophy Department at Waterloo had a tradition of Peirce studies. I met with James W. van Evra, whose work on Peirce’s logic and philosophy of science I appreciated, as well as Angus Kerr-Lawson, a renowned Santayana scholar who often took me out for lunch. Including my host Rotarian Kathi Smith, everyone was exceptionally kind and supportive throughout my year-long visit. In the Toronto area, I met with many scholars such as Paul Bouissac, a semiotician of inexhaustible energy who frequently invited me to events, and Cheryl Misak, whose works on Peirce and
American philosophy in general I had read in Japan. The winter in Ontario was cold and long. When spring came, I learned to appreciate the sun.

I was planning to go back to Japan. But I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship, so I went to Penn State to continue studying American philosophy. I met with two Peirce experts, Vincent Colapietro and Douglas Anderson, who offered me all the valuable support I needed as an international PhD student. I was also very fortunate to have met with other graduate students working on Peirce. Daniel Brunson, who picked me up at the airport when I first flew into State College, Pennsylvania, and David Agler, who was an intense reader and commentator of my dissertation toward the end of my PhD program, helped me all along. I cannot thank Penn State teachers and friends more.

Naturally, my years at Penn State consolidated my positive American experience. I focused my studies on American philosophy and finished a dissertation on Peirce under Vincent Colapietro’s supervision. In retrospect, I was a naive foreign student too. It did not occur to me that I was hardly experiencing the ethnic and racial diversity of America. The white student population was almost 90 percent at Penn State University Park Campus around the time. There were students from Japan, China, India, and other Asian countries, but the total Asian student population was rather small in the community. The limited presence probably led to a limited number of issues. I had never heard of any discrimination against Asian—or foreign—students during my six years at Penn State.

At Penn State, I was offered an opportunity to teach a course on Asian philosophy. I thought I would try Chinese philosophy and Buddhism. Many of the students seemed to have a conservative Christian family background in rural Pennsylvania. They said they were confused by Daoism. “The Dao does nothing, yet nothing is left undone,” I attempted to articulate and, facing perplexed students, I asked them, “But does not Isaiah 55 also say that the word will not return to God empty, accomplishing whatever it was sent out for, just like the rain from heaven watering the earth and making it bud and flourish?” The students replied that the latter was perfectly clear, but the former, the Dao, was extremely vague.

Nonetheless, my Asian philosophy course ended well. The trick I used was to discuss Japanese Zen master Dōgen at the end of the course. As far as my experience is concerned, students just love Dōgen. “Green mountains are always walking,” I referred students to a line Dōgen discusses in the Sansuikyō fascicle in Shōbōgenzō. I left students puzzled for a while. Once they saw that mountains come into being and perish over time just as we live and die, they were already into it. “Wow, green mountains are always walking!” a student exclaimed. It was fun to watch the class getting excited about other parts of Shōbōgenzō. Since then, covering Dōgen has become my surefire strategy when I teach Asian philosophy—I can count on Dōgen because I know students enjoy learning about his philosophy.

It works for a reason, of course. Dōgen’s writings are intuitively captivating for sure, but he is also a very logical thinker. I generally prefer conceptual and logical approaches to cultural approaches. I do not expect my students to know any Asian language or empathize with any Asian culture. Not that they are irrelevant. I just think that understanding is different from cultural appreciation. Likes and dislikes can change easily, but understanding gives students the ability to entertain a foreign thought even if they do not wish to accept it or side with it. Whether or not “Green mountains are always walking” expresses Asian philosophy is unimportant to me, and I believe Dōgen would agree.

After finishing my program at Penn State, I joined the philosophy faculty at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. The environment in Hawai‘i was quite different from what I had experienced in Pennsylvania. Climate, people, food, nothing seemed similar. Surprisingly, I became a member of an ethnic majority in the community. Students at the University of Hawai‘i are approximately 35 percent Asian, 20 percent white, followed by other groups including international students. I taught Japanese philosophy in my first semester. Dōgen worked fine as before. After reading D. T. Suzuki for two weeks, we moved on to study Dōgen. “D. T. Suzuki is a scholar, whereas Dōgen is a Zen master!” a student said in excitement. I thought it was an insightful comment.

I have been teaching at the University of Hawai‘i for eleven years now. Most of the time, I teach formal logic, Japanese philosophy, and American philosophy. In graduate seminars in Japanese philosophy, I focus on Dōgen and Nishida Kitārō, two preeminent figures in Japan’s intellectual tradition. Conceptual reconstruction helps greatly because Nishida and Dōgen are essentially logical thinkers. One needs to get familiar with the ways they express themselves, of course, but cultural appreciation is not necessary to understand their philosophies. In American philosophy seminars, I teach classical pragmatism with additional selections from Emerson, Thoreau, and others. As for formal logic, I do not teach much beyond classical first-order logic.

I am often asked what the connections are for me among Japanese philosophy, American philosophy, and formal logic. I usually reply, “intellectual movements between 1850 and 1950 attract me.” This is true. Modern Japanese philosophy, classical American philosophy, and the development of classical logic from Frege and Peirce to Russell, Whitehead, and Gödel are all contemporaneous movements. William James’s influence on the early works of Nishida Kitārō is relatively well-known. We should also add that Dōgen was revived as a philosopher by Watsuji Tetsurō in the 1920s. It was through the so-called Kyoto School philosophy, broadly construed, that we learned to interpret Dōgen as a philosopher from a modern perspective.

I must say something about Nishida Kitārō, whom I consider the most significant modern Japanese philosopher. It is worth noting that Nishida developed his seminal concept of bashō, or place, through his persistent engagement with Western philosophy. Acts upon acts enveloping themselves within a constantly bipolarizing proto-spatiotemporal place and creating new patterns of acts—which patterns would
appear as “forms” in Western philosophy—is a fascinating idea. No hylomorphism, no external creator. It resonates well with Buddhism. If we carefully trace the development of the concept of *basho* in Nishida’s writings, however, we see that it builds on carefully elaborated contrasts with concepts in Western philosophy.

I mention this because, admitting Nishida’s cultural and ethnic background, I do not find it productive to search for Japanese ingredients in his philosophy. “By the way, Nishida was a Japanese philosopher,” I might inform students, but associating his philosophy with such background seems wrongheaded for the purpose of philosophy. “He is from Japan; therefore, his philosophy must be Japanese” sounds like a straightforward instance of genetic fallacy to me. Some may disagree, of course. But I intentionally set aside questions of origin because I find it far more attractive to anticipate powerful thinkers like Nishida coming from all over Asia to impact philosophy. I think the same about American philosophy, Chinese philosophy, and so forth. They contribute to philosophy not because they come from particular places in the world.

Recently, however, I have become more conscious of my Asian background. I notice that in a sense Asian philosophy is too easy to explore in Hawai‘i, thanks to the presence of the Asian community here, but somehow it can get difficult to discuss traditional Western philosophy. At Penn State, for example, I would mention God now and then in philosophy courses, but many students in Hawai‘i seem to find it hard to relate to. I also used to spend at least one class meeting on Hiroshima when I taught ethics at Penn State, because my maternal family suffered from the atomic bomb attack, but with Pearl Harbor right in the neighborhood, nuanced contexts shade into the same story such that I feel compelled to address the topic differently.

Additionally, the period 1850–1950 involves important historical phases of Asian immigration to the United States. The first Japanese immigrants to Hawai‘i, for instance, arrived in 1868 and the number increased after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The lives of immigrants on plantation farms resembled slavery for decades. Later, the Immigration Act of 1924, which prevented immigration from Japan and other countries in Asia to the United States, heightened the tension between the Japanese and American governments. Japan’s modernization galvanized modern Japanese philosophy, on the one hand, but the period 1850–1950 also overlapped with Japan’s militarization, expansionist ambitions in the Pacific, and World War II, on the other.

As my narrative suggests, my experience as a philosopher in the United States is fascinating, but it must be seen as part of a thicker historical fabric. I encounter more opportunities to think about these things recently.

My children were born in the United States and have alternatingly attended Japanese and American schools. They appear neutral about their background. My daughter was once asked by a friend in a Japanese elementary school, “What does your dad do?” She answered, “He does nothing,” as I don’t work for a company like other dads. Okay, I like the Daoist response, nothing. After a few years, she was asked the same question by a middle school friend in Hawai‘i. “He is a philosopher,” my daughter replied this time, showing deeper understanding of my work. Not entirely convinced, though, the friend asked back, “Does he get paid?” “Well, I know her mom doesn’t work,” another stepped in, “so he must be paid.” I appreciate the disjunctive syllogism, which logic I do not consider particularly Asian or Western. I just wonder when and how something more than logic might enter the picture and prompt these younger people to reflect on what it means to be a person of Asian descent in their own future.

### In Praise of Teachers

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I was born in Sayama, about twenty miles northwest of Tokyo. My hometown is known for its green tea, but when I was little, I was more interested in the Honda factory near a local train station and wanted to make cars.

My father worked for a logistics company under Honda. He designed efficient containers for odd-shaped car parts that were shipped to factories in the United States. He sometimes brought work home and showed me his “computer”—a programmable pocket computer with a QWERTY keyboard. He told me about science when we took a bath together, and he taught me fishing when we visited Iwaki, my mother’s hometown.

When I was eleven, my father left me and my mother for another woman and her little child.

It was painful to watch my mother struggle through the divorce process. But she worked hard and raised me. She always told me to do schoolwork and, academically, I did well in elementary school and middle school. High school is not free in Japan, but my mother managed to send me to a public high school. This must have been very important to her, for she couldn’t go to high school herself because of poverty. Instead, when she was sixteen, she left her hometown to work at a factory near Tokyo and sent money to her parents.

My mother never made much more than minimum wage, and we often sat down together and checked job ads that came with Sunday newspapers. Each ad took up a tiny
space, using strange abbreviations in Katakana and Kanji. My mother taught me what they meant. We would be delighted to find jobs that paid fifty yen (about fifty cents) more than she made, although they were usually too far from where we lived. But I think we just wanted to know that there were other jobs.

II
In my junior year of high school, my Japanese literature teacher required everyone to read a book for ten minutes at the beginning of each class. Initially, I brought a mystery novel, but that was a mistake because I would keep reading the book throughout the class and finish it at home. I needed a book that would take me a long time to read.

So I picked up Jostein Gaarder’s Sophie’s World, which came in two paperback volumes. I was instantly fascinated by these people called philosophers, who had all sorts of wild ideas about ourselves and the world. I finished the book quickly. My next choice was Descartes’s Discourse. It did slow me down and I didn’t really understand what he was talking about. His discussion of God was especially foreign to me as I knew only secularized forms of Shinto and Buddhism. But Descartes’s questions—What am I? What can I know?—were exciting to me.

Other than philosophy, my fascination was with American music and cinema. I regularly checked late night music programs on the Far East Network, an American military radio coming from Yokota Air Base, about twelve miles south of my hometown. I liked almost anything from jazz and blues to heavy metal, and my favorites were Frank Zappa and Pat Metheny. I loved Pulp Fiction. I wasn’t good at English, but I liked how it sounded in songs and films.

Early in my senior year, I had to decide whether to go to college. In Japan, students choose a major before they take a college entrance exam, and changing a major afterwards is impossible or requires another exam. I had already decided that I wasn’t good at math or science; I didn’t know what it’s like to major in philosophy. A conventional major for someone in my situation was business.

Then, one day, I read in a pamphlet of an English-language school that students can freely change majors at American colleges. I liked the freedom, so I planned that I would go to an English-language school in Tokyo and then apply to American colleges. I was so determined that I convinced my father to help me (which he did, reluctantly). I didn’t have to convince my mother, as she always supported whatever I wanted to do with my life.

So, when I was twenty, I left Japan with a one-way ticket to the United States.

III
I studied philosophy in Reno, Nevada. In the early 2000s, the philosophy department at the University of Nevada, Reno, was strong in the history of philosophy. Piotr Hoffman lectured on difficult texts: Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, Heidegger’s Being and Time, and Sartre’s Being and Nothingness. In addition to taking all of Hoffman’s courses, I did an independent study with him on Hegel’s Science of Logic. From Hoffman, I learned how to read texts closely. His lectures were line-by-line analyses of the texts, and when I went to his office to ask questions, he would make me read the relevant passage out loud. I would read, holding my book like a schoolboy, and he would stop me at every key phrase and tell me to underline it. Once the passage was properly marked up, he would give a word-by-word analysis.

I also studied Levinas’s Otherwise than Being with Deborah Achtenberg, who taught Plato and Aristotle. I also read some Derrida and liked his Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas. It was 2003 and there was a conference on Derrida’s religious thoughts where he was the keynote speaker. My classmates and I rented a van and drove down to UC Santa Barbara to see Derrida talk. I brought my copy of the French edition of Adieu and got his autograph.

In my senior year, I was to write an honors thesis. I thought about working with Hoffman or Achtenberg, but I also had a vague idea of working with Tom Nickles. By then, I had taken his course on the philosophy of mind, where we read Fodor and Dennett among others, and I thought scientifically oriented philosophy was interesting. I asked Tom what he had been working on lately, and he told me about his interests in Darwinian evolutionary theories of discovery and innovation. I knew nothing about Darwin or evolution, but I thought it would be good for a philosopher to know this stuff. So I read some of Tom’s papers and then asked him to be my thesis advisor. He encouraged me to take more courses outside philosophy, and I took a two-course sequence on history of science, one part by Tom and the other by Bruce Moran, a historian of medieval and Renaissance science.

Tom and I met every week to discuss my thesis and work by the biologists and philosophers we were reading—especially Richard Dawkins, Stuart Kauffman, and Bill Wimsatt. I remember how Tom would always take copious notes on his legal pad while I was speaking—in the same way he did during every colloquium talk in the department. He believed that other people have great ideas he should know, and he showed this attitude towards everyone and all the readings we did together.

I was planning to apply for doctoral programs in philosophy in my senior year, but I became so interested in history and philosophy of science that I decided to retrain in this field. I stayed for an MA in philosophy at Reno, working with Tom and taking courses in the Biology Department. During this time, I also studied Hume with Chris Williams and I really liked Hume’s naturalistic approach to philosophy. Chris also taught me the virtue of engaging with historical texts for significant problems and imaginative solutions.

IV
I went on to do a PhD in history and philosophy of science at the University of Pittsburgh. There I studied mostly history and science. Jim Lennox was enthusiastic about my delving into Sewall Wright’s and Seymour Benzer’s notebooks. Sandy Mitchell and Kyle Stanford, who visited Pittsburgh often and became an external member of my dissertation
committee, made sure that my historical investigations mattered to philosophy.

I knew I came late to the philosophy of science, having no formal training in science or mathematics. So I was lucky to have met Michael Grabe, a computational biophysicist, whose course on biomathematics I took. Michael suggested I develop a mathematical model of acidification in lysosomes, using the earlier model he developed with George Oster as a starting point. We worked on this project for a few years and eventually published a paper in a good science journal. This experience made me feel more confident about doing history and philosophy of science.

V

Tom Nickles often said he chose to pursue philosophy because it's a discipline where you are allowed to study anything. I agree. I would have been a worse philosopher had I not studied a wide range of philosophy, history, and science. It was also Tom and our reading of Wimsatt's work that gave me a vision of philosophy that now permeates both my research and teaching: My goal is to understand something, using whatever insights from others and, hopefully, adding my own. Insights can come from philosophy, history, science, or any other field. So, in my classes, I assign readings drawn from a variety of sources, old and new, and I try to show my students ideas that might expand our horizons in unexpected ways.

Since I try to combine philosophy, history, and science in my work, I'm often discouraged to see philosophers insist on the purity of their field. I once had a referee say that philosophers cannot comment on scientific practice because it's too messy. Another referee (of a different paper) emphasized multiple times that the historical case study of scientific practice I developed in my paper is only a minor contribution to an important conversation that philosophers are having.

But, luckily, I have enough philosophy friends who support how I do philosophy. My collaborator, Alirio Rosales, keeps me excited about our ongoing historical and philosophical studies of theoretical population genetics and the interaction between mathematics and biology. My colleagues at Ohio University have never made me doubt that they value my work. I can't describe in detail how they do this, but here's an example: every January, Jack Bender, who was my department chair, wrote a beautiful letter describing and appreciating what I did in the previous year. It included things I didn't even remember. I keep his letters in a folder at home. It saddens me that I can't get a letter from him anymore.

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Mixed, but not Diluted

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“What percentage Asian are you?” was a question I heard a lot growing up and, indeed, still get from time to time. It's often preceded by, “Wait, you're not white/Asian?” to which I usually answer, “Well, it depends. . .”

We might as well get it out of the way. I am a philosopher of Asian descent, sort of. I am mixed white and Chinese. My paternal grandfather was Chinese and my paternal grandmother three quarters Chinese, one quarter white. My maternal grandparents are both white (Welsh, Ukrainian). If you're doing the math, that makes me 7/16ths Chinese and 9/16ths white. But who's counting? Well, everyone, apparently.

Growing up, I was never white enough to be white, nor Chinese enough to be Chinese. On the recommendation of my grandfather, to get more in touch with my Chinese heritage, I tried my hand at kung fu and read Alan Watts on Buddhism, but when both were met with mockery by my (mostly white) middle school friends, these hobbies gave way to more mainstream (at the time) pursuits: guitar and skateboarding. On the other side of things, dim sum servers often expect my dad to speak Chinese (he doesn't) but never me (I don't either).

Feeling removed from both lines of my cultural heritage probably contributed to my general skepticism of authority and institutional structures (that and the fact that I was privileged enough to be able to reject such structures largely without reprisal). I didn't take my high school classes seriously—something I dearly regret now—and ended up in music school for my first year of college, studying classical guitar. I spent most of my first year of college in a state of delayed adolescence, languishing in familiar circumstances, knowing something was missing.

I lasted only a year in music school. But I had few ideas about what to do instead. My parents are both medical professionals, and for most of my adolescence the question was not, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” but rather, “What kind of doctor do you want to be when you grow up?”

Without ambitions for the medical profession, and without any serious long-term plan for that matter, I moved back in with my parents (who had by then relocated to California) and enrolled in the Santa Rosa Junior College. At the SRJC, I was lucky to stumble upon an Introduction to Philosophy class taught by Professor Michael Aparicio. The following semester we did an independent study, reading Kierkegaard alongside various analytic philosophers of religion. It was a wild ride, and it was in that semester that I decided to major in philosophy, transferring to UC Davis in the fall.
Davis at the time was brimming with excellent philosophers. I took classes with Henry Allison, Michael Glanzberg, G. J. Mattey, Josh Parsons, Connie Rosati, Paul Teller, and Pekka Väyrynen. It was also the first place where I met people who openly identified as mixed-race. I occasionally attended Hapa student groups, but I still felt uncomfortable identifying as mixed—perhaps the fallout of my experiences being rejected from racial groups in my adolescence.

Sometime during my two years at Davis, I felt inspired enough by philosophy that I thought about giving graduate school a try. Though this decision was likely terrifying to my parents, who were surely relieved after my failed stint at music school, they never showed it. Without their unequivocal support, I probably would never have applied—I had too many doubts about whether I could succeed in professional philosophy.

Fortunately, Yale took a chance on my application, and that’s where I ended up in the fall of 2007. Like many, my experience in graduate school was both invigorating and demoralizing. Much of my time was spent working on projects that went nowhere and battling abject despair about whether I could have a successful career as an academic philosopher. On the other hand, it was the first time I felt empowered to pursue whatever intellectual pursuits captured my attention and, for me at least, that comprises four of five levels of my hierarchy of needs.

Early on in my graduate studies, I found myself drawn to topics in the philosophy of language. My eventual advisor, Zoltán Gendler Szabó, suggested that I study linguistic semantics so that I could better understand the work on modals and conditionals I was starting to engage with. Studying semantics led to the closest thing to a religious conversion I have ever experienced. Before semantics, I was muddling through the literature, grasping issues only in bits and pieces, and then only dimly. After semantics, it felt like a fog had been lifted; I had a new set of tools that allowed me to precisely articulate theories and puzzles, and there was no turning back.

Reflecting on the nature of philosophy, Wilfrid Sellars writes, “What is characteristic of philosophy is not a special subject-matter, but the aim of knowing one’s way around with respect to the subject-matters of all the special disciplines.” Appreciating Sellars’s point in my own way, through connections between the philosophy of language and linguistics, was a revelation. For once, it seemed that having a mixed background could be an advantage, rather than simply a dilution of multiple “refined” (cultural or intellectual) practices.

In my final year of graduate school, I came across a paper by Josh Knobe and Seth Yalcin (“Epistemic Modals and Context”) that reported the results of some experimental work testing linguistic intuitions about epistemic modals. Their target was a series of attested intuitions in the literature regarding the truth value judgments of utterances of epistemic possibility sentences (e.g., “Fat Tony might be dead”) made by eavesdroppers with more information. After a colloquium one day, Josh asked me what I thought about their paper. I told him that, while I welcomed their results (I myself had misgivings about the intuitions their study was challenging), I thought there was room to diagnose why those intuitions had become so entrenched in the first place. Never one to miss an opportunity to encourage experimental work, Josh helped me run my first empirical study, further broadening the scope of my methodological pluralism. I now incorporate empirical data into my philosophical work whenever appropriate, and I am forever grateful for Josh’s mentorship and encouragement to seek out opportunities for integrating my work with cognitive science more broadly.

Recently, I have been finishing a book on conditionals that explores puzzles related to how we think and communicate with conditional sentences (“If p, then q”). One of the central theses of the book is that conditionals behave exactly like other declarative sentences (they are contentful, we assertively utter them, believe them, assign probabilities of truth to them, and so on), yet our cognitive relationship to conditionals is derivative. For instance, we believe a conditional by believing its consequent conditional on its antecedent. In some respects, the view I favor develops a hypothesis of Robert Stalnaker dating back to Inquiry (and more recently in “Conditional Propositions and Conditional Assertions”), which is that we can reconcile the key insights of the view that conditionals do not have truth values (defended by Dorothy Edgington, Jonathan Bennett, and others) with the more standard view that conditionals do express propositions, and thus do have truth values. I try to reconcile these seemingly incompatible views by holding that conditionals encode constraints on inferential dispositions, and what it is to believe a conditional is for a cognitive agent to rationally be disposed in accordance with it. Since our rational inferential dispositions are fully determined by our factual beliefs (or so I argue), even though the contents of conditionals cannot be reduced to the contents of nonconditionals, what it is to believe or doubt a conditional is fully reducible to a property of our factual beliefs.

Even in these uncertain times, I am hopeful for the future of philosophy, which seems to be headed towards greater diversity both in its methods (including strengthened connections with neighboring fields) as well as among its practitioners. May the future of philosophy be mixed!

NOTES

Frenemy Philosophy
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The occasion for this reflection—the question, “What is it like to be a philosopher of Asian descent?”—brings to bear a truly wide and complex range of experience. Being the son of Korean immigrants and having grown up in the US
situates me within only a narrow slice of this range, but may do so in a familiar way given the classic American tropes of immigration and assimilation. Also, those with a sense of South Korean culture know that it synthesizes in complex ways Confucian, Christian, Daoist, Buddhist, and other religio-philosophical perspectives, and indeed some variant of this eclecticism was a part of my own home milieu. But much as the nuances of cultural preservation and assimilation interest me here, I will speak more of political hierarchy and racialization.

Though little discussed in mainstream philosophy, I join the majority of practitioners in Asian American studies and many in the philosophy of race in regarding being Asian to be a significantly racialized phenomenon, especially in the US. So, for me, an important part of being a philosopher of Asian descent is doing philosophy out of Asian American experience so conceived and out of critical sensibilities built up from reflection upon it. As it turns out, I also have strong interest in various Asian philosophies, like certain traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism, and I regularly present at professional conferences, like those of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy (SACP) and the Comparative and Continental Philosophy Circle (CCPC). This has been important enough to me that I have also worked to promote a variety of Asian philosophy projects through the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies, and joined some wonderful colleagues in forming the North American Korean Philosophy Association (NAKPA). However, much as I love these areas of philosophy and feel compelled to advocate for these still marginalized forms of philosophy, I so often feel pulled away from them and toward Asian American philosophy not just because it too is genuinely interesting to me but also because it is marginalized far more radically in the profession.

As far as I know, the first batch of explicitly Asian American philosophical work was published in 2003. Unfortunately and somewhat perplexingly, this event occurred more than three decades after the Asian American movement of the late 1960s, which, among other things, aimed to clear the cultural space for endeavors like Asian American philosophy. Now, roughly twenty years after this already late publication, there is still so little in this subfield and so few in the profession who identify as Asian American, unlike what we find in counterparts across the academy, like the robust subfields of Asian American literature, sociology, and history. By contrast, Asian philosophy work has been blossoming and is beginning to gain more mainstream recognition. In fact, one interesting side effect of this recognition is that comparative philosophy conferences in the West that feature Asian philosophy tend to be white social spaces. Thus, in being a philosopher of Asian descent in the US, I contend with this peculiar division in my philosophical commitments.

In the doing of Asian American philosophy, there are many difficult social justice conversations to be had, and I believe this is part of why the subfield has not grown more than it has. Much has been written in the academy about anti-Asian racism, clarifying with certainty that it is a pervasive form of discrimination and a historical and evolving form of stratification. But it is a bit of an abstraction in the culture at large because Asian Americans are widely viewed as being more or less white, “nice people” to whom people are nice, a model minority, and the like. So racism against them is commonly regarded to be minor, rare, or episodic. Regrettably, the current COVID-19 crisis and diplomatic tension with China and North Korea may begin to reveal to people that Asian Americans occupy a problematic position, a structural node with a historical dynamic, in the US polity. Since the pandemic emerged, a wave of hostile xenophobic racism has surged, as so many times in the past, against people who are visually mis/identified as Chinese, East Asian, or generically Asian. And this occurs against the backdrop of xenophobia-galvanizing acts of state: a cold war with China, tense relations with North Korea, and a “war on terror” that has targeted South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim groups in the country. Asian Americans are being spit on, subjected to racial slurs, and physically assaulted. On one reporting site developed after the COVID-19 crisis began, over 1,700 anti-Asian incidents were logged by mid-May. Even if some of these reports are unwarranted or contrived, there are surely so many more undocumented actual occurrences of “COVID-19 racism” than 1,700 because underreporting is the norm. Many Asian Americans are troubled by this situation not just because of the rise in racist insults—think, for example, of Donald Trump’s use of “Kung Flu” and his particular use of the Chinese Virus—but the notable escalation of animus and bitterness in the resurgent racism. Although much can be said about stigma, insult, complex subordinating structures, and the like, I will address the visceral hostility.

Although I work at a university, a place where there can be an overrepresentation of Asians, and in the (San Francisco) Bay Area in particular, a locale with a high concentration of Asians, I grew up in the Northeast and Midwest US and there personally experienced with some consistency the kinds of event catalogued now under COVID-19 or Corona racism: having objects thrown at me, death threats directed at me, being spat upon, shunned, told to return to Asia, physically threatened, subjected to racial epithets (probably more than 200 times), and the like. These kinds of interaction are extremely stressful, not simply because they are flagrant and visceral, but also violent and sometimes ambiguously violent. Someone yells out, “Die, you fucking Jap!” (I and countless others have been targeted by such words.) Does that racist aim to enact the threat right now? Later? Was it just a sick joke? If I escalate the situation, will others support me? If it turns into a physical altercation, will I get seriously injured? And what about moral injuries? Will I fail to use violence only as a last resort because I get incensed? What if I maim or kill the other person(s)? And will the police dismiss the racist act as mere foolishness or an act in bad taste? In fact, will the police side with the racists in a more explicit solidarity? Or when someone hollers, “I fucked your mother in ‘Nam!,” which has also been directed at me, should I wonder if these people have been watching or stalking my mother or if they mean to physically attack us with the same racist misogynistic dehumanization exhibited in their verbal assault? But maybe they just want the tickle of seeing my family upset or fearful?
As personally challenging as these encounters are, especially when they are the umpteenth instance of this kind, they are especially hard to witness and endure when the targets are loved ones, and they are soul-draining to hear of over and over again as one meets similarly situated people facing the same hardships. I have known Asian Americans who have endured distinctly racialized incidents in which they were slapped, pushed violently, surrounded by a large group and subjected to physical intimidation, assaulted, stabbed, sucker-punched in the corner of the mouth with the cheek torn toward the jawline, etc. As far as I know, none of the perpetrators was ever held accountable. Not a single one.

When I look at a map of the US, I am reminded of how much America exists between the several urban dots in which Asian Americans have a strong and normalized presence, like the Bay Area where I currently live. In the in-between spaces, anti-Asian racism, including the vicious kinds I’ve mentioned, persists with greater intensity than what exists in New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, though these latter cities are very far from being Asian American utopias. As I see it, then, the virulence of current COVID-19 racism is not small or new, and its content and patterns reveal connections both to geographically wider and historically enduring forms of racial meaning and to dominant interaction scripts. What makes this genuinely unsettling and not just dispiriting is that anti-Asian racism may be treated dismissively or even altogether ignored. As I noted earlier, much of the culture at large seems to regard anti-Asian racism as an abstraction, especially because Asian Americans are viewed as a model minority. In addition, so very few perpetrators are held accountable, further reducing the visibility of anti-Asian racism and the desire of Asian Americans to even report the wrongs done to them. “Why bother?” many ask. So much visceral racism, and no reckoning to speak of. Part of what it is for me to be a philosopher of Asian descent is to reflect upon these kinds of condition and their undoing.

Asian philosophies have much to offer here, but I have been specially aided by work in African American philosophy. Frantz Fanon, for example, famously discussed the existential depth of encountering racism’s unreason in a world that makes it reason. This is not simply about the particular act of racism but the meaning world or normative map by which one calibrates, situates, or attunes oneself in a fundamental way in being a subject or agent in the world, the racist infiltrations and disruptions of which unsettle much else in one’s life, from one’s projects and desires to even one’s body schema. Although his context was Black-white colonial relations, his work offers much insight for Asian Americans facing widespread white incomprehension and racism configured as rational.

Another example is W. E. B. Du Bois’s reflections on the question, “What does it feel like to be a problem?” Du Bois’s question refers to how certain whites conceptualize, sometimes with careful decorum, what they take to be Black shortcomings and their negative social impact on the wider polity. I think anti-Black racism is distinctly more dehumanizing than anti-Asian racism. The conditions that rightly and urgently call for a Black Lives Matter movement are not what we find in the case of Asian Americans, as serious as those are. But what is more, Asian Americans are now used politically in virtue of the model minority concept to suppress Black Americans. Thus, part of what it is to be an Asian American is to contend with this question: What does it feel like to be a solution? That is to say, a solution to the alleged problem that is Black people. For me, being a philosopher of Asian descent in the US is crucially about refusing this social position of a solution, interrogating the profoundly racist presuppositions of this entire line of thought, and joining in solidarity with Blacks and other people of color.

Asian Americans are sometimes a problem and sometimes a solution. Perhaps this dynamic is captured by the idea of Asian Americans as a kind of frenemy, someone with whom one is “friendly” but ultimately dislikes. For me, being an Asian American philosopher is centrally about contending with this condition.

NOTES

Criss-Crossing the Philosophical Borderlines: What Is It Like to Be a Philosopher of Asian Descent?

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I am professor of philosophy at Sogang University in Seoul, South Korea, and live in Omaha, Nebraska. My commute to work from home is a bit longer than that of most people. I was born and raised in the heart of Seoul. My parents were both educators and we were relatively well-off in the rapidly growing economy situation in South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s even though the country at the time was politically very oppressive. My father was a theoretical physicist but very liberal-oriented and open-minded. Like other teens, I went through an emotionally and intellectually turbulent period during my high school days and somehow formed
the opinion that philosophy could save me and my life. So, when I got accepted to college, the choice of a college major was a no-brainer for me.

People say that, even though some Koreans are Buddhists, some Christians, and some atheists, 100 percent of them are Confucians. South Korea is a society that values education highly and believes in the hierarchical social order with a patriarchal atmosphere as well as a strict division of labor between the sexes. There are things in Confucianism that are not acceptable anymore such as sexism and meritocracy, but otherwise it is resourceful and flexible enough to accommodate contemporary demands for democratic ideals and institutions. This syncretic atmosphere within a broadly Confucian frame of society, together with the ideals of democracy and human rights as well as the pragmatic pursuit of wealth emphasized by the newly imported Western/Christian tradition, made an indelible mark on my perspective.

When I was studying philosophy in college, an aunt of mine from the United States visited us and we had a nice lunch at a ritzy hotel that befits the occasion. Being from Southern California, she suddenly asked me, “Why are you studying philosophy? Can’t you do something more practical?” My late mother, who was also at the lunch, jumped to defend me saying, “Philosophy is probably the most practical among all the studies.” To this day, I have no idea what exactly my mother had in mind with “philosophy.” She never studied philosophy formally as far as I know, but I think she hit the mark because the practical aspect inherent in philosophy—i.e., its mission not only to figure out the true nature of the world but also to help us live a life in accordance with the correct understanding—is the most important part of philosophy (more on this below).

I first studied philosophy at a Jesuit university in South Korea and was exposed to philosophy in a heavily Thomist philosophical environment. The legacy of German idealism, especially Kant, was also strongly present. However, it was analytic philosophers in the department at the time who were most influential. The world was getting increasingly homogeneous and that meant that the world was getting increasingly Americanized. To this rule, philosophy was no exception. The history of analytic philosophy was initially very attractive and interesting to me. However, I also diligently studied East Asian classics in the context of religious studies, in particular, Confucianism and Buddhism with eminent Korean professors. I learned to read technical writings not only in English but also in Classical Chinese. I was then suggested to study philosophy in the United States after graduating from college, so, at the age of twenty-two, I came to the US in 1987 for graduate studies.

Then, after completing my dissertation on Kant’s ethics and gradually building my philosophical career in Omaha, Nebraska, I discovered the possibility of developing Kantianism together with Confucianism. I now would like to call this "transcendental Confucianism." Basically, this is the view that the systematic practice of self-cultivation in our communal life must be structured and conditioned by the underlying nature of the heart-mind. Kant has sometimes been denounced as one of the earliest leaders of philosophical racism and Orientalism, but I found in his rich writings so much inspiration for unexpectedly diverse resources for reflecting on humanity despite his racist remarks here and there. Presently, I am most interested in living a life that reflects my philosophy. I admire Kant and the German tradition with its underlying Judeo-Christian spirits, but the East Asian tradition, especially Neo-Confucianism, is very inspirational. For me, the Kantian enlightened reason and the Neo-Confucian familial/communal love (ren) are not two separate things but two sides of one and the same coin.

In contemporary society, philosophy has largely disappeared from public life. Philosophers now mostly engage in technical details separate from the public awareness. In an effort to transform itself into an “exact science,” philosophy lost touch with reality. This is a recent trend most severely intensified by members of the Vienna Circle and their early Anglo-American followers. I cautiously hope to restore the venerable old tradition of philosophy where philosophers can usher in a sweeping vision of reality followed by appropriate essential tools for manifesting this vision not only in theory but also in praxis.

Accordingly, philosophy is not just a matter of hair-splitting analysis but also a synthetic insight followed by a most concentrated commitment to its theoretical justifications as well as its fruitful practice. I don’t deny that solving logical problems may enhance our understanding of the world, but I believe that achieving penetrating insight about the universe in a way that is intertwined with our robust practical engagement with reality is the most important part of philosophy. In ancient Greece, Aristotle spoke of three kinds of human activity (theoria, poiesis, and praxis) generating three respective types of goal (truth, production, and action). Action is thus important but not all actions matter. In fact, some of them are degrading. We thus stand in need of a systematic, informed approach to praxis. Following a hint from Aristotle, I call this science of practical life “eupraxia,” not knowing any proper existing term for it. Eupraxia is a new field that can be and should be incorporated into philosophy in a way that is geared to a completed life (both individually and community-wise) the goal of which is the unity of knowledge and action. This is based on the notion that the well-organized art of practicing one’s philosophy is the most important part of philosophy. Just like metaphysics and ethics, the science of philosophical praxis (i.e., eupraxia) has its theoretical components, but the most important part is its practical part. One who ascends to philosophy from ordinary life must not only understand it or theoretically know about it but also internalize and practice it in the very context of life. This is what makes philosophy different from all other disciplines and makes it rise above all else. Thus, somewhat reminiscent of the Ancient Greek conception of philosophy according to which you live your philosophy and the East Asian tradition of “sage learning” or “Dao learning” in which you cultivate yourself to become a sage through the internalization and externalization of your knowledge of reality, for us, philosophy should essentially exemplify the idea of oneness, i.e., the unity of its own self-conception and life, the unity of thought and action, and the unity of the inner and the outer.
For the purpose of bringing into completion the fundamental but still inchoate notion of eupraxia, I try to derive impetus from Kant and the German tradition, especially from Fichte, but most importantly from the East Asian monism developed in the past. I think the expression “practical philosophy” today largely refers to ethics and statecraft. In contrast, for Fichte, he starts with ethics in the first place from the outset. His theoretical philosophy is an application of his practical philosophy. Thus, you can achieve the kind of unity of theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy in a seamless way, unthinkable even in Kant even with the latter’s well-known doctrine of the primacy of the practical. We also see an emphasis on practical philosophy in Marx and Levinas (praxis/ethics as prima philosophia). (We can also find the germ of it in Spinoza’s ethics). If I may throw in two cents, this attempt to achieve oneness is found most intensively in, for instance, the Neo-Confucian attempt to achieve sagehood because the whole (sage) learning is devoted to achieving unity (of knowledge and action, the inner and the other, reason and passion, etc.) with a singular focus on praxis/cultivation of the heart/mind. For Neo-Confucians, metaphysics and epistemology are mere tools for use in eupraxia. But this practice cannot be a blind issuance of a series of actions. It has to know its source, orientation, goal, and consequences. In other words, the well-organized art of praxis must form a “systematic whole of cognition, both theoretical and practical” in the broad sense. In the Neo-Confucian tradition, there seems to be a term that is close to it, i.e., kung fu (or gong fu) as the way of self-cultivation leading to virtuous communal life but, unfortunately, this conception, as is, remains at too rudimentary a state to be science, a Wissenschaft (i.e., a universal organized system, in other words, a well-established discipline with “systematic unity” if I may borrow the phrase from Kant). I found a similar notion/praxis in Buddhism, Hinduism, and even in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition as well as the Greek tradition (Plato’s care of the soul, Stoic as well as Epicurean forms of life, etc.). Thus, eupraxia is an umbrella term that refers to all these efforts to unify theory and praxis in the most systematic and organized way. When realized, eupraxia appropriately provides a resource and a tool for promoting humanity under sage learning, a lifelong multifaceted process of self-education and self-cultivation involving the development of Weltanschauung, a community-oriented socialization, the action/practice-oriented techniques of meditative procedures, an insight into the nature of the universe and human beings in it among others. In other words, eupraxia prepares one to become a sagely superior person or, alternatively, an individual who exemplifies “inwardly sageliness and outwardly kingliness.” Thus, it implies that everybody can be a philosopher-king (pace Plato) and everybody can be a “buddha” (an enlightened one) with the seed of awakening inherent in each.

A word of caution. Can East meet West in philosophy? I believe there is an understanding of fundamental categories that are available and acceptable to both traditions if they are approached from a suitably comprehensive perspective. To use a metaphor, if interracial couples can stay happy in real life, as many do, I think we can say that intercultural philosophy is also possible. We can understand each other. But if the understanding is too fine-grained, then even an intracultural understanding would be impossible. Eupraxia is a case in point. The key is that it is not just a matter of doing what is valuable for each individual but also a matter of developing a systematic unity of all the components required for executing what is valuable in the whole community. In this sense, it is a science of praxis, not just a series of actions. We can perhaps say that the whole system of eupraxia has not only action/praxis but also philosophy of knowledge, ethics, philosophy of law as well as religion and aesthetics. It can thus reconcile our “head and heart,” i.e., our theoretical commitment to objective knowledge, our practical commitment to the moral improvement of humanity, and, mostly importantly, our commitment to the balance between these two in a united whole. As a result, there is no conflict between the transcendental mode of doing philosophy and the common-sense-level sage learning. There is no conflict between reason and feeling, universals and particulars, and mind and body. This is my vision of what transcendental Confucianism aims to achieve.

I find a life of debate and action on any subject always rewarding. I plan to write more books. When I first began writing my dissertation, I was focused on proving myself. Now I am more conscious of my audience when I write—how best to persuade them and connect with them. By the way, I have an exceptionally good sense of direction and drive cars well. In view of this, perhaps driving a taxi could have been my perfect job. But my mother-in-law would have been mad at the idea, so I continue to practice philosophy.

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Making Meaning of Practices in Academic Philosophy

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What is it like to be a philosopher of Asian descent? Let me attempt a first answer from my Indo-German perspective.

I have had the privilege of doing my doctorate in Germany with Hubert Schleierchert, who belongs to the so-called third generation of the Vienna Circle. In postwar Vienna, Schleierchert saw his own doctoral supervisor, the Hungarian-Austrian Béla Juhos (1901–1971), being excluded from the inner circle of philosophers at the university because of “local Viennese intrigues” and a writing style that was deliberately nontechnical. Deeply frustrated and disillusioned about how these intrigues could be masked by the purported philosophical commitment to reason, Schleierchert left Vienna in 1967 for Germany. Indubitably marked by what had happened to his teacher, Schleierchert used his own academic life to push for an understanding of critical philosophy that could help unmask the underside of polished academic reasoning. In his obituary for Juhos,
Schleichert identified short bursts of theory-induced intoxication, which include vague gestures toward “deep labyrinths of the absolute” as some elements of this underbelly, while a skeptical attitude, critique, and humaneness were said to be integral parts of critical philosophy.1

Unsurprisingly, then, a crucial part of my apprenticeship in German academic philosophy, an academic setting that largely operates without graduate schools, did not involve pondering over canonical texts. Rather, Schleichert encouraged me to sift through material to see what could be in my reckoning cultivate personal integrity. As the Vienna Circle had pointed out, he reiterated, it was futile to find a scientific or philosophical justification of values. Rather, the core ethical insight of the Circle underscored that all a true philosopher could do was to learn to combine integrity of thought with integrity of action in her own person. So, while fellow doctoral candidates were trained by their supervisors to pull the right academic punches, I was taught to understand—through a critical study of texts in European intellectual history—how these punches had the power to snuff out all those critical voices, which refused to toe the line. While these punches might have helped some philosophers make the cut into the canon, a good philosopher would avoid them since they could negatively impact her integrity.

Schleichert directed my attention to the rich but understudied storehouse of other voices in human history. These voices were able to illustrate how subversive reason could be used to resist the power of human frailties like vanity and pride. Searching for such sources in history, whether in one’s own tradition or elsewhere, was crucial. Not only would one then be able to creatively appropriate them for our own needs, these voices could also help us understand how claims to philosophical universality tend to be closely intertwined with a larger sociopolitical agenda throughout history. Such claims are, in general, not neutral, notwithstanding contrary assertions on the part of their proponents.

In many ways, this academic apprenticeship complemented what I had learnt from Ratan Karani, my first undergraduate philosophy tutor at Wilson College in Mumbai, India. An analytical philosopher by training, Karani saw philosophers as civic intellectuals who had to work toward nurturing critical acumen in their students. He encouraged us teenagers to understand political events through the critical acumen in their students. He encouraged us teenagers to understand political events through the analytical philosophy of the Indian state has continued since my dissertation, while I continue to work on the ethics of immigration since my Habilitation (the traditional advanced qualification needed for a professorship in Germany). Independently of each other, they sowed the seeds for my research interests in epistemic decolonization, critical social epistemology, feminism, a James Tully-inspired public philosophy and world philosophies. This philosophical training has proved to be an invaluable asset.

In 2014, I initiated Confluence: Online Journal of World Philosophies. Henry Rosemont, Jr. was kind enough to think through the idea with me. Jim Maffie (Maryland) and Geeta Ramana (Mumbai) joined the project as co-editors, the journal was hosted by the German publisher Verlag Karl Alber till 2016. Maffie played a seminal role in the journal’s formative years in co-creating a nonconfrontational and nonadversarial space for a judicious engagement with world philosophies. Today, the journal is hosted as an open-access journal by Indiana University Press under the name Journal of World Philosophies. Co-editors Amy Donahue (Kenessaw State), Carl Mika (Wakato), and Amy Olberding (Oklahoma) share the work. Another complementary project under my chief editorship will be the Bloomsbury Introductions to World Philosophies. The series will be co-led with Leah Kalmanson (Drake), Nader El-Bizri (American University of Beirut), James Maddox (Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic), Sarah Mattice (University of North Florida), Takeshi Morisato (Sun Yat-sen University), Pasch Mungwini (UNISA), Omar Rivera (Southwestern), and Georgina Stewart (Auckland University of Technology).

Both these projects have brought me into contact with scholars from across the globe whose trajectories through philosophy have been relatively similar to mine, whether on account of their racialization, gender, and/or academic specialization in noncanonical philosophy. Absent stable and supportive institutional structures in the academy, their paths through philosophy seem to have been anchored by supportive individuals. (One could be tempted to see serendipity stepping in here to bridge the absence of institutional support.) In many ways, research on world philosophies aligns with recent calls for a conceptual and intellectual decolonization in philosophy. Such calls critique the centering of Euro-American experiences in global knowledge transmission practices. They question the manner in which Euro-American philosophers have pandered over the contextuality of their own philosophical practices while highlighting this very contextuality about other regions of the world. Pushing back against this “wonderful geographical doublespeak in the philosophy profession,” these scholars draw attention to how bodies placed in specific, spatiotemporal, and sociomaterial contexts shape our philosophical inquiry.

We see more clearly today how “white miscognition” has impacted the knowledge produced about other world philosophies and their practitioners. Those who were, and have been, identified as epistemic authorities in
Euro-America spoke, and tend to speak, from standpoints of accrued credibility excess for the whole world. One example is the widespread assumption that only the Euro-American philosophical tradition can adequately capture reality across spatiotemporal contexts. A careful study of different world philosophies would, however, show that this assumption is an overestimation of one’s own philosophical prowess. But some relatively widespread boundary-policing practices in canonical philosophy hinder a thorough interrogation of the assumption itself. As a result, a certain “meta-blindness,” “a particularly recalcitrant kind of ignorance about the cognitive and affective limitations of one’s own perspective,” continues to hold sway. This “willful ignorance” is at odds with the self-ethos of a profession that prides itself on its steadfast adherence to critical philosophy or the practice of criticism broadly understood.

My life in Euro-American academic philosophy has many a time felt for me, a female philosopher of Indian descent with interests in noncanonical philosophy, like facing a steep incline. Absent an awareness of practitioner and content diversity, minority scholars tend to be sought out as go-to experts for an antiquated and essentialized understanding of cultural identities. They are solicited for conference presentations to deliver “authentic” accounts of the “Indian mind,” “Chinese mind,” “Japanese mind,” etc. Such problematic interpellations play out against the background of the white miscognition alluded to above. Furthermore, these interpellations set up a close relation between philosophical ability and biographical factors—a relation that seems to hold particularly for those whose bodies are marked out as possessing “divergent” identities. Such interpellations as the philosophical “other” are not isolated incidents; they seem to occur across Euro-America. And yet I am cautiously optimistic that ongoing changes will make the field more inclusive.

Philosophy’s gender bias and Eurocentrism do not go wholly uncontested today. In some institutional contexts, attempts at diversifying the profession are being ramped up. The work done by the APA Committee on Inclusiveness in the Profession is one example of the same. Serving on the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies for the past three years and being involved in its varied activities, I see how long-term structural changes can be initiated within the profession itself—if one chooses to do so. While diversification of the profession has yet to gain global traction, other factors do seem to be instrumental in extending the base on which academic philosophy has rested for so long. One such factor is the increasing global availability of publications on world philosophies; highly creative scholarship is now making its mark on the field. Indeed, these publications could serve to close hermeneutical gaps in those national contexts in which the canon continues to be uncontested.

Born out of resistance, some of these inspirational and uplifting publications attempt to break free of problematic ascriptions. They illustrate how recontextualized philosophical concepts can be implemented to shed light on world philosophical traditions, which hitherto have been diligently exempted from the academy. This rich scholarship also underscores that there is no reason to hew world philosophies along the parameters set by canonical philosophy. Other people from near and afar have attempted to make sense of their own worlds, albeit in different ways.

Standing on the shoulders of my own mentors, I believe that the social ramifications of the world of academic philosophy are hard to overlook. Academic philosophy is like any other social activity in which meaning is made. To make meaning with others, we need to share to some extent a common conceptual repertoire with those involved in this process. Yet our own way of explicating these resources and making sense of them with other co-members can render this process hegemonic and authoritarian. This happens when we begin to take habituated ways of understanding as the sole way of understanding a phenomenon and, in the process, lose our ability to change intellectual perspectives and dialogic roles. We, then, attempt to structure the field of meanings with our co-members such that contrary views are excluded or marginalized.

Although such exclusionary tendencies may occur in other social groups, there is no plausible reason to accept this feature in our social world of academic philosophy. For one, our socialization in this particular world does, in general, train us to check whether the tools we intend to use are indeed adequate for the task at hand. For another, our world of meaning-making activities does involve (even if minimally) a sense of what it means to be a moral person. On both counts, we cannot systematically continue to bracket out—and silence—all those voices that seek to bring to our attention the flip side of our meaning-making activities.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 12.
A Small Act of Rebellion Toward Philosophy as a Gift

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Thinking about the value of autobiographical narratives, I ponder the role of my Asian descent. Most of my work insists that identity, especially racial identity, influences the development of subjectivity, but I’m not sure that my Asian descent is more influential than my gender, class, or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, race functions as one of the defining features of my identity, not because of essentialistic traditional and cultural practices that are so deeply ingrained in me that they have become natural, but because the visible differences of my embodiment condition my experiences.

I am an immigrant. Immigration destinations are never random, the strategic stationing of US troops in South Korea during the Cold War conditioned our immigration pattern. I lived my first five years in Korea and the following five years on the island of Guam. To date, I have lived the majority of my life (seventeen years) in New York City, predominantly in the Bronx, but also the Upper West Side and Brooklyn. Needless to say, the three regions are vastly different in culture and language as well as in natural environment, although Seoul and New York City are similar in climate.

The idea to pursue a doctorate in philosophy came from my undergraduate advisor in economics. My undergraduate thesis impressed Professor Andre Burgstaller—not for its economic analysis but for its philosophical analysis. Neoclassical economics disparages the use of welfare policies; I wrote a thesis defending welfare policies. Neoclassical economics relies on utilitarianism, an idea that I knew to be highly contested among philosophers. The most influential experience from my childhood that impressed—impressed enough to suggest that I consider pursuing a PhD in philosophy. He urged me to ensure that I make my life meaningful.

At first, I did not listen to him. I am an immigrant; my parents do not really speak English. I felt the need to earn money to help with my family’s financial status. To give credit to my parents, they are fine; they do not rely on me financially. But as with all capitalistic urges, one can always do better. So I stuck with economics, planned to earn an MBA, and got a job in business. I worked for an internet-access company for a year, for a microeconomic consulting firm for another year, and finally for a financial newspaper reporting on the bank loan market. Clearly, I had a variety of experiences. I jumped around because I did not find the work meaningful. I did not want to expend so much energy focusing on matters I really did not care about. All of these jobs were initially interesting because of a learning curve, but eventually, after about six months, I was bored. I was so bored that I found myself hiding in my cubicule reading philosophy. I read all the works of Foucault and Nietzsche. Because I did not quite understand everything, I wanted to engage with people about these texts. While hiding in these cubicles and reading Foucault’s description of the architectural designs for early schools and prisons—that their walls were designed to be just high enough so that one never quite knows when someone is watching—I realized that my cubicles were designed for exactly the same reasons. I decided I’d like to know more. So I made a very selfish decision and decided to give philosophy a chance. The PhD was a gift to myself. I have not been bored since. I do not regret my decision. I know it was the right decision for me.

The most influential experience from my childhood that affects my philosophical specialization is that I grew up working as a cashier at my parents’ fruit and vegetable store. My parents’ means of earning a living fits squarely with the Asian American history of self-employment through opening small retail stores such as laundromats, restaurants, and grocery stores because of the difficulties of employment in other venues in the aftermath of a series of anti-Asian immigration laws. I worked every available Sunday. I decided to work on Sundays; it was a gesture of love for my parents. Again, to give credit to my parents, they paid me. But more important to me than earning money to help with my family’s financial status. To give credit to my parents, they are fine; they do not rely on me financially. It was a gesture of love for my parents. Again, to give credit to my parents, they paid me. But more important to me than earning the money was volunteering to give them a break for the week. The stores were located mostly in poor neighborhoods in the Bronx. Alone with just another worker, who spoke mostly Spanish, I was left in charge of the cash register. Most of the time the store was empty; Sundays were not busy days. There was a little rush after Sunday services, but the afternoons were usually slow. Most of the time I was bored, and I wonder now if when I first read Marx in college, I gravitated toward it precisely because I experienced
the alienation of mind-numbing work. The experience is unforgettable.

The customers were mostly African American or Latin American, and did I mention that they were poor? The dynamics are something I’m still trying to understand. My mother raised us as Catholics and she believed in sharing with the less fortunate. In other words, questions about what it means to be good had already circled my attention. With this religiously inspired backdrop, while cashiering at these low-end stores where customers always inquired about my relationship to the owners, I felt the resentment from the customers that we, new immigrants, still had more. This period of Sunday cashiering lasted longer than a decade and overlapped with the demonstrations and riots against Korean store owners in Black neighborhoods, including the Los Angeles riots of 1992. I occupied the position of having to survey the customers to check for shoplifters, even if most of the time I really did not care whether someone took something or not. I wondered if we should just let them have it, since they needed it that much. Usually, if we caught a shoplifter, they just dropped the item and left the store. So why the constant need to monitor? I guess the worry was the slippery slope argument about too much shoplifting impacting the store’s purpose of financially providing for my family. I wondered if I had internalized the racist narratives about Black people as more likely to shoplift; consequently, did I monitor them more? Whatever the reason, the constant monitoring was part of the job. So, conflicts arose. During such conflicts, the customers hurled racist epithets at me. Most commonly, the African Americans suggested that I go home where I came from. I have wondered about this particular response; do African Americans feel a greater sense of ownership of the United States? In that situation, they allied with whites in guarding the borders of the United States by determining who belonged and who did not. I always found that sense of proprietary ownership of the United States interesting in light of the history of slavery; perhaps especially because of the history of slavery, African Americans deserve to claim this country more. These empathetic feelings interspersed with the hurt and anger I felt in response to their denial of my belonging in this country. But there were always people who were kind. Interestingly, those who liked me often praised my English-speaking abilities.

Let me highlight one other feature to this horizon; I cashiered throughout junior high school, high school, college, and, intermittently, through graduate school. I attended some elite schools. So, during the week, I engaged mostly with white people; they clearly occupied a different class level. I still vividly recall seeing a picture in high school of one woman of color sitting on the wall in Venice. The idea that she was able to go to Venice so challenged my sense of normalcy that I really could not digest it. The image remains imprinted in my mind.² I am not suggesting that all whites are rich and all people of color are not; even then I noticed gradations in class. The few Black students who were economically better-positioned usually hung out with more whites and vice versa. But even with the gradations, generally, one’s race was a good indicator of one’s class level. Against this weekday background of seeing whiteness and differences in class, I faced every Sunday feeling I had more in common with these folks than the whites. Yes, I had feelings of wanting distance from the Sunday folks, but I always had feelings of solidarity and empathy with them as well, knowing we occupied similar class levels.

Within the complexity of the situation, in the class dynamics, in the racial dynamics—for in the store on Sundays, we were all minorities, though clearly, we knew about the racist and classist stereotypes about one another—sits the question of how to make the right choice. If it is never a single act, so let me rephrase the question as the difficulty of determining the right behavior, attitudes, or series of interactions.³ My desire to be good was difficult to determine in this structural situation where we all were constrained by our roles as owners and customers and as African, Latin, and Asian Americans. I’m still trying to understand and negotiate my individual responsibility within this social, structurally constrained, and complex situation. This experience will always influence my philosophical thinking.

As a professor of philosophy, I share my past experiences because I think about my responsibility to my students, my family, my colleagues, and to those who read my work in this social, structurally constrained, and complex situation where Asian American women philosophy professors continue to be a minority (if not an anomaly) and academia continues to be prohibitive to the lower classes. Even as on a daily basis I struggle with challenges to my position as a subject who knows, as a subject who can lead, I am also very aware of the privilege of holding this position. I don’t know if snippets of my biography will help anyone; most of the time, I feel like I am just stumbling along, so much seems to be happenstance. But at this stage in my life, I feel grateful that I earn my living doing meaningful work that I enjoy. I hope to motivate others to aspire to personally meaningful work.

NOTES
1. I read that Amy Tan went into writing for similar reasons, because someone discouraged her from it.
2. This experience had an indelible influence on me. This experience may be the reason why I made sure to travel internationally. This experience may have influenced my decision to take my daughter to Venice as one of her first vacations.
3. Clearly, I experienced Maria Lugones’s idea of the intermeshedness of oppressive => oppressed.

How I Came to Be a Philosopher

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I’m an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I am of Korean descent, born in the US of parents who came from South Korea. So how did I end up becoming a philosophy professor specializing in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy?
I grew up in the deep South, in a beautiful little town called Natchitoches, Louisiana, where my father was a physics professor and my mother taught high school math and physics for a number of years before making a career switch to software analyst and programmer. My parents came to the US in the early 1960s before immigration quotas had opened up for Asians with the 1965 Immigration Act. They met in the physics PhD program at the University of Florida and were part of a small cohort of Korean and Chinese graduate students who had come to the US to study science or engineering. My mother’s family had fled from North Korea; my father came from a land-owning family of farmers and lawyers in the countryside. Both families suffered during the Korean War. Both of my parents had studied physics at Seoul National University, where my mother was famous for being the only woman in her year to be admitted to the class of physics majors. I’m certain my mother was the original Tiger Mother, constantly coaching, exhorting, criticizing, and encouraging. It was affirming to know that she believed there was potential in my sister and me, though it was also painfully clear she thought we had a lot of flaws that had to be overcome by persistent attention and effort. My parents, especially my mother, were feminists before we had ever heard of that term; they believed that girls should be held to the same high expectations as boys. Neither of them ever mentioned marriage or children, but instead expected that we would seek and find fulfilling work and careers.

We were the only Korean family for hundreds of miles, and I would not be surprised if in the 1970s we were the only Koreans in the entire state of Louisiana. I remember being puzzled about where I fit in; I played with white as well as Black kids, but felt very different from both. Culturally, there was a huge gulf: other kids would head home to watch TV and play sports after school, whereas my younger sister Sue and I spent hours practicing piano and violin, doing homework, with extra math lessons from my mother, and no TV except for Little House on the Prairie and PBS concerts. Long before we’d ever heard the term, we were the “Model Minority”—“Orientals” (as we were called back then!), not native Louisianians, but accepted in the community because of my father’s position as professor at the university and my mother’s growing fame as an extraordinary teacher at a local high school. Even though I was a US citizen, I wasn’t sure what it was to be an American—or what it was to be a Korean, for that matter. In my first four years, my parents first spoke to me and my sister only in Korean, but when I went to preschool not knowing how to speak English, they quickly switched to speaking in English full time, and so my Korean faded (though it never entirely disappeared). They thought that speaking Korean at home would be a handicap and prevent us from learning English fully. Only later did we regret the loss this entailed. From early on, my political consciousness was developing along with my thinking about what it is to be an American; my parents always had the news on, and I remember the dark political mood in the 1970s, with family conversations about Watergate, Nixon’s resignation, problems with inflation, and then our excitement over Jimmy Carter’s election in 1976.

In middle school, this feeling of disconnection and alienation grew worse; however, my parents sent my sister and me to various summer camps where I met other kids like me, in particular other Asian girls. Among other things, I discovered the joys of playing in an orchestra and chamber music, and, at a poetry and writing camp, my love of words, literature, and writing. At home, there were no such programs; the public school system in this rural town was truly abysmal. I had already skipped fifth grade, and by ninth grade I was taking math, chemistry, and English classes at the local university. I was extremely unhappy by this time—bored, stressed out, and lonely. My parents decided to send my sister and me to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. Academically rigorous, it is also one of the two most elite prep schools in the US, along with Andover; when I arrived, I had no idea what it meant to have an address on the Upper East Side or Chestnut Hill. I was in any case thrilled to be there; Sue and I received an incredible education in math, science, history, languages, and literature, and made many lifelong friends there as well.

My sister Sue was a brilliant mathematician who clearly fulfilled my parents’ dream of success when she landed a high-paying job in Silicon Valley straight after graduating from MIT with a BS/MS in computer science and electrical engineering. My own story, however, was less straightforward. After Exeter, I went to Columbia in the fall of 1985, attracted by their Great Books-type Core Curriculum, thinking that I would study chemistry and try to become a scientist or doctor with a broadly humanist background. I had never taken a philosophy course, but from the wide reading I’d already done in high school, I had an inkling that I would like philosophy. And I did—fell in love with my philosophy classes and soon found that I was spending all my time reading philosophy, lurking in the library and local bookshops to find more, and looking forward every day to my philosophy classes rather than the chemistry classes that I’d signed up for. Eventually I decided to switch my major from chemistry to philosophy. It is hard to convey the quiet dismay with which my parents greeted this news. First, while they could understand why I would enjoy taking a philosophy course or two, they were also survivors fleeing the economic wasteland that was Korea in the 1950s and feared that philosophy presaged a lifetime of struggle and poverty. Second, Richard Feynman famously once said, “Philosophy of science is as useful to scientists as ornithology is to birds”; in the value scheme of physicists, philosophy ranks very low—why waste your time muddling around with inane abstractions when you can understand how things really are through physics? My father once told me how his colleague commiserated with him when he said his daughter had decided to study philosophy. Even so, I was undeterred.

My love of philosophy started in college and has been my consuming passion ever since. I happily took a variety of philosophy classes from professors such as Palle Yorgrau, Gisela Striker, Raymond Geuss, and David Albert, as well as classes in Greek and Latin to enable me to read ancient texts. In my senior year, I decided to apply for graduate school because I could not envision anything else that I wanted to do other than to study more philosophy, particularly ancient Greek philosophy. I already had a good sense of what it would be like to be an academic from my father,
who was always writing papers and working on his teaching. My single most important teacher and mentor was Gisela Striker, whose courses on Plato and Aristotle were a revelation and changed my life; she encouraged me to apply to graduate school and took me under her wing. I decided to study with her at Harvard, where she had started teaching in the fall of 1989. My time in the program was exhilarating and exciting—I had classes with Putnam, Rawls, Parsons, Scanlon, Korsgaard, and Burnyeat, as well as Striker—but it was also a time of acute self-doubt, since it seemed to me that everyone I knew was better than I. We now have names for these feelings, including “stereotype threat” and “imposter syndrome.” Fortunately for me, the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University had just hired their first women tenured faculty members, Striker and then the following year Chris Korsgaard, and it was very important and inspiring to me to have them as role models. I wrote a dissertation under Professor Striker’s supervision on Protagorean relativism and arguments against it by Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus. I earned my degree in 1996 and went to the University of Illinois at Chicago, where I taught nine years as an assistant and then associate professor of philosophy. My first book, Epistemology after Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) was an expansion of my dissertation and won the APA Book Prize Honorable Mention. After nine years at UIC, I moved to the University of Colorado at Boulder to join my husband, Peter Hunt; a professor of Greek history; here we've raised our twin daughters, now age fifteen. I am currently at work on a second book, tentatively titled Justice in Aristotle’s Moral and Political Philosophy, under contract with Oxford University Press.

My career path has been unusual for an Asian American woman of my generation and certainly my focus on ancient Greek philosophy has little to do with my identity as an Asian American woman, though perhaps my intellectually oriented upbringing focusing so heavily on reading and thinking made me the kind of person who would fall in love with the world of ideas. Even so, being an Asian American woman has given me a unique perspective on the field and sympathy towards students who end up feeling like outsiders in philosophy. I was from the start very conscious of being a woman in a male-dominated field. As for being Asian American, there were only three of us during my entire time in grad school, and only one African American; the rest of the philosophy graduate students were mostly white Americans or Europeans. All of this meant that when I first stepped in front of a classroom at age twenty-three, I was aware that what many of my students would see was a short, slight, young, “foreign”-looking female—not a philosophy teacher. Even after all these years, students regularly address me as “Mrs. Lee” or “Ms. Lee,” apparently reserving “Prof.” or “Dr.” for my male colleagues. I take some pains to explain my background and academic credentials, hoping that it will inspire some of them to rethink their assumptions about what a professor should look like—and what is possible in life for a woman or person of color. These assumptions on the part of students are easily explained—after all, we now know that we all have implicit biases, growing up in an unequal society such as ours, about what a professor or any other authority figure should look like. At UIC, where I taught for the first nine years of my teaching career, I was fortunate to be in a department with enormously supportive colleagues who taught me a lot about teaching. Furthermore, UIC has one of the most racially and economically diverse student populations in the US, and I thoroughly enjoyed learning to teach students who were neither jaded nor entitled, but were genuinely enthusiastic to be in a philosophy classroom with me. Since then, I have become an experienced teacher; I love introducing undergraduates to philosophy, and ancient Greek philosophy in particular, but also love teaching graduate seminars and advising PhD students who are working with me in ancient Greek philosophy. Getting to know students and helping them when I can has been one of the most important ways that I can “pay it forward” and use my position as a teacher to help students find opportunities where they can grow, develop, and thrive. I know what it’s like when my students experience a lack of self-confidence, stereotype threat, and other self-undermining attitudes; I try to get to know them as well as I can, and coach them and encourage them to do their best work and believe in themselves. In 2009–2010, I was nominated by the graduate students of my department for CU’s Outstanding Graduate Student Mentor Faculty Award, an award that has meant the most to me of all the awards I’ve ever received.

In recent years, I have become more and more conscious of the need to diversify the profession and to expand our notions of what it is to do philosophy. I support the idea that we should go well beyond the so-called core areas of philosophy, including my own beloved area of ancient Greek philosophy, and embrace areas such as feminist philosophy, philosophy of race, non-Western philosophy, applied ethics, as well as philosophy of the social sciences. I support the APA in its efforts to diversify the profession, serving on the APA Good Practices Guide Committee to write a Good Practices Guide that collects and codifies some of the ways that philosophy departments around the country have attempted to incorporate inclusive practices into their programs. After witnessing problems in my own department and many others, I have become a strong supporter of attempts to reform our profession and the academy in general with respect to sexual harassment and other forms of unequal treatment that disproportionately impact women and racial minorities, and drive them from our field. Having benefited from numerous mentors, I am also a great believer in mentoring. This is something I believe all students benefit from and, as noted above, it’s an important part of my teaching in general. But minority students often don’t get the advice or encouragement that they need, and so I was delighted to host and take part in the APA workshop “Mentoring the Mentors,” where I learned about how to mentor minority students in philosophy to address potential challenges and obstacles they face in academia. These and other hopes I have for our field have their roots in the experiences I’ve had as an Asian American woman philosopher.

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From Accidental to Integral: My Journey with Doing Philosophy

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My very first time on an airplane was when I boarded the British Airways flight out of Kolkata within fifteen days of submitting my Indian PhD dissertation. My destination was the PhD Program in Philosophy at the University of Connecticut. Luckily, I didn’t find this exercise of starting another PhD right on the tail of submitting one dissertation to be futile or dreadful. On the contrary, I have distinct memories of palpable excitement to be able to study philosophy in the US. Reflecting on this undertaking twenty-five years later, I believe my unwavering commitment to doing philosophy is unmistakable. While this commitment might have a ring of inevitability now, my relationship to philosophy began by way of a few lucky accidents.

First of these involved my gender. Being a girl in my traditional Bengali family meant less societal pressure to do something “more important”—like medicine or engineering. So given my good fortune that my high school offered philosophy courses, which I liked quite a bit, and the fact that the local college, which is what my parents wanted me to attend, offered “honors” (comparable to an academic major in the US) in philosophy, nobody questioned my decision to study philosophy in college.

Why did I decide to study philosophy? Honestly, because I could. But also because pursuing philosophy gave me glimpses of the possibility of being able to think for myself. Now, after many degrees from institutions in India and the US and years of experience in academia later, my understanding of being able to think for myself has evolved in such dramatic fashions that my current understanding of philosophy would be unrecognizable to my eighteen-year-old self. This essay offers me an opportunity to investigate the role that my being a person of Asian descent has played in this dramatic shift.

Let me start with some of my mentors who have been instrumental in my journey with philosophy and the transformations in my understanding of philosophy. First, there is my high school philosophy teacher, Barunadi, who saw something in my excitement for philosophy that no one else including myself could detect, offering encouragements that made my continued study of philosophy seem normal and even worthwhile. The chair of my undergraduate philosophy department, Shibaranidi, by insisting that English has to be the medium of my philosophy study even though I felt much more comfortable in Bengali, singlehandedly ensured that I could one day travel beyond Bengal to grow with philosophy. Bijoyda, one of my teachers during my master’s degree studies, introduced me not only to analytic philosophy but also to his undying excitement about it! This list would be incomplete without Amitabhada, my Indian PhD thesis advisor. His abiding and all-consuming love for the discipline of philosophy was contagious and his many gifts included the painstaking care with which he taught me how to write philosophy. Finally, Ruth Millikan gave me a home in the US. Of course, I can’t replicate her stunningly brilliant and curious mind; nonetheless, I aspire to replicate her wholehearted commitment to philosophy—not just as a place to make arguments but also as a place defined by our shared quest for truth, understanding, and decency. I find her commitment to teaching empowering and try to replicate that dedication and commitment in my interactions with students. Being a student of all these teachers and mentors and having the opportunity to grow with their generosity are some of the most fortunate accidents of my life. My doing philosophy has also benefited from the generosity of a number of colleagues and friends over the years. They are a necessary element of my relationship with philosophy today.

Doing philosophy, for me, evolved from an option that was available to me to the realization that it is an integral part of who I am. It went from something I studied in my philosophy classes to something that defines my professional voice and finally to being the lens that I draw on in my everyday engagements with the world. My being a person of Asian descent has definitely influenced this evolution in distinct ways. This is most clearly reflected in the ways my teaching and research in philosophy have evolved and changed. I want to recount this evolution briefly, since this could have some insights that future philosophers—especially those occupying cultural-gendered-professional-expectational positionalities similar to mine—might find relevant.

One of the major reflections of my evolving understanding of doing philosophy is in the list of areas of philosophy that I am interested in today. It includes the philosophy of mind, third-world feminism, Indian philosophy, comparative and cross-cultural philosophy, feminist philosophy of mind, and the epistemology of mindfulness. If you asked me to stretch beyond my familiar fields of the philosophy of language and mind during my PhD studies both at the Central University of Hyderabad, India and at the University of Connecticut, I would have replied, “The philosophy of science” or “History of modern philosophy.” Until that time, I had taken exactly one seminar in feminist philosophy and one seminar in social and political philosophy. Writing anything in these areas would have been beyond my wildest dreams. Thus, even though I noted above that my relationship with philosophy is forged through my gender, it didn’t automatically bring me to the philosophical study of gender.

Two events during my doctoral studies at UConn hinted that my philosophical trajectory was about to shift in substantive ways. Teaching my own Introduction to Philosophy from a Comparative Perspective course as a TA at UConn required my re-engagement in a significant fashion with concepts and theories from Indian philosophy that I had studied as part of my philosophy training in India. This also warmed me to the potential of comparative philosophy. Further, in my last year at UConn, Diana Meyers (who knew what I needed to know to support me in academia) recommended that I read Uma Narayans’s Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism (London: Routledge,
What is it like to be a philosopher of Asian descent?—aligns with Thomas Nagel’s response in his classic paper. Nagel highlighted the importance of the specific perspective an organism occupies for understanding that organism’s experiences. The process of composing this essay helped me realize how my evolving understanding of doing philosophy depends on my vantage of being a person of Asian descent. It is this perspective that has enabled me to find a workable family-work balance and, finally, the kind of philosophy I feel most at home in.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
My sincere thanks to Paula Droeges and Catherine Parker for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.
Breathing Living History into Haunted Places

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My father chose “John” as his American name and grew up in California, the seventh of nine children born to Louie Ma (馬) and Yong Shee. Louie was a grocery store owner and, according to family stories, mayor of Modesto’s Chinatown. It was not until my cousin researched the National Archives and Records Administration that I saw proof of Louie’s role as a community leader helping Chinese to navigate immigration laws and read transcripts of Yong Shee’s interrogations while she was imprisoned on Angel Island.

John grew up playing basketball with neighborhood kids until the attack on Pearl Harbor. Seeing his Japanese friends being shipped to internment camps, John chose to enlist. Too young to take the cadet exam, John needed his father, who didn’t read English, to sign a form.

John met Mary Eng at the army base in Big Springs, Texas. Mary was the second of six children born in San Antonio, Texas, to Bow Ng (迂) and Lee Shee. Bow, a grocery store owner, was president of the Chinese Merchants Association. He emphasized education as the way to respond to the sign in the park: “No Chinese or Dogs Allowed.”

Bow was murdered at the age of forty-two. His funeral, as reported in The San Antonio Light, attracted “thousands of curious spectators” and “was delayed a week to permit members of a society in which Ng was prominent to come to San Antonio from as far away as Boston and New York.”

Bow’s death brought drastic changes: “Handshake agreements” were broken, the family was forced into poverty, and Lee Shee was institutionalized for talking to her husband’s ghost. The responsibility for raising their four younger siblings fell on Mary and her older brother Joseph. When she met John, Mary was eighteen and installing carburetors in an auto factory.

As a first lieutenant on a B-17 “Flying Fortress,” John flew seven missions as lead bombardier. The survival rate for a standard tour of duty of twenty-five missions was only 1 in 4. Declining the Purple Heart, John was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with Four Oak Leaf Clusters, and the ETO Ribbon with Three Battle Stars. Above all, he prized membership in the “Lucky Bastards Club” for “sallying forth and returning no less than 35 times, for having braved the hazards of Hun flack for bringing to Hitler and his cronies tons of bombs . . . in the interest of liberty loving people everywhere.”

After the war, John and Mary married and moved to California where they started the Chinese Kitchen, the first restaurant in Sacramento to deliver Chinese food. Mary’s younger siblings moved into the back of the restaurant. Chinese guys thought it cool to deliver for the Chinese Kitchen, driving a truck rigged with a pan of water over the muffler to keep food warm, getting a free dinner, and perhaps catching a glimpse of the “Yellow Roses from Texas”—Mary, Annabel, Willie Mae, and Olive.

Before his GI benefits ran out, John sold the business and bought a house for the family near UC Berkeley where he earned a Master in Architecture. “I bombed too many buildings during the war and wanted to build them instead.” That was how I came to be born in Richmond.

Before I entered fourth grade, my family moved back to Sacramento. Dad opened his office on Freeport Boulevard, remodeling grocery stores for Chinese businessmen and winning awards for his innovative use of industrial materials. Mom would send monthly checks to a bank in Hong Kong, which would send money to her grandmother and two brothers in Guangdong. For $50 they could buy a water buffalo for their village. Governor Edmund Brown, Mom said, was honorable for wanting to end the deportation of Chinese Americans. Learning how Chinese collaboratively created “paper sons and daughters” to circumvent discriminatory immigration laws, I lived in fear of being illegal.

Mary’s older brother Joseph moved to San Francisco, where the ratio of Chinese men to Chinese women was as high as 20:1. Joseph offered to “marry” a single mother so that she and her son would not be deported. Shortly afterwards, he committed suicide in his bachelor apartment.

Uncle Joe willed $50 for me to buy books. I bought Bertrand Russell’s A History of Western Philosophy from a bookstore in Sausalito. I also purchased Martin Gardner’s first Scientific American Book of Mathematical Puzzles and Diversions, whose preface enchanted me:

Creative mathematicians are seldom ashamed of their interest in recreational topics. Topology has its origins in Euler’s analysis of a puzzle about crossing bridges. Leibniz developed considerable time to the study of a peg-jumping puzzle. . . . David Hilbert, the great German mathematician, proved one of the basic
During high school, the evening news showed images of people who looked like me—a naked girl running down a road burning with napalm, Vietnamese men shot point blank, Buddhist monks setting themselves on fire. I was part of a group of students who organized an assembly to protest the Vietnam War. This angered the physics teacher, who then gave the physics award to the quarterback of the football team, who admitted to copying my homework.

After double-majoring at UC Davis, I was interviewed for the position of valedictory speaker. Unwilling to choose between math and philosophy, I accepted a Regent’s Fellowship to graduate school at UCLA. I studied logic with Donald Kalish, David Kaplan, and Alonzo Church in the Philosophy Department and with Herbert Enderton, Donald Martin, and C. C. Chang in Mathematics.

Serving as Kalish’s teaching assistant was a turning point. Known for hiring Angela Davis and for his 1960s activism, Kalish should be better known for mentoring. Supporting my nomination for a teaching award I had previously declined, Kalish wrote:

I have taught our introductory course in symbolic logic for some three decades. What is without question the best of such courses that I have taught was when . . . Mr. Mar was my teaching assistant. . . . He created in the class as a whole an enthusiasm for and understanding of our subject that I had never experienced before—nor have since.

Invited to co-author a revision of Kalish and Montague’s classic logic textbook, I worked in Don’s office, whose walls were covered with news clippings from his years of activism. I listened to Kalish’s comments on philosophy and faculty meetings. Don was doing more than teaching me how to write logic; he was showing me who he was and the kind of academic I wanted to become. When I was without a dissertation advisor, Kalish approached Alonzo Church. I became the thirty-fifth, and last, student to complete a PhD directed by Professor Church.

When I was an assistant professor at Stony Brook University, my eight-month-old son David died of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). I had a daughter, Jessica, two years older than David and a daughter, Krista, born two years later. In 1993, two high school students, Ellen Liu and Mili Subudhi, committed suicide on the Long Island Railroad tracks. Ellen and Mili had first met in the Gifted and Talented Program, which Jessica was about to begin as a third grader.

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Seeking to establish an Asian American Center, I asked Dad to draw up plans to remodel an abandoned hallway near my office. When Charles Wang, CEO of one of world’s largest business computing companies, spoke at Stony Brook, I approached him with a proposal and the plans. Wang sent a personal check for $25,000 to renovate the hallway and then decided to donate $25 million for the Charles B. Wang Asian American Center, at the time the largest donation to public education in New York State.

I proposed a new course, *Philosophical Issues in Asian American History*, and ended up teaching it for decades. Following the path of an Asian American philosopher has required me to speak out against injustices, which brought discrimination and delays in my career. This path also taught me how to create community events and to accompany Students discovered that their lives and their ancestors’ lives were worthy of philosophical examination. My students experienced the sufferings of being a child of Asian America and the joys of having their research publicly acknowledged.

In 2005, I was host to Noam Chomsky, a visiting professor of philosophy. I organized “The Politics of War and Remembrance,” an event that placed Chomsky in conversation with Lisa Yun (speaking for Loni Ding), Gary Okihiro, Helen Zia, and John Kuo Wei Tchen. Exceeding the capacity of the recently opened Wang Center and broadcast on Amy Goodman’s *Democracy Now*, this event was a capstone of a decade’s worth of community-based educational programming. I began thinking about how to balance community leadership and education with my childhood dream of becoming a logician.

Martin Gardner’s preface (quoted above) proved to be a map. I won teaching awards for introducing Euler’s bridges and other topics into my classes. I became the youngest brother of Alan Turing sharing Alonzo Church as our academic father. I presented research at the Gödel Centenary 2006 in Vienna, where I met Paul Cohen, who solved the first of Hilbert’s twenty-three open problems for twentieth-century mathematics. At the *Vienna Summer of Logic*, Dana Scott told me what it was like to be entrusted with Gödel’s logical formalization of Leibniz’s ontological argument. This past summer I gave a talk in Vienna at the *Gödel’s Legacy Conference* about Gödel’s work on the physics and philosophy of time in honor of the seventieth birthday of his friend Albert Einstein. Perhaps the most enchanting childhood dream come true was to have my collaborative research in logic discussed in a descendant of Gardner’s legendary column in *Scientific American*.

My childhood memories were confusing because I was living in a “land without ghosts.” Asian American philosophy breathed living history into the haunted places of my youth. “Our lives do not just pass through time in such a way that a
Facing Challenges and Re-Advancing: Toward Constructive Engagement

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Instead of touching on all relevant aspects, I focus on some of those distinct events that directly bear on my way of being a philosopher of Asian descent and are also most relevant to the direction, emphasis, and orientation of my philosophical exploration in the past decades in the United States.¹

I was born in Beijing, China. In retrospect, I recognize that the Beijing environment with its distinct manifestation of richness in Chinese culture and humanities has recessively impacted my outlook and character in multiple connections and layers since my childhood. Wing-tsit Chan is right when he characterizes the joint play and complementary contributions of two major movements of thought in the Chinese tradition, Confucianism and Daoism.² Indeed, I have been influenced by an orientation of pursuit shared by many ordinary people, which can be summarized in a more reflective way, i.e., complementarily in partial Confucian terms of pursuing nei-sheng-wai-wang (內聖外王) and in partial Daoist terms of antidoting excessiveness. What I intend to furthermore address here is something underlying concerning ways of thinking. Methodologically, it points to the sensitivity of seeking a complementary balance that can be rendered not only being one characteristic across-the-board feature of the Chinese tradition as a whole but also underlying all traditions and being fundamentally shared in a cross-tradition manner, though in distinct ways of manifestation and to distinct degrees; many of these distinct ways themselves are reflectively interesting, engaging, and somehow complementary. It is one primary source of the constructive engagement to be addressed later.

During the twenty years from my college education period to my starting teaching philosophy at San José State University, I underwent three major restarts. Having some direct and substantial bearing on my identity as a philosopher of Asian descent, they consist of (1) restarting study philosophy from a math major, (2) restarting as a doctoral student in philosophy in the United States. From a full-time philosophy researcher position in China, and (3) restarting from my original plan to go back to my previous comfort zone doing philosophy after receiving my PhD to facing up to the challenge of seeking a tenure-track philosophy position here on more engaging fronts. Each of the three restarts came with serious challenges while opening up to a new front and opportunity for further development and re-advancement. Let me focus on the first two here, which are closely related.

Around the end of 1977, one event significant to many young people in China occurred. After the ten-year Cultural Revolution movement (1966–1976) with the interruption of

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Notes:
1. When assigned a 200-word essay, Dad would count the words, erase the extra ones, and put a period at the end. Because of the 2,000-word limit for this essay, I eliminated the bibliography and endnotes, both of which are made available upon request.
2. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA. https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb8x0nb644/
the normal course of higher education, the first national college entrance examination was held. I was one of those college students who were admitted through this national entrance examination—the so-called "七七级" (1977 term): March 1978–January 1982—majoring in mathematics. Out of strong interest in philosophy, however, I restarted focusing on exploring philosophy after receiving my BS in math with a minor in computing science in 1982, giving up my easy job prospects. (Nevertheless, I haven’t given up but have substantially benefited from my knowledge of and training in math and computing science in doing philosophy, which turns out to enhance my relevant scholarly work in a distinct way.)

I spent the 1982-1983 academic year intensively studying philosophy at a university in Beijing, taking the exams of all the major philosophy courses I took there, including a two-semester course on the history of Chinese philosophy taught by Luo Yulie (楼宇烈). Having taken the national graduate-study entrance exam, I was admitted into the graduate program in philosophy at the Graduate School, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) (1984–1987). I was then admitted into the Institute of Philosophy, CASS, as a full-time researcher (1987–1989). During that period, I was facing choices at two levels. Many academics at my age who had an educational background and life experience in both China and the United States would recall the aspiring period around the mid/late 1980s in China; many of them were then eager to study abroad and explore new fronts. I was not an exception. Though raised in a family environment of Chinese classics, interested in a variety of resources for Chinese thought, and trained in the history of Chinese philosophy, I was then strongly motivated to go out of the boundaries of the status quo, thus facing serious choices on two fronts. First, to remain in the comfortable zone of CASS and enjoy a research position equivalent to the rank of assistant professor in the American system or to give up all the comfortable things and restart from scratch as a student in a foreign land? Second, to apply for a PhD program and write a dissertation on some familiar topic in Chinese philosophy with the advantages of my firsthand experience and knowledge of Chinese language and culture or on a topic with the resources that went well beyond the boundaries of the status quo but were in genuine need for the development of Chinese philosophy and of philosophy in China? Eventually, I chose the more challenging options. This contributed to my decision to resign from my research position and restart as a student enrolling in a PhD program in the US with my concentration areas in the philosophy of language and metaphysics, focusing on the issue of the relationship among language, thought, and reality. As I had planned to go back to CASS after receiving my PhD, financial stability and safety were my primary considerations besides the academic excellence of a PhD program. My elder brother was then pursuing his doctorate in biology at Cornell University; to be near to him, I applied to a number of schools that were in the State of New York. In 1989, I received offers of full financial support from the University of Rochester, Columbia University, and SUNY Buffalo. I chose Rochester for its five-year full-financial-aid package and for the safety of the location, without considering whether or how choosing a school or program would bear on securing a philosophy position in the US as it was not my goal at that time. At Rochester, I was fortunate to have had my dissertation supervised by Richard Feldman, Theodore Sider, and Rolf Eberle: They are not only strong in the philosophy of language and metaphysics but also highly respected for their expertise in epistemology, metaphysics, and logic, respectively; their joint scholarship well fits distinct but closely connected dimensions of the cross-tradition fundamental issue of the relationship among language, thought, and reality. What I learned from them during my PhD-pursuing period, together with what I have learned from Donald Davidson, Adam Morton, Al Martinich, and Kwong-loi Shun through certain outside projects around and after that period, has provided me with an indispensable theoretic preparation (besides those Chinese resources explored in China) for my way of treating resources in Chinese philosophy, Western philosophy, and comparative philosophy in my subsequent scholarly work.

Perhaps, in my case, what most distinguishes my identity as a philosopher of Asian descent lies in my cross-tradition philosophical work in the past two decades since I joined the philosophy faculty at SJSU (with my AOS in the philosophy of language and my background in Chinese philosophy) in 2000, exploring how distinct resources from different philosophical traditions (say, Chinese and Western traditions) can talk to, learn from, and engage with one another, and thus jointly contribute to the contemporary development of philosophy and society. What distinguishes my work in this creatively engaging area is my endeavor to contribute to one strategic goal and methodological strategy in cross-tradition engagement in philosophy. Generally speaking, this approach can be characterized as follows: It is to inquire into how, by way of reflective criticism (including self-criticism) and argumentation and with the guidance of adequate methodological guiding principles, distinct approaches from different philosophical traditions (whether distinguished culturally or by style/orientation) can talk to and learn from one another and jointly contribute to the development of philosophy and of contemporary society on a range of issues of philosophical significance, which can be jointly concerned and approached through appropriate philosophical interpretation and from a broader philosophical vantage point. The foregoing strategic goal and methodological strategy might as well be called “the constructive-engagement strategy of cross-tradition engagement in philosophy” (henceforth, “the constructive-engagement strategy”).

This endeavor is a closely related two-track story. One track is my role in a range of international collective constructive-engagement projects, which I have initiated and coordinated in the past two decades. First, as a contributing editor, I have initiated and coordinated several multiple-year constructive-engagement anthology projects during this period. These include the anthology project “Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions: Two Roads to Wisdom?” (1999–2001 with its end result?), the anthology project “Comparative Approaches to Chinese Philosophy” (2002-2003 with its end result?), the conference-anthology project “Davidson’s Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement” (2002–2006 with its end result?)...
the conference-anthology project “Searle’s Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement” (2004–2008 with its end result”), the reference-book project “History of Chinese Philosophy: A Constructive-Engagement Approach” (2004–2009 with its end result”), the conference-anthology project “Constructive Engagement of Analytic and Continental Approaches in Philosophy: From the Vantage Point of Comparative Philosophy” (co-coordinated with Richard Tieszen, 2010–2013, with its end result”), and the conference-anthology project “Philosophy of Language, Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement” (2006–2018 with its end result”). Second, I was part of the international association project for the International Society for Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy (ISCPWP) with its explicit emphasis on the constructive engagement between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy, which was established in 2002 and for which I served as the founding president. Third, I was part of the peer-reviewed, open-access international journal project for Comparative Philosophy (www.comparativephilosophy.org) with its emphasis highlighted by its subtitle An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches Toward World Philosophy, for which I have been serving as the founding editor-in-chief since the journal made its debut in 2010. Besides the foregoing three sets of international collective constructive-engagement projects, there is one local collective constructive-engagement project, the Center for Comparative Philosophy at San José State University (the first research center that has been established for comparative philosophy in the US with emphasis on the constructive-engagement strategy), for which I served as the founding director (2007–2013). I appreciate the valuable contributions and joint endeavors of all the contributing scholars and colleagues to the foregoing projects as listed in my “Preface and Acknowledgments” in Cross-Tradition Engagement in Philosophy: A Constructive-Engagement Account (2020).

The other track is my personal research agenda and scholarly work, which is closely related to the foregoing track. On this track, the prominent work of mine is a triad of three distinct but complementary monographs, besides my authored reference book and my edited reference book. My most recent monograph, Cross-Tradition Engagement in Philosophy: A Constructive-Engagement Account (2020) (henceforth, CTEP), is intended to give a relatively systematic theoretic account of the constructive-engagement strategy (together with detailed discussions of a number of representative case studies covering issues in philosophical methodology, metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of language, logic, and ethics), which can be viewed as a concluding chapter for me to the aforementioned international collective constructive-engagement projects which I have initiated and coordinated in the past two decades. This monograph is closely related to the previous two monographs of mine, SubstantivePerspectivism: An Essay of Philosophical Concern with Truth (2009) (henceforth, SP) and Semantic-Truth Approaches in Chinese Philosophy: A Unifying Pluralist Account (2019) (henceforth, STACP). Though each of them is a self-contained book, together they constitute a triad whole at an in-depth level in my own research agenda. SP and STACP treat the same specific but fundamentally jointly concerned philosophical issue of truth respectively in view of contemporary Western resources and ancient Chinese resources, which are deeply complementary and unified by the same meta-theoretic account of truth, a unifying pluralist account. CTEP marks the completion of this triad. This most recent monograph also marks a momentous accumulating point of my relevant scholarly work in cross-tradition philosophical engagement in the past two decades.

The foregoing two-track endeavor and its results have brought about a sense of scholarly accomplishment relief to me as a philosopher of Asian descent. However, looking forward and facing up to new challenges, I am still on my journey toward the constructive engagement in my academic pursuit and in my nei-sheng-wai-wang pursuit, both in a Confucian-Daoist way and in ongoing consultation with all constructive resources from the Asian/Chinese traditions, from my current environment, and from my teachers, scholars, and colleagues here.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Dr. A. Minh Nguyen, Chair of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies, for his invitation to contribute this piece to the current issue of the committee’s newsletter on the theme.

NOTES

1. Due to limited space, I have removed most content of the part about how some deeper layers of my life (related to my growing-up environment, relevant resources of the Chinese philosophical tradition, and my family background) bear on my way of being a philosopher of Asian descent and the part about my third major restart to be mentioned later in this essay. These contents might be included in a more complete account on the theme in the future.


3. It can be literally translated as “sageliness within and kingliness without,” which, in plain language, means that one should strive to become a noble person through inside self-cultivation while actively endeavoring to make outside society and others become better (both in a Confucian way).


5. Exactly how to label the foregoing strategic goal and methodological strategy of cross-tradition engagement in doing (comparative) philosophy is relatively unimportant, but it is more inclusive than what is labeled “cross-cultural” philosophy; it is a general engaging way of doing philosophy, instead of being restricted to “cross-cultural” items, as shown by a range of collective constructive-engagement projects in the past two decades to be addressed below.


The Past, the Present, and the Owl of Minerva

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I was born in Hong Kong and my family immigrated to Toronto, Canada when I was five years old. That moment of transition—saying goodbye to familiar people and places, arriving in a new world feeling both excitement and alienation—formed some of my earliest and most vivid memories. Being an immigrant shaped me profoundly. The experience of being on the outside looking in, of wanting and failing to fit into the dominant culture, and at the same time cherishing a somewhat secret Chinese way of being (a lot of it surrounding food)—all this shaped my interior life and was something I struggled with well into my teens. When I got older and learned more about the colonial history of Hong Kong, I realized that Chinese identity was complicated for almost everyone in my family and everyone my family knew, many of whom emigrated in the ‘80s and ‘90s prior to the 1997 handover. As happens in many colonial contexts, the hybridity of Hong Kong is vividly reflected in its language and its food. My broken, colloquial Cantonese is filled with loanwords from English, easily aided by actual English words to supplement my childlike vocabulary. My mother drank Hong Kong-style milk tea every morning (she complained of the weak tea when we moved to Canada, eventually giving it up and switching to coffee) and many weekend brunches were spent in Hong Kong-style diners, where favorites included spaghetti with red sauce and pork chops, instant ramen with spam, egg custard tarts, and French toast. These strange foods are a synecdoche for the complicated sense of Chinese identity that many Hongkongers share, one that remains unresolved in the years since the handover.

As a child, I was offered a simple narrative about why we had to relocate, namely, out of fear of living under the totalitarian rule of communist China (I’ll leave aside the question of whether that narrative was overly simple—this is not a historical essay). Much of this was couched in terms of the freedom of education and its absolute rather than merely instrumental importance. To this day, when asked, my parents will claim that they immigrated for the sake of my education. The idea that a scholarly, intellectual life was worth pursuing for its own sake was thus never foreign to me, and many weekends were spent at the local public library devouring endless piles of books. What is striking to me now about my parents’ commitment to education was that it was a function neither of class privilege (they grew up in relative poverty) nor of their own personal experiences with educational institutions (neither went to college). And in contrast to the stereotypes of Chinese “tiger” parenting, my parents were continually and exceedingly supportive of my intellectual interests and educational choices. When I discovered philosophy through a course in high school taught by one of the most spirited teachers I ever had, it felt like a happy coincidence that the ideas and arguments that floated around our dinner table, in my head, in the music I listened to and the books I read, constituted a tradition and a discipline, something that one could study systematically and pursue professionally. With the guidance of my high school philosophy teacher, I read Plato, Nietzsche, and Marx and, unsurprisingly, became enamored with existentialism. On the verge of the anticipated self-reinvention that often comes with the transition to college, the freedom that accompanied the fact that existence preceded essence held an undeniable allure. Later I would conclude that the existentialist conception of freedom was deeply flawed, but at the age of eighteen, there could be nothing worse than falling into the trap of bad faith.

I did my undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, where, without a good understanding of disciplinary divisions and norms, I started out as a political science major thinking that this was the best way to pursue my burgeoning interest in social and political philosophy. Luckily, I also enrolled in some philosophy classes and quickly discovered that I wanted to spend nearly all my time reading for those courses and reading all the philosophy I could get my hands on. At the time, Toronto had an abundance of used bookstores where my friends and I spent a lot of time and money—at one point I lived next door to my favorite, Balfour Books, which happily remains in business. My studies at U of T were heavy on the history of Western philosophy, and many of my professors placed a strong emphasis on the close reading of philosophical texts. Highlights from this time include classes on Kant and Hegel, reading Schelling in my nineteenth-century philosophy class, a four-person senior seminar on Foucault led by Ian Hacking, and being published twice in the department’s undergraduate journal. I graduated as a “specialist” in philosophy (basically, a super major with more philosophy classes) with a minor in women’s studies. Although I had planned for many years to apply to law school, I changed my mind and applied to MA programs in philosophy, deciding to attend the University of Essex. Like many new graduates, I was eager to travel and live in new places. I didn’t know this at the time, but my graduation from U of T would also mark the end of my time of living permanently in Canada. After completing my MA, I moved to New York and eventually completed my PhD at the New School for Social Research.

Of course, I had not failed to notice that in stark contrast to nearly all the spaces I knew growing up in Toronto, often cited to be the most diverse city in the world, philosophy as a discipline was overwhelmingly white. And unsurprisingly, in nearly all my classes there were more men than
women, and the men talked more and with a confidence that at the time I hardly ever questioned. I was extremely nervous about speaking up in class well into my graduate studies. Complicating matters, I ended up specializing in nineteenth-century philosophy and Frankfurt School critical theory, writing a dissertation, and eventually a book, on Hegel, a towering symbol of Eurocentrism if there ever was one. The irony is not lost on me that Hegel considers the Chinese to be not “properly” historical, claiming that we lack the inwardness characteristic of subjective freedom and have no inherent moral consciousness, not to mention an unsophisticated language that is poorly suited for the development of philosophy and the sciences.

Hegel’s comments notwithstanding (no one can be right about everything), I feel unbelievably lucky that I was able to make philosophy my profession. Securing a job after graduate school felt like a miracle and the dysfunctions of the academic job market, alongside the wider dysfunctions of higher education in this country more broadly, are at this point widely documented. I think there is evidence for both optimism and pessimism regarding philosophy as a profession, although the COVID-19 crisis that hit after I had been invited to contribute this piece undoubtedly brings further uncertainty and extreme cause for concern. On the side of optimism, the discipline appears to be increasingly committed to efforts of diversifying philosophy in a wide range of senses, whether this concerns the canon, previously neglected philosophical subdisciplines, pluralizing philosophical methods, the demographics of students and faculty, or expanding the reach of philosophy outside the academy into the broader concerns and debates of the public sphere. The institutionalization of these various efforts is surely a mark of progress, and I am hopeful that these efforts will have transformative effects on the discipline as a whole. More anecdotally, the recent cohorts of graduate students in my own department have happily created some of the most diverse philosophical contexts that I have ever been a part of.

Less optimistically, and even before the pandemic, many broader trends (again, well documented) have signaled that the current system of academic labor is highly dysfunctional. The floundering academic job market (aptly described in a recent article as operating more like a lottery than a market), the adjunct labor crisis and the opposition to faculty and graduate student unions at private universities, broad cuts to higher education, the pressure on departments and faculty to conduct affairs and research on the basis of inflexible metrics, and the high-stress culture of publish or perish—all of these widely reported trends have negatively impacted the lives of faculty and graduate students, making it difficult to be optimistic about the future of academic philosophy and academia more broadly. One of the most difficult aspects of my job is advising graduate students concerning the job market, because it brings about acute feelings of cognitive dissonance. If Hegel is right that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk, when a shape of life has grown old, then philosophy might be better at helping us to understand our present crisis than offering clear solutions for the future. I’m not sure if Hegel is right, but I have no solutions here—at least none that will not sound naïve or utopian. On the other hand, so-called realism about the current state of affairs is often reactionary, a sign of fear, self-deception, and complacency, a refusal to see reality for what it truly is.

If being an immigrant was the most important defining feature of my childhood, then being a philosopher, or doing philosophy, is surely what shaped my entry into adulthood, to the extent that I have entered it. The uncertainty of what counts as adulthood presently is likely due to the uncertainty surrounding the institutions that were traditionally the hallmarks of adulthood, including work, property, family, and marriage. Rather than struggling against my immigrant status as I did in my childhood, I now cherish this way of relating to myself and the world. I am now almost the same age as my parents were when they moved to Canada, and I often try to imagine my way into what that experience was like for them, moving to an unknown place with a young child, adjusting to a foreign language, searching for work and a new community. Abandoning my earlier commitment to the existentialist conception of freedom, I have come to think that Hegel’s conception is likely the best one philosophy has on offer. Freedom as being at home with oneself in this crisis fosters the same kind of self-awareness with the institutionalization of these various efforts is surely a mark of progress, and I am hopeful that these efforts will have transformative effects on the discipline as a whole. More anecdotally, the recent cohorts of graduate students in my own department have happily created some of the most diverse philosophical contexts that I have ever been a part of.

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Ambiguity, Alienation, and Authenticity

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1. WHO AM I?
“You’re not Vietnamese. You’re American.” My dad said this to me when I was in high school.

I grew up in Saint Petersburg, Florida. So, home for me is approximately 9,760 miles away from Tân Hiêp—a rural district in Vietnam’s Kiên Giang Province—where my dad grew up. As a child, I watched Bugs Bunny, Powerpuff Girls, and Courage the Cowardly Dog. I ate hotdogs on the Fourth of July. I pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States of America every morning in school. I did not have the childhood of my father.

My uncle recently joked to me that I am American Vietnamese. Vietnamese first. American second. The joke’s content betrays the value, in my family, in being Vietnamese over being American. Its nature as a joke betrays my Americanness.

I was not considered Vietnamese enough to be Vietnamese. But I was often not considered American enough to be American. I was always singled out in school for my Asianness. Because of my difference, I was bullied in middle school. It is worth emphasizing that attention was distinctly given to my Asianness, not my Vietnameseess. Particularity gave in to generality and stereotype. Within my
family, Vietnamese identity was salient and distinguished from other Asian identities. But outside of it, much of Asia was, and is, lumped together by many non-Asians. From this perspective, distinctions among people of Asian descent are erased. Hence the familiar joke that all Asians look alike.

When I was seven or eight, my uncle—the same one who recently joked that I am American Vietnamese—was driving me home. We briefly stopped at a red light when a middle-aged, white man and his family drove up next to us, just to our left. With unmistakable contempt, he asked my uncle, “You’re not from around here, are you?” I forget what my uncle said in reply. He had been living in America for more than a decade at this point. America had become his home. The white man continued, “Go back to where you came from!” before speeding off at the green light. I shared my uncle’s feelings of anger and powerlessness.

“Asian American” sounds like an oxymoron for many. But that is what I am. The phenomenology of this existence is at times ambiguous. I have to often ask of myself: How much should I act “like an Asian” now? How much “like an American”? How do those around me perceive me? What is my cultural identity, really? I am, to some extent, alien to both my ancestors and my fellow citizens. As a child, I often felt that no culture I identified with could make room for me. As Gary Mar puts it, the “experience growing up with ‘a childhood among ghosts’ was distinctively Asian American.”

The only way forward is to make peace with my identity, to embrace the authenticity within my difference. For me, being a second-generation Vietnamese American and Asian American is to pick and choose under uncertainty. It is both freedom and paralysis. I am still learning what my Vietnamese American and Asian American identities mean to me, and for me, today.

2. RACISM

Identity, however, underlines difference, which often becomes fuel for bigotry. In today’s era of the coronavirus pandemic, we are all witnessing the otherness of Asians and Asian Americans in broad daylight. Donald Trump has called the coronavirus “the Chinese Virus.” A White House official has called the disease scientifically known as COVID-19 “the Kung Flu.” Stop AAPI Hate, run by the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, received 1,843 reports of anti-Asian discrimination related to coronavirus between March 19 and May 13 this year.

Prejudicial acts against Asian Americans have been violent. In February, a sixteen-year-old Asian American boy was beaten by bullies at his high school. He was sent to the emergency room. His attackers targeted him because he was Asian American and thus, in their eyes, a likely carrier of the coronavirus. In March, three members of an Asian American family in Midland, Texas, were stabbed. One victim was two years old. Another was six years old. The culprit attacked them explicitly “because he thought the family was Chinese and infecting people with the coronavirus.” The victims are not actually Chinese. They’re Burmese.

Despite the fact that Asian Americans are often viewed as a “model minority” (which is itself problematic), we will not achieve equality for ourselves until racism is extinguished altogether in the United States. Not only would it be wrong for Asian Americans to want to share, alongside white Americans, a position of racial domination, we will never be treated justly so long as Asian racism—distinctively white supremacist in nature—exists. Both morality and self-interest thus compel us to support anti-racist work such as that of Black Lives Matter, which has recently garnered national attention.

In the era of the coronavirus, I am made acutely aware of my Asian body. In pre-mask times, one man looked disgusted at me and covered his mouth with his shirt as he quickly walked past me. Another time, a woman walking in my direction bitterly said something about how I better not give her the coronavirus. She spoke just loudly enough for me to hear. Although both events were uncomfortable, they could have been dangerously worse. A two-year-old baby in Texas was stabbed for looking Asian.

This is why I cannot accept Andrew Yang’s response to the blatant anti-Asian racism that has become more prominent in light of the COVID-19 pandemic:

We Asian Americans need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before. . . . We should show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country in this time of need. Demonstrate that we are part of the solution. We are not the virus, but we can be part of the cure.

Here, Yang claims that it is on Asian Americans to show that we are Americans. This is false. It is on everyone else to recognize the Americanness of Asian Americans. Our status as Americans is not something we must do more to deserve. It is tautologous that all Asian Americans are American. If we acquiesce to anti-Asian xenophobia by accepting that our Americanness is something we must earn, we will have lost our way. Morality, dignity, and basic logic suggest a better path.

3. PHILOSOPHY

Given anti-Asian racism, what does being an Asian American philosopher mean to me? I first developed an interest in philosophy in high school when I was questioning the Catholicism and (implicit) moral realism that I had been raised in. After reading J. L. Mackie’s Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, which I enjoyed, I wanted to take philosophy classes in college. I started off at Florida State University. It is there that I became interested in pursuing academic philosophy. I soon transferred to Reed College to finish up my undergraduate studies. I transferred because I wanted the liberal arts college experience that Reed promised. Moreover, I knew that Reed was effective at sending their philosophy majors to top graduate programs in philosophy. (I thank the heavens up above that knowledge is factive.) I happily ended up at the University of Southern California, where I am pursuing my PhD.
I am sometimes unsure what effects my being Asian American has had. I suspect many people’s belief that I am a technical philosopher has something to do with my being of Asian descent. I am myself surprised when other graduate students I’ve only recently met tell me that they see me as a very technical philosopher. But while my work is generally nontechnical in nature, I have discussed and worked on some technical issues in the philosophy of language, metaphysics, and logic. So, I’m unsure what is due to stereotype and what is due to inference from my past behavior.

In any case, even positive stereotypes are unwelcome. As Carole J. Lee notes, “most Asian Americans negatively react to the positive stereotype[s] associated with their group because imposing a stereotype . . . depersonalizes them.”12 Each person of Asian descent is degraded when one of us is seen in that “oriental sort of way.”13 No person of Asian descent is, or will be, the nameless, stereotypical caricature of an Asian. Yet, this caricature provides the standard by which we are all measured.

I will also say that there being so few influential analytic philosophers of Asian descent is alienating. In a 2009 Leiter Reports poll asking who the most important philosopher of the last two hundred years is, everyone in the top forty was white.14 The only well-known analytic philosopher of Asian descent that I can think of is Jaegwon Kim. And I’ve never read him—I don’t work in the philosophy of mind. There are not many well-known analytic philosophers of Asian descent around. One can easily study analytic philosophy and never learn about the work of a philosopher of Asian descent.

Only white men are sufficiently represented in the canon of analytic philosophy. Nonetheless, my own sense is that underrepresentation in the discipline today is less acute for philosophers of Asian descent than for philosophers from other marginalized groups. In 2018, the APA reported that 317 out of 4,581 of their members identified themselves as Asian. So, approximately 7 percent of all APA members, in 2018, identified themselves as Asian.15 Roughly 6 percent of Americans are Asian Americans. This gives some reason to believe that, in the discipline today, philosophers of Asian descent are at least on track to being fairly represented in the discipline.16 But I am hesitant to draw this conclusion. Not all APA members are American. Moreover, the data does not guarantee that philosophers of Asian descent are well-represented in positions of power (e.g., tenured positions). Finally, Asian Americans constitute an extremely heterogeneous group. It should be unsurprising if there are differences in how well different groups of Asian Americans are represented in academia, just as there are broader socioeconomic differences among different groups of Asian Americans.17

In any case, philosophy is still too exclusionary. David Haekwon Kim gives an example showing this quite clearly:

> Just think of what a dissertation or tenure committee would say to a philosopher putting forward, say, a Confucian theory of racial shame or a Buddhist critique of the exoticization of Asian women. Such a philosopher has committed professional hara-kiri.18

To the exclusion of other topics, there is a deeply Western, Eurocentric focus on what topics are held in high regard in academic philosophy. There is no question that the boundaries of what is considered a “respectable” and “serious” philosophical topic must be broadened. This would require dealing a blow to the “conceptual whiteness” of philosophy.19 But that is a good thing. Many philosophers of Asian descent may understandably have a special relationship to some Asian philosophy. But insofar as such philosophy is disparaged, many philosophers of Asian descent will have to endure the “derogation of philosophical thought that resonates with their identity.”20 How could this not make many students of Asian descent suspect that they do not belong in this discipline?

For my part, I have “played by the rules.” I mostly work in traditional areas of analytic philosophy. I do genuinely enjoy thinking about these topics, but this focus is clearly to my professional benefit. Things would be very different for me if I did not work within the confines of analytic philosophy. I doubt that I could have published in influential generalist philosophy journals if my papers were on, say, Vietnamese Confucian ethics as opposed to what my publications were actually on—analytic philosophy of language, metaphysics, and philosophy of biology.

My focus on analytic philosophy is perhaps a consequence of the nonexistence of alternatives at the departments I’ve studied at. (Florida State University is a slight exception, since they offered a few classes in continental philosophy while I was there. But the canon of continental philosophy is overwhelmingly white as well.) You could say that I do not know how else to do philosophy. No Asian or Asian American philosophy courses were ever offered in any of the departments that I’ve studied at.21 I would have definitely at least tried my hand at them if given the option. Maybe I wouldn’t have liked it. Maybe I would have. Either way, if Asian and Asian American philosophy had been held in much higher esteem in the West, I am confident that philosophy would have felt more welcoming for a younger version of myself. There are still many philosophers and students of philosophy who would thrive in a more inclusive climate. As a discipline, I believe that we owe them more than what we have given.

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NOTES

1. “I believe the invisibility of Asian-Americans in our culture has been so deep and enduring that Asian-Americans themselves are often ambivalent about how they would like to see themselves portrayed and perhaps even uncomfortable about being portrayed at all.” David Haekwon Kim, “The Invisible Asian,” interview by George Yancy, The Stone, New York Times, October 8, 2015, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/08/the-invisible-asian/.
My Philosophy Journey to the West
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Philosophizing is a journey. In my case, I have traveled from the East to the West and back again. I hope that this time, with nutrients from both roots, I have journeyed more maturely.

I grew up in a small town on the west coast of Taiwan during 1960s–1980s when Taiwan was still under martial law. My childhood and early adulthood life was austere but stable, at times intense, when the political conflict between mainland China (People's Republic of China) and Taiwan (Republic of China) became heightened. My budding interest in philosophy was kindled by courses in intellectual history taught by amazing teachers in middle and high schools. They opened my eyes to the deeper contents of human history—the ideas, conflicts, planned or unplanned undercurrents that drove historical changes.

I ended up with a philosophy major in college, despite the fact that my parents—like most Taiwanese parents—preferred that I chose a different major that would give me better job prospects than philosophy. They were loving parents, however, and were supportive of my decision once I made up my mind.

I was a rebellious child by Taiwanese standards. In high school, to my parents’ dismay, I worked in a factory to earn some extra spending money so that I could travel with friends. In college, behind my parents’ back, I secretly purchased a small motorcycle. I studied hard but also partied hard—a model student in academic excellence but also a rebel in resisting social norms. After graduation from college, much to the disappointment of many of my professors, instead of going to a philosophy graduate program, I took a three-year break from academics and went into the workforce. The work experience in the factories and companies taught me valuable lessons about the predicament that many blue-collar workers face, the socioeconomic conditions that often privileged the wealthy, the importance of empathy, and the value of the mind. These were lessons that couldn’t be learned in the confines of the academic environment.

My first deep conversion experience did not take place until a motorcycle accident that happened in my senior year in college. Riding the secret motorcycle that I intentionally hid from my parents, I was hit by a car one night after leaving a friend’s house. Not able to move my body or hear or feel anything for an extended period, my mind, in bleak darkness, watched over me. In that surreal moment between consciousness and unconsciousness, life and death, many thoughts—surprisingly—rushed to the mind. I realized that was at a loss. All regrets flooded in, in tandem.

“Who would notify my parents of my death?”

“Dying on the street on a motorcycle that I hid from them. What a scandal it would be!”
"The secrecy of the motorcycle . . . I should not have hidden the fact from them . . ."

"What a sorrow my death is going to cause them though my relationship with them has been strained!"

"What about my annoying siblings? I will never have the opportunity to tell them that I love them even though we've just fought."

"What about my friends?"

"In a few months I will graduate, but there are unfinished projects, and now they will never get finished."

It was an existential moment, an awakening, that taught me the fragility of life in the most personal and vivid way—no one is invincible. We all should strive to live out the fullness of our lives mindfully in the here and now. It is a blessed life if, when death comes, we can leave the world without regrets.

After this personal ordeal, in 1987, a year after my graduation from college, Taiwan ended its martial law enforcement (1949–1987) that had governed the country for almost four decades, the longest imposition of martial law by a government at the time. It was an overwhelming time for the Taiwanese—a complex feeling mixed with both joy and anxiety. The number of newspapers, television and radio stations, civic organizations, protests, etc. mushroomed a hundredfold. A newspaper that typically had six pages per issue grew to fifty pages. Buses had to take alternative routes because the roads were blocked by protesters that had been cooped up for four decades. Freedom is so precious, but we had to learn how to exercise it and how to live in an open society caringly and responsibly. It was not an easy path.

After working for three years in the factories and companies, in 1989 (the year when the student-led Tiananmen Square protests broke out in Beijing, China), I came to the US to pursue a master's degree in philosophy at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, South Carolina, and later a doctorate degree in philosophy at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. These international experiences not only ignited my interest in exploring how the East and the West have distinctly diverging interpretations of what freedom is but also revealed to me how cultures engage philosophy differently.

When I studied philosophy at Tunghai University in Taiwan, all students were required to take courses in history of philosophy from both Eastern and Western traditions. Philosophy majors were expected to demonstrate competence in both areas, not only when they were taking the courses but also in their graduation subject tests in their senior year. In the US, there are typically no senior graduation subject tests in undergraduate philosophy programs that grant bachelor's degrees in philosophy. Nor is basic competency in both Western and non-Western philosophies normally a requirement for a bachelor's, master's, or doctorate's degree in philosophy.

I came to the US to study philosophy for an advanced degree because I felt that Chinese philosophy could benefit from the analytical method for clarity of concepts and argumentative style. I soon discovered, however, that philosophy in the US academy had a jarred preference for doing philosophy analytically, predominantly with arguments constructed by pure logic in abstraction. Because of such preference, other modes of philosophizing—by means of literature, metaphor, analogy, symbolism, or sentiment, for instance—were relegated to secondary importance or even regarded as non-philosophical. Asian philosophy with its embedded poetic sense, its love of paradox, its non-dualist logic that rejects the absolute demarcation of subject and object, among other factors, became a primary candidate for such devaluation. I was astounded by this fact. Nonetheless, I awfully and painfully bought into this all-pervading, prejudicial, analytic mode of philosophizing in my early academic career in the US. In 1997, I was hired by the Philosophy Department at the University of Scranton for a tenure-track assistant professor position for my specialization in Western medieval philosophy and my competence in Chinese philosophy. The first time I taught a Chinese philosophy course, I broke down in tears in private multiple times throughout the semester. It was a complex emotion. I felt that I failed to convey the splendor of Chinese philosophy to students because I did not know how to teach the materials analytically. I also began to doubt whether Chinese philosophy was philosophy because it did not fit the standard Western conception of what philosophy is. It took me years to be at peace with how Chinese tradition engages philosophy in its own unique and valuable way and to feel proud of what Chinese tradition can contribute to contemporary philosophical debates on the good life, virtue, political theories, environmental ethics, and many other subjects. There is no need for Chinese philosophy to fit the standard Western conception of philosophy. Mathematical reasoning, analytical method, and analytical philosophy have their use and validity, but when they become hegemonic, they become barren.

In 2020, twenty-some years after I first started my academic career, this decisive preference for analytical tradition and method in the academy has not changed. This exclusivist perspective of what counts and what does not count as philosophy, coupled with the structure and content of the philosophy curriculum from undergraduate program to graduate program, is still all-pervading—it limits the student's perspective of the world and fabricates a reality that is partial and incomplete. In my expanded list of readings and interests, I began to see that such an exclusionary mentality divides and prioritizes not just certain cultures, but also certain races, sexualities, and genders. Simone de Beauvoir's painstaking analysis of the notion of duality regarding how relative opposites are absolutized into the eternal superior rational self and the eternal inferior irrational other—a means to denigrate women—is equally relevant here in our analysis of the relationship between culture and race, and of the conceptualization of what counts and what does not count as philosophy.1 Bryan W. Van Norden's blunt critique of the long history of philosophical ethnocentrism in American-European universities and his passionate call for a more inclusive global curriculum may annoy some
people. Nonetheless, these provocative statements are prompts for deeper reflection on the future of philosophy and, more importantly, on what kinds of person we want our students to become and what kind of world we want to pass down to future generations.\(^2\)

Looking forward, if we take a look at the hard numbers, faculty of color, women faculty, and women faculty of color in philosophy departments across the US are disproportionately underrepresented. The numbers for these categories are not only the lowest in the humanities but also even lower than those in the natural sciences.\(^1\) I am among the few lucky ones. Although it is difficult to align effects with their causes, one does wonder what makes philosophy historically a discipline so predominantly occupied by a select group of a particular race and sex. Referring back to my earlier point, is it possible that how philosophy has been traditionally defined contributes to this embarrassing disparity? Rather than narrowing philosophy, shouldn’t we be widening it—welcoming as many inquirers and interlocutors as possible in the pursuit of truth and goodness? After all, isn’t this the very nature and purpose of philosophical inquiry? Hegemony is unphilosophical. Homogeneity is the death of philosophy. When asked what challenges I see in the future of philosophy, I hope that philosophy, which prizes itself as a discipline of reason, will become more inclusive and steer away from the dogmatism that undermines the spirit of philosophy.

Always interested in comparative philosophy since my college years, I took a detour to medieval philosophy and analytical philosophy, writing a master thesis on Aquinas’s Third Way with first-order symbolic logic supplemented by modal logic and later a dissertation on Augustinian ethics. I am now finally coming home to the field of cross-cultural comparative philosophy and have taken an interest in the less traveled paths of philosophy of women in Chinese tradition and comparative philosophy on women. I find great enjoyment in conducting research, delivering talks, and teaching on subjects that I think will make a difference in students’ lives, in the community, and in the greater academic circles. I am grateful for where life has taken me and the enjoyment in conducting research, delivering talks, and teaching on subjects that I think will make a difference in students’ lives, in the community, and in the greater academic circles. I am grateful for where life has taken me and the enjoyment in conducting research, delivering talks, and teaching on subjects that I think will make a difference in students’ lives, in the community, and in the greater academic circles.

I am outlining my marginal positions not to complain about them, but as a testimony to the source of my philosophical inspiration. I believe that my experiences as an Asian woman in a Confucian society and then within a white-dominated world has seminal influences on my approach to philosophy, and those experiences have become main philosophemes for my philosophy.

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Doing Philosophy at the Margin

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I sometimes tell myself that I am an expert in being at the margin. I am a woman in a patriarchal society, an Asian in the West-dominated world, doing philosophy in a time when people say that the humanities are dead, and I specialize in Asian philosophy within an academia that is reluctant to accept non-Western philosophical traditions as philosophy. So here I am: an Asian woman in Western academia working on Asian, especially Korean, philosophy.

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at the time were mostly existential, dotted with abstract ideas of social revolt. The situation gradually changed.

During my graduate school days, my philosophical reading began to take a rather political turn. While I was getting my first master’s degree in Korea, one of my professors said in class that the university didn’t hire women. Such an openly discriminatory statement was not illegal at that time, and I don’t know how many students in the class felt offended, but I still remember that moment. That was obviously not the only time that I became aware of gender discrimination in the Confucian and patriarchal Korean society. Up to that point, I was partly shielded from the direct impacts of gender discrimination because I was still in the academic setting at an elite university. Once I graduated college, my gender became a visible element for people to judge me and design my future. Having grown up under a military dictatorship and an authoritarian government and having spent my college days with students’ demonstrations for democracy being fixtures on campus and the streets, I developed a keen sense of the influence of power structure and violence in our lives. These were some of the constant themes of discussion in my college days. One after another, different forms of marginalization and social oppression began to come together in my thinking. I then left Korea to continue my study in the United States where I encountered another layer of discrimination based on my race.

Korea was a relatively homogeneous society, and my gender was the most visible identity that the society discriminated against. In the US, I found myself becoming an Asian woman, and I had to deal with that visible identity. In order to understand this new minority position, I began my own research on Korean Americans and their immigration history as well as changes in immigration laws and the model minority theory. I was also fascinated by African American literature via which I felt so painfully the suffering of the marginalized group. Gradually, I found myself reading and doing research to embrace the reality through which I had lived: inequality and social injustice, being a marginalized group in an authoritarian society, a marginalized group in a capitalist society, a marginalized gender in a patriarchal society, and a marginalized race in a society of white supremacy. And the existential reality with which I began my philosophical journey was a part of this discourse of marginality, as I understood myself to be a finite being, yearning to understand the reason for being finite instead of infinite.

More than any other political philosopher, Jacques Derrida’s works gave me a tool to use in my efforts to articulate what it means to be at the margin, how to identify the schemes through which marginal life is being created and justified, and how to act and react to such discriminations. The fact that Derrida’s philosophy shares similar ideas with the traditional Asian philosophy of Buddhism was one of the major triggers that led me to a cross-cultural philosophy of Buddhism and Derrida’s deconstruction. Since the first time I read Derrida’s work in graduate school, cross-cultural philosophy became a major component of my philosophical investigation.

It is not a secret that non-Western philosophy, including Asian philosophy, is still in a marginal position in the academic discipline of philosophy. But I believe that we are becoming increasingly sensitive to the imbalance in the presentation of philosophical traditions in our philosophy curriculum. Recent publications on the imbalance in the philosophy curriculum, including the West-centrism and male dominance in philosophy, demonstrate that a gradual change is occurring in the domain of philosophy.

At a number of US college campuses, the idea of diversity and inclusion has been a mantra of the twenty-first century. Despite the buzz, it is often not clear how that goal of diversity and inclusion would be actualized in real life. In the meantime, Asians and Asian Americans suffer from a double-minority position. Asians are obviously a minority in American society, but when it comes to “diversity and inclusion,” universities often say that their priority is to focus on “underrepresented” minorities. The model minority theory still hovers over Asian Americans and is being used to avoid giving needed attention to Asian Americans on the university campuses. Of the full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the US, Asian and Pacific Islander females constitute only 4 percent, compared to 35 percent white females. Among those with the rank of full professor, Asian and Pacific Islander females constitute only 3 percent. Marginalization and the practice of exclusion also have impacts on the reception of our scholarship.

The research of Eric Schwitzgebel, a professor of philosophy at the University of California at Riverside, on the citation rate of women and ethnic minorities in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy yielded a revealing demonstration about the impact of ethnicity and gender on the reception and value of our scholarship. Schwitzgebel reports his findings as follows: Among the top fifty most-cited contemporary (born in 1900 and after) authors, females consist of only 2 percent, and minorities comprise 0 percent; among the top one hundred most-cited contemporary authors, 7 percent are female, and 1 percent are minorities. And among the top 267 most-cited contemporary authors, 10 percent are female, and 3 percent are minorities. Schwitzgebel concludes that “[a]t the highest levels of visibility in contemporary mainstream Anglophone analytic philosophy (as measured by citation in the discipline’s leading reference source), men vastly outnumber women, and ethnic minorities are virtually absent.” I am not claiming here that the quality of one’s scholarship is decided only by one’s ethnicity or gender. But it is also true that evaluation of our scholarship is not free from the discrimination our society practices, and being a philosopher of Asian descent means that we do our scholarship despite having such a marginalized position. In this context, such a reality becomes part of our philosophical agenda.

I believe that it is essential for the future of the discipline of philosophy that we broaden the scope of our curriculum and expand our scholarship beyond the mainstream philosophies. When I teach general philosophy courses like Moral Philosophy, I incorporate Asian materials to discuss Buddhist ethics, Confucian ethics, or Daoist positions on morality. Comparing the Buddhist, Confucian, or Daoist positions on ethics with the more conventional moral
Theories of Aristotle, Kant, or Mill offers students a broader spectrum of what it means to lead a good life, how different cultures and philosophical traditions approach ethics from different stances, and what options they have when they engage in moral deliberations.

As Asian-descendent faculty members struggle to earn proper attention for their positions in academia, Asian American students feel frustrated, not seeing a venue to raise their voices and courses that represent their own experiences. As a faculty member of Asian descent, I believe that it is our responsibility to open a path for these young Asian Americans to raise their voices and learn about topics that reflect their life experiences as much as possible that locates them at the center. To do so also means not exclusively singling out Asian Americans from the other marginalized groups and their experiences. Instead, Asian and Asian American philosophers should be able to place the marginal position of Asians in a broader spectrum of marginalized groups in diverse contexts. Everybody must in some way be in a marginal position if we consider the multiple subjectivities through which we live our lives. But we tend to suppress our marginal positions and reveal our central position only, and, by doing so, foreclose our capacity to understand others as well as ourselves.

I tell my graduate students that by the time they become professors, “philosophy” should not mean just Western philosophy, and an introduction to philosophy won’t be filled with Western white males’ philosophy. I also encourage them to cover some of the non-Western philosophers in their Introduction to Philosophy classes, even though non-Western philosophy might not be a field in which they have expertise. Most of the students receive this advice with a positive perspective, which I believe is progress in itself.

To me, to be a philosopher of Asian descent means that I am thoroughly sensitive to the power structure that is at the core of our philosophizing and the discipline of philosophy. It also means that I base my philosophy on the lived experiences of myself and many others who have experienced discrimination and marginalization of different kinds and at different levels. My life experiences also define the nature of what philosophy I wish to do and believe I am doing. In Buddhist philosophy, there is a teaching that, if one sees the world with the Buddha’s eyes, there is nothing that is not a Buddha. If one sees it with the unenlightened being’s eyes, everything just looks like mundane reality. Seeing things as a Buddha means that each and every event in life can be the revelation and experience of truth; and the experience of truth is not limited to a specific gender or race. This is one of the reasons that I categorically oppose the claim that philosophy is a search for the universal truth and that the contexts of doing philosophy can be put in parentheses or do not matter. Truth might be universal, but when the truth happens in an individual’s life and lived events, it happens in context, and the individual understands truth in that specific context. The capacity to link the dots to understand the broader implication of the truth that individuals experience in a singular event is the path to universal truth, not the other way around.

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty made a statement similar to the Buddhist claim I mentioned above when he said, “Philosophy’s center is nowhere and its circumference nowhere.” Everyday events in life can be a philosophical topic for us to think about life and the world, and being a philosopher of Asian descent, for me, means that I am keenly aware of the connections between our lived experiences and our philosophizing.

The Othering of Others has been one of the perennial schemes of marginalization and its justification. The subject is the subject only to the subject, and the subject is the object to other subjects. Others are others from the subject’s perspective, but the subject is the other from that other’s position. At a time of pandemic, hate crimes against Asians and Asian Americans are increasing; women, as the first caregivers at home, must be having an especially hard time in this “stay-at-home” reality. How a philosopher of Asian descent connects with such reality in their philosophizing will be what makes them unique as much as what makes them a part of philosophy in general.

NOTES


My Journey Across the Pacific

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I became hooked on philosophy when I read Descartes’s Discourse on Method as an undergraduate in my home country, Japan. I still remember the thrilling intellectual adventure of doubting everything. I was never able to unhook myself from philosophizing and this passion led me to pursue graduate work in the United States at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.
Three things from my graduate studies stand out in memory. First is the sheer intensity of philosophical reading and writing, both in quantity and in quality. Although I had become fairly proficient in English by then, I was utterly overwhelmed by tackling Hegel and Leibniz, among others, during the first semester. I don’t remember how I survived the proverbial “baptism by fire.”

Another experience still vivid today is my first encounter with the visual images of European formal gardens in the course on nature aesthetics. I now realize that it reveals my ignorance more than anything else, but I remember the shock of seeing those gardens that are so different from Japanese gardens, the only gardens I was familiar with. However, I experienced an even bigger shock when my subsequent research indicated that those formal gardens were regarded as representing nature by the seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century European thinkers. How could such artificial-looking gardens represent nature? This puzzle was one of the reasons that led me to write my doctoral dissertation on the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Today nature aesthetics and environmental aesthetics are well-established, but back then aesthetics discourse was art-centric, which made my research both challenging and exciting. In addition, it was before the ubiquity of the computer and internet, so the research required going through the library card catalogue and I wrote my dissertation on a typewriter, making revisions a true nightmare, particularly when adding or deleting endnotes.

The final indelible memory from my graduate studies is feeling dismayed at the generally positive interpretation of “self-respect,” one of the subject matters in an ethics seminar that focused on various emotions, such as sympathy and envy. The Japanese equivalent, jison 自尊, has a rather negative connotation, more like pride or self-aggrandizement. It is much later that I came to realize that my bewilderment deserved an opportunity for a comparative study in ethics.

For more than thirty-five years, my academic home was the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) until I retired in 2018. Although a certain number of credits in liberal arts is required for a BFA, all RISD students major in art or design; hence, there is no philosophy major or department. It was challenging to teach students who neither had a background in philosophy nor would pursue it, and at times I missed the opportunity to teach an advanced philosophy seminar. However, I soon realized that this challenge was also an opportunity to develop teaching strategies to reach visually oriented, creative students. Specifically, I used many examples, both the slides and actual objects, as a springboard for developing a theoretical discussion. In addition, by necessity, I had to explain philosophical ideas in a non-technical, accessible manner. This way of teaching had a significant impact on my own work. In presenting my ideas, whether orally or in writing, I always tried to make the content comprehensible to the general audience through various examples and jargon-free explanations.

Teaching at RISD also shaped the content of the courses. Being the only Asian instructor in the liberal arts division at that time, I took it upon myself to expose RISD students, predominantly Western until about fifteen years ago, to Asian ways of thinking, by drawing from Confucianism, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, as well as Japanese aesthetics. I included these philosophies and cultural traditions in every course. I also offered a course in Japanese aesthetics every year, which became very popular with a long waiting list. It was exciting to see the students’ horizons expand with various examples and readings that were unfamiliar to them.

However, I made sure that they did not develop a dreamy-eyed appreciation of everything Japanese, which is easy to do particularly with Japanese arts, by also addressing some sober and politically problematic implications of Japanese aesthetics. For example, when discussing the long-celebrated ephemeral beauty of falling cherry blossoms expressed in various classical literature, we also read parts from Emiko Ohnuki-Tierny’s Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History (University of Chicago Press, 2002). When lecturing on the Japanese landscape aesthetics, I included The Theory of Japanese Landscape (日本風景論, 1894) by Shigetaka Shiga (志賀重昂), a geologist and an ultranationalist, who argued for the superiority of Japanese landscape in comparison with that of the rest of the world. Very popular at the time, his theory fueled the nationalistic sentiment during the Sino-Japanese War, paving the way for the Russo-Japanese War and eventually World War II.

As aesthetics was my main field, teaching RISD students was a true privilege, as they had given me constant intellectual nourishment particularly through their studio work. The dissertation on nature aesthetics was my first foray into a heretofore unexplored area in the mainstream art-centric aesthetics discourse. Interacting with RISD students, half of whom are design majors, opened further areas of aesthetic inquiry. I was repeatedly awestruck by design professions that address so many factors: functionality, safety, cost, sustainability, and aesthetics through much theoretical thinking as well as experimentation. I developed a respect for various artifacts and structures that make up our everyday environment and normally do not garner much attention. Above all, I learned that the design of artifacts and built environments has an immense power to affect the quality of life and the state of the world, for better or worse.

What I learned about design led me to think about the role of aesthetics in our everyday life. I was able to develop my thoughts in a series of presentations, articles, and two books published by Oxford University Press (Everyday Aesthetics, 2007; Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making, 2017). In addition to exploring this heretofore neglected area in the Anglo-American art-centric aesthetics, I incorporated my thinking on Japanese aesthetics derived not only from formal research but also from my own experience of living in Japan. My purpose was not so much to introduce Japanese aesthetics per se, but rather to use it as an example of how everyday aesthetic concerns can be addressed. For example, I argue that moral virtues such as care and respect for the other, whether persons or objects, can be expressed aesthetically and illustrate this point by various artistic practices, designed
objects, and daily affairs in Japan. The point of doing so is to demonstrate a general point that moral virtues are integrated into the aesthetic dimensions of people’s daily lives, despite cultural and social differences in specific manifestations.

I also examine the Zen training of transcending self in experiencing the world, which is primarily exemplified in the training for Japanese traditional arts. I have come to appreciate the bewilderment I felt over the notion of self-respect in that graduate seminar by realizing that my Japanese upbringing ingrained in me the moral and aesthetic importance of minimizing self in respecting the other. We are encouraged to listen to the voice of the other, whether human or nonhuman, on its own terms, thereby respecting the other's reality and integrity for what it is. At the same time, I am cognizant of a possible negative consequence of this moral stance that encourages denying one’s own self and sacrificing one's well-being, not only from my personal experience but also from other people’s accounts. Having lived in both Japan and the United States, I recognize the importance of the relationality and interdependence of human existence while maintaining a degree of autonomy of self, a subject much discussed in feminist ethics, care ethics in particular. I am privileged to have two “homes” and appreciate what each has to offer, but at the same time, I cannot deny feeling not fully “at home” in either culture.

However, those of us whose life straddles two cultures are particularly suited to engage in a comparative inquiry, and I would suggest that we have a responsibility to build bridges. I believe that my role in pursuing philosophical aesthetics is not only to introduce Japanese cultural tradition and aesthetics but also, and more importantly for me, to facilitate a fruitful dialogue between Japanese philosophy and Western philosophy by focusing on a common theme, such as the aesthetic expression of moral virtues that I mentioned. Trained in Western philosophy, I took it for granted that there are distinct subdisciplines within philosophy, such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. However, such fundamental framework is subject to questioning when approached from the Japanese perspective. Aesthetics in the Japanese tradition, for example, is not theorized from a spectator’s point of view regarding beauty and art, a dominant mode of inquiry in Western aesthetics, but rather is practiced as a way of life not only by professionals but also by the general populace in pursuit of the good life and moral goodness. This is not to judge one framework to be better than the other. Rather, by developing an understanding of a philosophical and cultural framework different from what is most familiar (and, for many of us, what is most familiar in this context is Western philosophy), we can appreciate each worldview’s strengths as well as its limitations. Intellectual honesty and integrity demand this effort, particularly from philosophers. Citing Marilyn Frye and María Lugones, Kathleen Higgins promotes “collaborative dialogue” by overcoming the “arrogant perception” that takes one’s own position as superior to those championed by members of other groups and instead cultivating “loving perception” through sympathetic and imaginative understanding.

Philosophy today has come a long way from when I was a graduate student. At that time, non-Western philosophy, if referenced at all, was regarded more as an exotic curiosity. Multiculturalism, feminism, decolonization, politics of difference, and critiques of white-, male-, and hetero-centric regimes are welcome developments. However, old habits die hard and the Anglo-American philosophical discourse still favors argumentation that encourages competitiveness and combative. Of course, argumentation is a necessary tool of philosophizing, but sometimes it is used as an end in itself. Instead, venues such as conferences and journals should be an opportunity for us to think and explore collaboratively. Disagreements and critiquing are obviously indispensable for such projects, but they are necessary because we want to use them as a means of advancing our thinking together.

Philosophy still suffers from a perception among the general populace that it is a purely abstract and speculative endeavor with little relevance to people’s daily lives. Philosophers are viewed as talking only to other philosophers and I admit that I share this perception. Philosophy in the West started with Socrates walking around the city and engaging Athenians in a dialogue over concepts that permeate their everyday lives. It was not an academic exercise that has significance and relevance only to other academicians. While specialized training is necessary for philosophers, my vision and hope for our discipline is to engage in a discourse that “matters.” The work we produce should be the kind that helps the audience members, both philosophers and nonphilosophers, illuminate and critically examine assumptions governing their lives. With the proliferation of open-access publications and the ease of global communication, opportunities abound for philosophers to engage in public discourse. This is an exciting time and teaching can be done beyond the classroom walls. Whatever form it takes, the future of philosophy depends upon being socially engaged in terms of both the content and the format of the discussion. We need to ensure that philosophy does not become a purely academic exercise that is irrelevant to people’s lives and social discourse.

NOTES

The Fluidity of Identity: Moving Toward a Philosophy of Race

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Asian identity has never been an easy category to inhabit, except in terms of history, nationalist politics, immigration rules and quotas—“official” categories of public policies and international relations. The fluid contours of identity are inevitably eclipsed when identity becomes reified
in these categorizations. To be a philosopher of Asian descent changes in meaning as context changes. In 2002, to be a philosopher of South Asian descent meant that my focus was on how Muslims were undergoing sudden and extreme persecution under the state. But, as I entered the job market, that research elicited interview questions (at multiple institutions) such as “Can you teach Islamic philosophy?” “Are you Muslim?” The latter question was illegal, but indicative of an academic, intellectual, and even philosophical entitlement, secured through institutional power. Entitlement, I now understand, is the thread that runs through the dynamic between myself, loosely construed as a political philosopher of Asian descent, and mainstream (even progressive) academics who police the gates of philosophy.

Growing up a South Asian immigrant in the lush suburbs of Central Jersey was a dream come true for my father, but a nightmare for me. By the third grade, what I only later understood in graduate school as the racism of a teacher and many classmates left me alienated for the duration of grammar school. During my first year of high school, my family moved closer to New York City so my parents could be closer to the store that they owned and ran. We settled in a working-class town on the Hudson River, majority white Irish and Polish, but with a significant population from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Portugal, and Puerto Rico. It was liberating to be among other teenagers who looked somewhat similar to me.

Until I graduated from college, I never imagined becoming an academic, let alone a philosopher. I learned quickly that what qualified me as a top student at my public Northern Jersey high school had not translated into the broad education or the solid study skills of my extremely smart peers at the elite West Coast university to which I had fled. I found the readings in my political science and English classes overwhelming and difficult to digest. I had no idea how to write a blue book essay exam; I didn’t even know how to study for one, but I learned, thanks to better-prepared and generous classmates.

But the West Coast was where I began to develop a racial consciousness that counteracted my shame about being an immigrant and “Indian.” I began to realize that while “Asian” had mostly replaced “Oriental” as a descriptive term, it remained a term of art designating (and often denigrating) a long-standing “Other” against a dominant whiteness and a Black Other. I hadn’t yet learned to think of myself as brown or as a person of color. The latter term seemed bellicose, judging from the graduate students who used the term at UC Berkeley. During that time of radical protests and rent control, the ethnic and racial politics of California seemed full of potential for change and justice. And simultaneously, I began to take a range of fascinating classes in Berkeley’s Rhetoric Department. Through the spectrum of readings, from imperial novels, to Roman law, to modern political theory, suddenly questions that I had about how rights were proven or anchored were being articulated and answers to them were broached. These were not entirely satisfactory answers, but I’d found discourses that showed me how questions about the limits of rights and of inclusion gave form to question of the “we,” and to the contours of what a political imaginary might look like. One new young faculty member encouraged my writing and thinking during the last two years of college; for the first time, I allowed myself to believe that I might be worthy enough for graduate school.

At that time, I was still considering law school, but realizing that I had no desire to practice. My interest in law was conceptual and intellectual. After some drawn-out considerations and half-starts, I finally traveled back east to enroll in a graduate program in philosophy. I chose the New School Graduate Faculty, in part because it came the closest to offering a liberal arts PhD program.

Beginning that graduate work, I was interested in political, legal, and social philosophy, considered from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives, but I did not have critical perspective linked to my identity as a philosopher of South Asian descent. At the time, the question of identity as a vehicle of philosophical exploration was denigrated by the Marxist and structuralist faculty and hence by a number of my white classmates as well. In retrospect, that was a core moment in what we now think of as the battle over “identity politics,” which was typically derided by both the white, non-feminist left and the right. “Identity politics” was a term of disparagement, used when insisting that there were sounder principles than identity from which to think philosophically. Likewise, designating the camp of identity politics allowed “real” philosophers to police the borders of what constituted “real” philosophy. Race in the US context was not a common category at the time, even though we read texts by Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, and Albert Memmi in relation to the persecution of Jews during the early twentieth century. Race, like identity, was still considered an unsound basis by which to engage in (again) “real” philosophy, even as gender and feminist philosophy had become more commonly accepted bases for social and political philosophy.

And yet, from the beginning of my graduate work, the questions that involuntarily bubbled up often had to do with political and social exclusion; with the limits of the imaginary “we”; and with the role of force as it masqueraded as consent. I did not “discover” the philosophy of race until I was nearly finished with my dissertation, a good decade after I began graduate school.

I’m still not sure I understand what it meant, back then, to be a philosopher of Asian descent, but I do understand what it meant to be a nonwhite student—a brown woman, a student with limited means, and an immigrant. I experienced—I still do experience—having my comportment and questions met with perplexity or suspicion by a number of faculty and classmates. There was a certain sense of entitlement that went hand in hand with being seen as a “serious young scholar”: feeling as if one had the right to take up a professor’s time, to take up space in their office, to ask questions for which one did not have answers. Doing political philosophy, let alone doing the philosophy of race, or studying the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion was not obviously on the side of the “real” or the “serious” then, even before one began to interrogate how one’s experience shaped and was shaped by categories.
I still don’t consider myself to be a philosopher of Asian descent. In part, this is because the term “Asian” is primarily associated with those of East and Southeast Asian descent, at least in the US. Still, I appreciate that the term “Asian American” has radical origins, inspired through the 1960s politics and the Black Power Movement, as a way to unite Japanese, Filipino, and Chinese students. If at all, I refer to myself as “South Asian” these days, mostly as a resistance to my parents’ generation of defining themselves in nationalist terms. The politics of being “Indian” is implicitly a way to distinguish oneself from being Pakistani. This is a distinction that is still less than one hundred years old and borne through the politics of colonialism and of battling “colonized intellectuals,” as Frantz Fanon refers to them. The colonized intellectuals, or the colonial bourgeoisie, carry on the divisive practices of their British colonial forbears—so even “South Asian” is more a term of resistance than easy description.

Becoming the sort of philosopher of South Asian descent I am, then, has included reading eclectically as I reconsidered a different approach to identity—or to race and racial divisions. I began to think about what I call a “technology of race,” which became the basis of my first book, Toward a Political Philosophy of Race (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009). When I began writing it, I was concerned about the way that, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Muslims in the US from various ethnic and national backgrounds—Indian, Afghan, Egyptian, Indonesian—were facilely grouped together as a population as if they had been a race. Moreover, the grouping clearly wasn’t an innocent error, but part of a narrative of vilification; as if they had been a coherent group who threatened the safety and security of (non-Muslim) Americans. I saw that the positioning was similar to the production of other groups in history who were perceived as threats—Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and, of course, African Americans, for whom this kind of targeting has been continuous and unceasing.

I was also reading Martin Heidegger’s writings on technology and Michel Foucault’s writings on technique as I considered that these identities were products of history, social context, and political tensions. So I began to understand race not as a biological or descriptive category, but as a politically fluid and expedient category, which could function semiotically to signal certain social hierarchies. I tried to test the soundness of this approach by researching how particular racial identities were produced by historical and political divisions, and how divided populations were then the attempt to manage through deceptively neutral, liberal procedures such as constitutional frameworks, laws, and public policy. I used the occasion of writing that book to argue that there was a subterranean political ontology that supported certain exclusionary understandings of rights. Liberal rights were not the neutral frameworks of ideal theory; they were regularly deployed to include or exclude certain populations as convenient to secure state power. I researched and studied a wide-ranging set of examples of technologies of racialization and their political and economic contexts. One of the examples that I drew upon was that of Punjabi-Mexicans (or Mexican-Hindus, as they were also called, even as many of the Punjabi men were Sikh or Muslim), a group that emerged through the constraints of Alien Land Laws, anti-miscegenation laws, and tactical attempts to avoid being the target of the state’s wrath for both Mexican women and Punjabi men who had migrated to the western coast of North America. My argument in that book emerged from my attempts to grapple with the complexity of race and ethnic identity and the realization that identity is too complicated to be static or stable.

In the years since the publication of that book, I have continued to explore the way that racial divisions were managed through the vehicle of national security policies, including, for example, the USA PATRIOT Act, various related “safety” measures used to target and harass Muslims. This scholarship, too, is built on the notion that race is a technology used to produce certain kinds of social identity and political outcome.

I have recently completed another book, provisionally titled The Veil: Dismissal, Excruciation, and the Racial Politics of Neocolonialism (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), which deepens these same considerations. There, I approach the production of identity by complex external forces; forces I study with an approach I call “interstitiality.” Interstitiality builds on the notion of intersections as described by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, but suggests that we likewise consider the invisible institutions, such as building codes and regulations, that inform the design, history, and background for the (institutional) buildings inhabited by people on city blocks. These interstices intervene to amalgamate or disarticulate group identities in light of external institutions such as anti-discrimination laws, labor markets, hiring processes, and other public policies. So, for example, I explore the way that Muslim women of color and Black Muslim women who wear the hijab are regulated and disciplined in the US. These contestations are not visually explosive or spectacular, but rather procedural and orderly. They take place in workplaces and courtrooms, through dress codes and judicial opinions, and allow for actors in liberal judicial and economic contexts to deny that they are engaging in discipline.

While I can’t trace a direct trajectory between my racial self-awareness and my work as a philosopher, my attention to the relationship among identity, power, and race has certainly been compelled by the tensions of inhabiting a nonwhite body in the US and informed by a variety of philosophical tools. I continue to be gripped by the complexity of identity and power and their political consequences.

NOTES


2. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 44.


4. Michel Foucault, Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76, trans. David Macey (New York:
“Wogs” and Philosophers

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1. EXPERIENCES
Like some philosophers I know, in general I do not enjoy most philosophy conferences very much. There are several reasons for this.

First, it is an open secret that the vast majority of sessions at many philosophy conferences are just not very good, philosophically; I have even heard some very distinguished philosophers say they go to conferences mainly for the locations or to meet old friends. Indeed, it is often more stimulating philosophically to browse through book exhibits, if any, at conferences rather than to attend many of the sessions; and usually more fun to talk with philosophers one-on-one or in small groups. Of course, as many say, conferences are mainly about networking, and that is perhaps a necessary evil one has to indulge in if one is a graduate student or in the early stages of one’s profession or trying to promote one’s career or work; and speaking of evil, an internationally renowned philosopher once said that there is a stench of evil around some of our biggest conferences.

Second, many conference locations have been described as the cultural backwaters of North America, where cheap hotels seem to be the biggest draw for organizers. For example, I was at a conference in a much vaunted town some years back, and my lasting memory is of sitting in a dive by the hotel, chugging cheap beer, and looking at the Confederate flag.

Third, and perhaps most pertinent to this special issue, racism and xenophobia have not yet been completely eradicated in our society, and philosophers are, for better or worse, not completely immune to social influences. A fair bit has been written in recent years about the sexism and misogyny faced by women in our profession, or the racism that Black philosophers have to deal with. These discussions are all very welcome, of course! But in addition, we must also look at the experiences of members of other marginalized groups such as LGBTQ people, Muslims, the disabled, immigrants, Native Americans, Mexicans, Latinx people (who incidentally, as a group in the US, numerically surpassed Blacks some years back, even if many philosophers seem not to have realized this), multiracial people, working-class philosophers, philosophers who are first-generation college graduates, and Asians. As a member of the last of these named groups, let me elaborate by listing some episodes below; though I will not name names, considering the tendency of some philosophers to place greater faith in lawyers and defamation or libel lawsuits than in their own philosophical abilities, even though philosophy is said to be excellent training for the law rather than the other way around!

- I have been attending and presenting at philosophy conferences, including some APA meetings, for over twenty-five years now. It has not been uncommon to find people walking out while I am reading a paper. I have also sometimes had rude and incompetent commentators, people who give their comments to you on the spot rather than at least a few days in advance as many conferences request, and who also simply ignore repeated emailed requests to send comments in advance.

- At many conferences and presentations, I have often had male and, yes, sometimes female philosophers too yelling at me. Like many Asians, I have the professional curse of looking younger than my age, as a distinguished philosopher in New York City once noted. There are some no doubt who have looked at me and wondered, even if not always very consciously, “What the heck is this brown kid with an accent talking about?” Such philosophers only generate a lot of heat without any light. They cannot disagree without being disagreeable. I am reminded of an overlooked passage in Plato’s Republic VI (487c-e) where after he’s talked about philosopher-rulers, Plato himself admits that most philosophers are not fit to rule as they either become cranks or are useless. Think about all the philosophers you know, and judge for yourself if Plato is right!

- The dean of a supposedly reputable Midwestern private liberal arts college asked me explicitly about my immigration status when I was one of the three finalists flown in for an on-campus job interview and talk many years back; I am now a naturalized US citizen and believe it is illegal to ask candidates such questions explicitly and use the information as a basis not to hire people because of their citizenship status or national origins.

- The chairperson of a philosophy department once asked me if I count as “a minority.”

- A woman philosopher who holds an endowed chair asked me once to my face if I am Muslim, which I am not, for the record; not that there is anything wrong with it, to borrow the famous line from Seinfeld.

- A wealthy, Ivy-League-educated philosopher laughed when I told another philosopher I teach Asian (or Eastern) philosophy and also write in it, and said dismissively that he finds it hard enough to do Western philosophy as is. He just brushed aside the fact that I hold philosophy degrees from universities in three different countries (the US,
England, and India), in three different continents, and so might presumably know something about non-Western philosophies.

- Editors sometimes do not respond at all to my correspondence, despite requests for brief acknowledgements; after all, like Barack Obama, I have a funny name! Some editors in New York City have even told me to write to their offices in another country, even though I live and work a short train ride away.

- Editors and referees often sit idly on my work for many months when they know (or figure out) my identity.

- I wonder sometimes if I am not taken as seriously for some excellent philosophers of Asian descent such as the late Jaegwon Kim (1934–2019), to whose memory this issue is dedicated, made it to the top of our profession!

- I had trouble finding a place to rent in a small town in supposedly progressive New England when I worked there for a bit many years back; many landlords were wary of me.

- My car was vandalized in Boston, the self-styled “university capital of the world,” about four weeks after 9/11 when the war in Afghanistan began; I have often been told I look vaguely Middle Eastern, which I am not as a matter of fact. Of course, I condemn 9/11 and terrorism, and in fact I was more shaken by 9/11 than many of my American friends!

Do all of these taken together—and I could add more to this list—amount to a kind of bias, even if not always very overt, explicit, or conscious? You be the judge!

2. SOLUTIONS
So what are you to do if you are a graduate student or junior faculty member of Asian descent, if you have brown skin or East Asian facial features, for instance? You probably will face some typecasting and, dare I say, at least some unconscious bias. But do not despair and abandon hope, for some excellent philosophers of Asian descent such as the late Jaegwon Kim (1934–2019), to whose memory this issue is dedicated, made it to the top of our profession! Here are some ways in which you can deal with all this and even turn it to your advantage.

- Make yourself as marketable as possible. Back in my day, many jobs were in history of philosophy or ethics. Work in these areas if you so desire, though at the same time I would strongly urge you to seriously consider other options in light of your interests, talents, and abilities, because philosophy departments nowadays hire more outside those areas in, for example, logic, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, and aesthetics.

- Be prepared to have Asian philosophy at least as important as non-Western philosophies. Stress that many of the figures and texts we deal with in Asian philosophy—Confucius, Laozi (if he existed), the Upanishads, the Buddha, and so on—predate Christ by a few centuries, and they are also often temporally prior to Socrates. Christ himself lived in Asia, by the way!

- Emphasize that there is a lot of wisdom in these traditions and they are philosophically very rich
and diverse in their own right, though we should also question them just as we do when we read Western philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Quine.

- Stress that about 6 percent of the US population is Asian, though this figure is likely to be revised once the results of the 2020 US Census are finalized; many states in the Western US have particularly large Asian populations.

3. “WOGS”

Many American philosophers may not know the word “wog,” featured in the title of this essay, though my British, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand friends will. Like the n-word, it is a highly offensive word, one that comes from British slang. Its precise origin and meaning are unclear, though you can look up both print and online dictionaries. I have come across suggestions that the word is highly derogatory for dark-skinned foreigners. I have even heard that “wog” may be an acronym—W.O.G.—for “Westernized Oriental Gentleman,” perhaps coined in elite, private British schools at least as far back as the last century; you can imagine the last of these three words being said in a sly, slightly accented way!

There are philosophers who see me as just that—a “wog”—regardless of any qualities of head and heart I might have.

The Story of One Male Asian American Philosopher

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My parents immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s and I was born in Chicago in the mid-seventies. My father’s job as a petroleum engineer took us first to Texas and then, when I was five, to Saudi Arabia. I made a few friends at my international school with whom I played football and soccer, jammed guitar in a heavy metal band, and rode my motorbike in the desert. Because the Saudi government mandated that everyone not born in the country had to leave for at least thirty days each year, our family also spent significant amounts of time traveling, mainly to visit relatives and friends in the US, India, and Germany.

When the first Gulf War began in 1991, my family was living by an army base that was being bombed. My brother was already living in the States. The war was too scary for my mom. She packed me up and moved me to California. I found high school academically challenging. As a young child, I had been diagnosed with dyslexia and now found myself struggling with algebra and writing. In high school, about the only thing I was decent at was playing guitar. But even then, most of my band mates thought it was an oxymoron that I was a “rhythm guitarist” because I had no rhythm—I fell out of time all the time.

When it was time to decide where to go to college, I wanted to be far away from the high school I was at in Southern California. I picked Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, seven hundred miles up north. It was one of the most beautiful campuses I’d ever seen, nestled deep in the redwood forests.

I first discovered the term “philosophy” in an encyclopedia around age twelve. Long before I knew what the study of logic and moral philosophy was, I had found myself attracted to what falls under those terms, such as Charles Sanders Peirce’s law ((P → Q) → P), which I also found in the same encyclopedia, and Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, which I stumbled across at a bookstore at age fifteen.

My full conversion to the philosophy major came after I took a class in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy, and was introduced to the debates over faith and rationality, Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and Spinoza’s *Ethics*. I discovered that I didn’t think that evidence settled whether God exists, and also that I am not a Hindu. Later I became interested in the philosophy of law and the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty because of his discussion of two hands touching each other where one cannot say that there is a subject and an object. I also discovered critical thinking.

My parents grew up in Nehru’s India where the study of science and math was seen as bedrock and, thus, encouraged me towards a profession that would provide a steady income, preferably as a medical doctor, an engineer, or a lawyer. They were worried that my choice to pursue philosophy would be seen as a failure of sorts and I’d be considered someone who simply wasn’t good enough at math and science and had been forced to “settle.” They, like many Indians of their generation, associated philosophy with either European existentialism, theology, or Indian Hindutva—a pro-Hindu nationalist movement that either they nor I accept. My choice to pursue philosophy was seen as a waste of a prized opportunity. I gathered that their circle of friends would have said, “We have come all the way from India to America so that you can have an opportunity to get a good education, and now you want to study philosophy?”

At the end of my sophomore year, a friend at UCLA encouraged me to apply to their philosophy department because of my interest in logic. I applied and gained acceptance, which was doubly good because my parents had recently divorced and my mom needed me back in Southern California. At UCLA, I was introduced to mathematical logic by Tony Martin and Kit Fine, reintroduced to medieval philosophy by Calvin Normore, the philosophy of language by David Kaplan, Kant and the philosophy of mind by Tyler Burge, and Wittgenstein by Andrew Hsu. I found myself attracted to the content as well as the method of doing philosophy. It felt honest: I was being encouraged to search for the truth, to be precise, and to challenge my classmates to do their best to present and defend an argument.
At UCLA, the standards were high and the readings were difficult. I spent all my time walking, reading, and talking. I would do proofs on the back of pizza boxes at the shop I was working at. Nothing seemed more important to me than understanding philosophy. I liked inspecting the deductive status of arguments: validity and soundness. I also liked to think in terms of basic logics, such as first-order predicate logic. It didn’t matter what the arguments were about.

I did find it odd that there appeared to be little respect for phenomenology, and when I asked about Indian philosophy, I was told that the department didn’t offer courses in that area. It wasn’t clear why these things were excluded, but I went with it, because I found my first love in philosophy: modal logic.

I was fascinated by how possible worlds semantics pushed us to think about the most fundamental questions concerning reality: the relation between the possible and the actual. When a friend gave me a copy of Stephen Yablo’s “Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?” I remember loving the style of argument and the question: How does our ability to conceive things guide us with respect to knowing what is possible?

It was my interest in the work of David Chalmers on conceivability and consciousness that led me to pursue graduate school at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where I worked with Kevin Falvey, Tony Brueckner, and Nathan Salmon. I wrote my dissertation on the epistemology of modality focusing on the work of Stephen Yablo, David Chalmers, and Timothy Williamson. To this day, I continue to work on issues in that field. The majority of my work is exploring how knowledge of essence informs our judgments about what is possible and necessary.

In addition to my dissertation work, I expanded my interests out to the philosophy of economics, moral philosophy, and business ethics. I got my first taste of experimental philosophy when Stephen Stitch et al. published their famous study of how, unlike Westerners, Indians don’t share the Gettier Intuition (that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge). I became curious about intuitions and how culture might shape them, but also wondered why no one was talking about Indian philosophy, but only about how Indians react to examples from Western philosophy. Later in my career I devoted years of research working on intuitions in philosophical methodology with people in experimental philosophy and analytic philosophy, such as Edouard Machery and Thomas Grundman.

After my PhD, I was honored to have been hired by San José State University, where I am now a Professor of Philosophy and former Director of the Center for Comparative Philosophy. I now teach a wide range of courses from philosophy of mind to business ethics. I was working at. Nothing seemed more important to me than understanding philosophy. I liked inspecting the deductive status of arguments: validity and soundness. I also liked to think in terms of basic logics, such as first-order predicate logic. It didn’t matter what the arguments were about.

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After my PhD, I was honored to have been hired by San José State University, where I am now a Professor of Philosophy and former Director of the Center for Comparative Philosophy. I now teach a wide range of courses from philosophy of mind to business ethics. I was fortunate early in my career as SJSU supported my travel to Germany, Brazil, and Australia to do work in analytic epistemology on the topics of modality and intuition. During this part of my career, I was passionate about the philosophy of economics also. When I was up for my first sabbatical, I considered getting a second doctorate in the field. However, my mom was diagnosed with cancer and midway through a summer school I was attending in Budapest, I decided that I had to go back to California. I couldn’t choose a second degree over my mom; she had always been there for me. While my plans for the second degree had failed, my passion for the field didn’t. I still teach courses in the philosophy of economics and applied topics, such as the prison industrial complex.

My colleagues at SJSU introduced me to comparative philosophy—the late Richard Tieszen, Carlos Sanchez, Bo Mou, and Karin Brown. My introduction to Indian philosophy came via Purushottama Bilimoria, who had just moved to Berkeley in 2009. I met him at a talk by Hubert Dreyfus at SJSU, where I was responding to Dreyfus’s critique of John McDowell. We found we had similar interests and he asked if I wanted to work on a paper for a festschrift on the work of Jayshankar Lal Shaw. I didn’t know Shaw’s work at the time and was initially hesitant, but after reading a few articles that Purushottama suggested on classical Indian epistemology I was hooked by the methodology and clear arguments about the self and perception.

When I discovered that Evan Thompson was teaching a seminar on Buddhism at the University of California at Berkeley, I signed up immediately, wanting to learn more about Indian philosophy of mind. The seminar turned out to be well attended by neuroscientists, philosophers, and Buddhist scholars, and I was immediately attracted to the interdisciplinary vibe there (the excitement I felt reminded me of the first time David Kaplan explained to me the problem of quantifying into modal contexts). I realized I wanted to learn not only about Indian philosophy but also about Asian philosophy and phenomenology in general. I reconnected with my desire to engage a broader range of philosophers in different traditions who could be accessed in English, since I didn’t know Sanskrit. When I finally took my first sabbatical, I spent time formally training in Indian philosophy with Jayshankar Shaw (by now I knew him well).

As I got deeper into the discipline, I found myself questioning why these thinkers were never part of the traditional philosophy curriculum (a thought that many people have about the traditions they enjoy, which are left out of the canon). Some of the people I was reading wrote in English and had only died recently, such as Bimal Krishna Matilal and Daya Krishna. In advocating for the need to include Indian philosophy into the canon, I do not want to imply that these traditions are better than other traditions. Rather, I cannot defend the idea that there is a principled reason to exclude them: neither their method nor their intellectual excellence seemed any different from what I had studied.

My early attempts to advocate for Indian philosophy were met with resistance. It was implied that since I had no Sanskrit training and there is no such thing as Indian philosophy (only Indian religion), it was inappropriate for me to advocate for its inclusion.

Surprisingly, the most frustrating conversations I’ve had were with Indians raised in India. The presumption that many make is that the only reason anyone would talk about
such things is because they are defending Hindutva. They can understand wanting to be a classical Indian musician or artist, but Indian philosophy is backwards-tending to them. It seems unfair that such an amazing rich philosophical tradition has effectively been hijacked by Hindu nationalists and their religious-nationalist agenda.

It has been ten years since I became reacquainted with Indian philosophy, the last of which I have spent trying to make work on perception in Indian philosophy relevant to analytic discussions. I am now in my mid-forties and will perhaps never make a massive breakthrough on a topic as heavily researched as perception. However, I remain convinced that we have a lot to gain from a cross-traditional conversation in philosophy. I hope to synthesize an understanding of perception that cuts through these different traditions and get people to talk to one another.

I’ve come to appreciate that friction is not always bad. Cross-cultural methods improve analytical and experimental methods by providing a kind of epistemic friction that takes one outside of one’s philosophical echo chamber in an epistemically responsible way.

Fit or Flight: Ethical Decision-Making as a Model Minority

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INTRODUCTION
I am working on this article about a month into a widespread transition to working from home, as per public health recommendations in the face of COVID-19. But the face of COVID-19 has also been Chinese, an image that has been maintained by a variety of sources, such as media photos and the US president’s continued insistence on referring to it as the “Chinese Virus.” Overt incidents of anti-Asian racism have been on the rise all over North America, even in my small-ish Canadian city that has among its tourist attractions the oldest Chinatown in Canada. I find myself wondering whether I would want to travel to the US in the future, even when the borders reopen. Worries about racist backlash against Asian Americans have been the subject of various op-eds, and one of note was written by a recent former Democratic presidential candidate, Andrew Yang, who notes incidents of racism that he has experienced personally, but concludes his piece by writing:

Now, Yang writes this despite noting that many frontline medical workers are of Asian descent, and that many Japanese-Americans volunteered for service during World War II (which did not seem to prevent them or their families from being sent to internment camps). But his prescription here highlights a longstanding tension that faces many Asian Americans as “model minorities,” and academic philosophers from underrepresented groups, which is the extent to which we do and ought to try to “fit in.” The idea of “fit” is difficult to pin down in the first place. As part of basic equity and diversity training for hiring committees at my institution, we are often cautioned about the extent to which we rely on fit, as an abstract and often unmeasurable idea. A candidate’s fit with a department can often mean that they exemplify many of our existing gendered, racialized, ableist, and classist stereotypes about the ideal of a philosopher. Sometimes, committee members will be skeptical about these caution, thinking that their sense of who would make a good colleague—one of the things captured by “fit”—is just as important as anything else in a candidate’s dossier, but many such skeptics are people who have likely never worried about the extent to which they did or did not fit in.

In this piece, I want to highlight a dilemma related to fit that I think Yang’s quote illustrates nicely. I do not expect that this will be groundbreaking for many who have struggled with these kinds of issue, but I hope that this way of laying out the problem will at least be helpful. One horn of the dilemma is the extent to which fitting in, to whatever degree possible, might personally enable a person to change a problematic culture overall. This type of strategy might be familiar to anyone who waits until tenure to work on the topics they really want to pursue, topics that they think should be taken more seriously in the field as a whole. While I (and I think World War II history) certainly disagree with the idea that displays of local patriotism by ethnic minorities will mitigate racism in general, they could potentially benefit people as individuals. Hanging a Canadian flag in your window won’t solve the problem of racism, but it may make your white neighbors nicer to you and give you the breathing room you need to support your family members. But the other horn of the dilemma is that there are wider ethical consequences to fitting in that reach beyond impact to the individual or even their community. In many cases, when we choose to fit in (instead of refusing to conform or just leaving a community altogether), even when it is to put ourselves in a position to make change, we run the risk of further entrenching the problematic (typically white colonial) standards to which we were being held in the first place.

I will focus primarily on the latter horn of the dilemma, as well as the ways in which these issues of fit play out in the case of Asian Americans, since this is my own background. But I do think that something like this more general problem is also faced by many of those who are seen as “respectable enough” or who might pass as members of more privileged groups. I also note that a precondition of this dilemma is that one even has the option of trying to fit in in the first place instead of just leaving, and for many others the situation is much different. But this is not an exercise in comparative experiences of oppression, simply
a discussion of some ways in which it affects some ethical decision-making in some people’s lives.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE THIS PHILOSOPHER OF ASIAN DESCENT?

In terms of my ethnic background, I am an immigrant of Malaysian Chinese descent. My mother’s family sometimes identifies us as “nonya,” referring to people descended from members of the Chinese diaspora, from the Southern provinces, who settled in Malaysia. But I grew up in Canada speaking English and not Cantonese or Mandarin. My vague sense of cultural identity involves the Buddhist temple at Lunar New Year, words for food and family in an assortment of dialects, and trying to fit into my port’s sarong kebaya so I could wear it at her eightieth birthday party. It involves very little about China, which is where many North Americans suppose I must have been born.

In terms of my academic background, I was relatively lucky, since both of my parents were university educated, and we always had enough money growing up (we were, after all, allowed to immigrate to Canada). Despite stumbling into a philosophy major, and having a distinct lack of understanding about what academic life entails, I also managed to be accepted into a good US graduate program to work in logic and philosophy of mathematics. I was hired ABD at my present institution back in Canada to teach logic, and this remains about half of my teaching load (though I now work primarily in feminist philosophy and social epistemology). But with respect to my early career, I probably could not have done more to fit in to mainstream North American philosophy if I had tried (I still don’t know if I was trying), and I have no doubt that this benefited me in ways I likely still don’t understand.

THE ETHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF FIT

The ethical consequences of fit are perhaps best illustrated by an example. It is often the case that racialized immigrants want to ensure that their children fit in to their new countries. This often means trying to eliminate traces of foreignness, such as accents or non-anglicized names. Many of my cousins and I, who either were immigrants as children or were born in Western countries such as Canada, the US, and Australia, speak very little of any Chinese dialects, and were not taught the language as children. But with our families conscious of the stereotype of the maladjusted immigrant, “fresh off the boat,” we often did not question the wisdom of this move until we were older. The impact of this on us, our family, and our communities is certainly worth considering, as are the ethical costs of choosing one type of life over another more generally. But I will focus on the potential consequences to those beyond our communities.

One thing that I was never taught as a young Asian Canadian was that the land I had come to live on (Musqueam then, though I now live and work on unceded Lekwungen territory) had been taken from people whose descendants were still living. Anything related to Indigenous people had to do with the past, and traditional ways of living that were presented simply as history. The fiction that I was raised with was that the rightful Canadians were the white settlers I wanted (consciously or unconsciously) to resemble. And the more I came to accept (though not in those terms) that whiteness set the standard to which I would need to conform, the more complicit I became in colonial oppression.

In the history of my own city, Victoria, BC, racism against people of Chinese ethnicity has dovetailed neatly with colonialism, simultaneously excluding the Chinese from “genuine” Canadian identity, while erasing Indigenous people entirely. This means that Chinese settlers were constituted as alien, while settlers of European descent were constituted as native to the land, and properly belonging. This had the function of naturalizing colonial dominance over the country, and effectively removing Indigenous people from representation, just as they were dispossessed of their traditional lands. This means that the white settler state was able to position itself as the gatekeeper, determining which immigrants were desirable, and which bore further scrutiny. Control over who was permitted to live and work in the territory not only allowed white Europeans to create a community that reflected their needs and desires, but also establish themselves as its rightful inhabitants.

Histories of racism have allowed colonial education systems and other social institutions to justify shunting nonwhite people into subordinate social roles. The incorporation of hierarchical racialized characteristics into things like school textbooks allowed such characteristics to become common knowledge and part of the fabric of everyday Canadian society. This means that colonial education systems can use people like me to reinforce themselves, holding up those of us who were able to navigate them with some success. Accepting that this is an appropriate standard to which we should aspire frequently means ignoring the extent to which such standards discriminate. For example, my angsty thirteen-year-old self never questioned the extent to which whiteness shaped the standards of beauty to which I aspired.

In philosophy, those of us who successfully navigate applications, the job market, and tenure might not question the extent to which our comparative success is linked to the ways in which we have successfully fit in to an exclusionary system. Which is not to say that we are necessarily doing something wrong when we meet white colonial expectations; I do not blame my twenty-one-year-old self for having chosen a “respectable” analytic-philosophy path, since I genuinely liked working in that area, and it was absolutely what my undergraduate degree prepared me to do. But I have also had less clear-cut experiences. I am sure other philosophers of East Asian backgrounds have also avoided participating in discussions of “internationalization” and how to attract students from China. When untenured, I was once asked by a visiting speaker whether I was so good with technology because I was so young or because I was Asian (I had been assisting him with some projector issues before his talk). There are any number of ways in which I could have challenged stereotypes but chose not to do so—though I have in mid-career become much more vocal.
CONCLUSION

In this piece, I have laid out a dilemma faced by people at the margins of fitting in. I think this is the case for many philosophers of Asian descent, since as model minorities, our successes can easily be used to reinforce racism and colonialism. So, we face a kind of tradeoff between fitting in and getting to a place where we might be able to better challenge unjust systems, or refusing to put ourselves in a position to be used against others with relatively less privilege. The temptation to fit in, as illustrated by the Yang quote, can be motivated by a desire to work against racism, or at least to feel safer from it. But the important thing to note is that the systems in which we operate ensure that there will always be a cost—if not to us, then likely to others.

This does not mean that we (or others from underrepresented groups) are to blame for the ways in which we do fit in to mainstream North American philosophy, or academia in general. Nor is it to say that fitting in is merely a matter of personal gain. I would hope that this piece has some kind of positive impact beyond my own career (but of course I am only comfortable writing it because I am tenured and happy at my institution). Rather, it is to point out that institutions created under conditions of white supremacy and colonialism will tend to further perpetuate white supremacy and colonialism by encouraging us to believe that they genuinely reward merit, measured by some thoroughly neutral standard. Instead, if there is such a standard, I do not think any of us know what it is, nor do we know how to apply it. And wherever we do end up, to whatever extent we do “fit in,” we need to keep in mind that working against anti-Asian racism should not come at the expense of other BIPOC folks, nor at the expense of others from underrepresented groups. Anti-racism that loses sight of colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, and other kinds of injustice may find itself doing damage, even as it seeks to repair it.

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NOTES

8. Stanley, Confesting White Supremacy.

MEMORIAL NOTICE

In Memoriam: Jaegwon Kim (1934–2019)

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It is with great sorrow that the Department of Philosophy of Brown University reports the passing of Jaegwon Kim, William Herbert Perry Faunce Professor of Philosophy emeritus, on November 27, 2019. Professor Kim was eighty-five years old.

Born in Daegu, Korea, in 1934, Professor Kim studied French literature at Seoul National University (1953–1955) before graduating summa cum laude from Dartmouth College in 1958, with a combined major in French, mathematics, and philosophy. He earned his PhD in Philosophy at Princeton University in 1962. At Princeton Kim was influenced by the teaching of Carl G. Hempel and the publications of Roderick Chisholm; both were among the great American philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, Hempel in philosophy of science and Chisholm in metaphysics and epistemology; Chisholm was the dominant figure in the Brown department for much of that period. After teaching for two years at Swarthmore College, Kim taught at Brown from 1963 to 1967, as Chisholm’s colleague, and at the University of Michigan from 1967 to 1987, where he chaired the philosophy department for eight years and was awarded the title of Roy Wood Sellars Professor of Philosophy, in honor of one of the great American philosophers of the first part of the twentieth century. He was also a visiting professor at Cornell, Stanford, and the Johns Hopkins Universities during this period. He returned to Brown in 1987 as Chisholm was retiring, in effect as his successor as the central figure of the department, and taught here until his retirement in 2014. He was the chair of the department during a period of rebuilding in the 1990s and spearheaded the appointment of a continuing core of the present department. Kim earned research grants from the ACLS, NSF, and NEH, and was awarded the Kyung-Ahm Prize of the Kyung-Ahm Cultural and Educational Foundation in 2014. Kim was president of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association in 1988–1989, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences since 1991. From 2000 to 2005, Kim co-edited the journal Nous with his colleague Ernest Sosa, who also
spent much of his career at Brown. Literature as well as music remained lifelong interests for Professor Kim, and he devoted much of his time in retirement to reading and writing poetry and listening to music. Throughout his life, Professor Kim was generous to students and colleagues, and beloved for his character as well as admired for his work. He inspired several generations of philosophy students in Korea although he spent his career in the US, and was also recognized as a poet in Korea.

Professor Kim was known for his work in philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. His books included *Supervenience and Mind* (1993), *Mind in a Physical World* (1998), *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough* (2005), the survey *Philosophy of Mind* (second edition, 2006), *Trois essais sur l’émergence* (2006), and *Essays in the Metaphysics of Mind* (2010). He was also the editor or co-editor of five anthologies of philosophical essays on metaphysics and epistemology, four of them with Ernest Sosa, and numerous journal articles and book chapters.

Kim explored the challenges for a naturalistic approach to philosophy. He rejected any appeal to the supernatural in philosophy as simply substituting “one riddle for another,” but argued that “qualia,” the qualitative aspects of mental states, although in some sense clearly caused by physical states, could not easily be reduced to physical properties of brain-states. This issue led Kim to a rigorous examination of the concept of “supervenience,” a term for the relation in which one property is neither strictly identical to nor caused by another co-varies with it. He distinguished supervenience from emergence, the causation of a new phenomenon, and refined previous understandings of it. This work also led to a detailed study of the concept of causation itself, a central concept of metaphysics; Kim was indeed in good part responsible for revived interest in metaphysics after critiques of it from Kant to Wittgenstein had brought it into ill repute. Here his question became how can we maintain a commitment to the causal closure of physics, that is, our assumption that there is in principle an adequate physical explanation of any event in the physical world, and yet maintain the causal significance of mental events, that is, that they are not just “epiphenomenal” consciousness of physical events but play a genuine role in determining subsequent events. In the theory of knowledge, Kim criticized the well-known “naturalized epistemology” of Willard Van Orman Quine, arguing that a purely descriptive approach to belief-forming practices cannot account for the justification of knowledge-claims, although constructing a theory of such justification has traditionally been taken to be the task of epistemology. In all these areas, Professor Kim argued for the necessity of incorporating the qualitative dimensions of human experience and cognition into a naturalistic world-picture. By such arguments Professor Kim clarified and refined concepts often taken for granted, by means of argumentation with a form and content subtly different from that of colleagues close and far who were battling over these and related issues. In so doing, he challenged and inspired several generations of his own students and of philosophers worldwide.

Professor Kim leaves his wife Sylvia, his son Justin, and many students, colleagues, and admirers throughout the philosophical profession in the US and abroad.

**ASIAN PHILOSOPHY BLOGS**

PEA Soup, an influential blog and forum for philosophers from across the globe to discuss philosophy, ethics, and academia, has a new ongoing series titled “Cross-Cultural Normative Philosophy” (http://peasoup.us/category/cross-cultural-normative-philosophy). The goal of the series is to encourage broadly analytic moral and political philosophers to learn about and to engage with Asian and Asian American philosophers and philosophies. Nominations for articles to feature are most certainly welcome. The series editor, Dr. Bradford Cokelet (Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Kansas, USA), aims to identify articles that will interest scholars who are new to Asian philosophy. After choosing an article, he will arrange a critical précis by a scholar who works outside of Asian philosophy and contact both the relevant scholars with interests in Asian philosophy and those without in order to promote fruitful discussion and to explore research ideas and teaching practices. If you have suggestions or nominations, please email Dr. Cokelet at bradcokelet@gmail.com.

We are also promoting new books in Asian philosophy on the committee-run New Books Blog (https://www.apaonline.org/blogpost/1710515/New-Books). Hoping especially to reach academic philosophers who are not very familiar with Asian philosophy, we update the blog a few times per year with a list of the latest titles in Asian philosophy published by academic presses. We are especially interested in new titles that deserve to be considered book-review subjects for professional journals in Asian philosophy. A number of journals including *Philosophy East and West*, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, and *The Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* support this blog. If you have any questions or suggestions, please contact the blog’s editor and administrator, Dr. Doil Kim (Associate Professor, Department of Confucian Studies, Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea), at philosokim@gmail.com.

Both Dr. Cokelet and Dr. Kim serve on the APA Committee on Asian and American Philosophers and Philosophies and we are thankful for their work on our behalf to promote the direct and constructive engagement between Asian and other philosophical traditions, to help draw out their mutual relevance, and to advance teaching and study of Asian philosophy and cross-cultural philosophy.
SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

GOAL OF THE NEWSLETTER ON ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS

The APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies is sponsored by the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies to report on the philosophical work of Asian and Asian American philosophy, to report on new work in Asian philosophy, and to provide a forum for the discussion of topics of importance to Asian and Asian American philosophers and those engaged with Asian and Asian American philosophy. We encourage a diversity of views and topics within this broad rubric. None of the varied philosophical views provided by authors of newsletter articles necessarily represents the views of any or all the members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies, including the editor(s) of the newsletter. The committee and the newsletter are committed to advancing Asian and Asian American philosophical scholarships and bringing this work and this community to the attention of the larger philosophical community; we do not endorse any particular approach to Asian or Asian American philosophy.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

1) Purpose: The purpose of the newsletter is to publish information about the status of Asians and Asian Americans and their philosophy and to make the resources of Asians and Asian American philosophy available to a larger philosophical community. The newsletter presents discussions of recent developments in Asians and Asian American philosophy (including, for example, both modern and classical East-Asian philosophy, both modern and classical South Asian philosophy, and Asians and Asian Americans doing philosophy in its various forms), related work in other disciplines, literature overviews, reviews of the discipline as a whole, timely book reviews, and suggestions for both spreading and improving the teaching of Asian philosophy in the current curriculum. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies. One way the dissemination of knowledge of the relevant areas occurs is by holding highly visible, interactive sessions on Asian philosophy at the American Philosophical Association’s three annual divisional meetings. Potential authors should follow the submission guidelines below:

   i) Please submit essays electronically to the editor(s). Articles submitted to the newsletter should be limited to ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA submission guidelines.

   ii) All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. Each submission shall be sent to two referees. Reports will be shared with authors. References should follow The Chicago Manual Style.

   iii) If the paper is accepted, each author is required to sign a copyright transfer form, available on the APA website, prior to publication.

2) Book reviews and reviewers: If you have published a book that you consider appropriate for review in the newsletter, please ask your publisher to send the editor(s) a copy of your book. Each call for papers may also include a list of books for possible review. To volunteer to review books (or some specific book), kindly send the editor(s) a CV and letter of interest mentioning your areas of research and teaching.

3) Where to send papers/reviews: Please send all articles, comments, reviews, suggestions, books, and other communications to the editor: A. Minh Nguyen (atnguyen@fgcu.edu).

4) Submission deadlines: Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1, and submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.

5) Guest editorship: It is possible that one or more members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies could act as guest editors for one of the issues of the newsletter depending on their expertise in the field. To produce a high-quality newsletter, one of the co-editors could even come from outside the members of the committee depending on his/her area of research interest.
EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

Lauren Freeman
UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE


I’m grateful to all of the authors for their wonderful contributions to this issue.

ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER ON FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

The Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy is sponsored by the APA Committee on the Status of Women (CSW). The newsletter is designed to provide an introduction to recent philosophical work that addresses issues of gender. None of the varied philosophical views presented by authors of newsletter articles necessarily reflect the views of any or all of the members of the Committee on the Status of Women, including the editor(s) of the newsletter, nor does the committee advocate any particular type of feminist philosophy. We advocate only that serious philosophical attention be given to issues of gender and that claims of gender bias in philosophy receive full and fair consideration.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

1. Purpose: The purpose of the newsletter is to publish information about the status of women in philosophy and to make the resources of feminist philosophy more widely available. The newsletter contains discussions of recent developments in feminist philosophy and related work in other disciplines, literature overviews and book reviews, suggestions for eliminating gender bias in the traditional philosophy curriculum, and reflections on feminist pedagogy. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on the Status of Women.

Articles submitted to the newsletter should be around ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language. Please submit essays electronically to the editor or send four copies of essays via regular mail. All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. References should follow The Chicago Manual of Style.

2. Book Reviews and Reviewers: If you have published a book that is appropriate for review in the newsletter, please have your publisher send us a copy of your book. We are always seeking new book reviewers. To volunteer to review books (or some particular book), please send the editor, Lauren Freeman (lauren.freeman@louisville.edu), a CV and letter of interest, including mention of your areas of research and teaching.

3. Where to Send Things: Please send all articles, comments, suggestions, books, and other communications to the editor: Dr. Lauren Freeman, University of Louisville, lauren.freeman@louisville.edu.

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One hindrance to defining and understanding pornography has become.

“Our” inability to say precisely what pornography is and if so, what would make pornography feminist? Not having a clear idea about what we are talking about when we talk about pornography has hindered philosophical attempts to answer these questions. There is still much confusion over the conceptual and political commitments of different anti- and pro-pornography positions, while different sides tend to portray a simplistic picture of their opponents. Participants in the debates end up easily talking past one another. Furthermore, given the emotive nature of the topic, interlocutors can miss the fact that existing positions are much more nuanced and far more complex than might at first seem. In fact, different sides to the debate might not even disagree with one another, contra appearances.

In light of these difficulties and (apparent) disagreements, this book examines philosophical pornography debates with the aim to steady and clarify the waters. It does not put forward one overarching argument throughout, but rather evaluates relevant arguments thematically. In so doing, the book has three broad goals. First, to conduct a comprehensive and careful investigation of different philosophical positions for and against pornography, which will provide much needed clarity on how pornography and other key notions are (and should be) understood. In so doing, the book also clarifies what different views are theoretically and politically committed to. Second, to investigate important methodological issues by considering how empirically adequate existing philosophical positions are relative to the sizeable pornography industry. This will involve considering alternative pornographies too that are said to be feminist, “female-friendly,” and non-heteronormative. Third, to enrich extant philosophical debates by examining how discussions in different sub-areas (like feminist philosophy and aesthetics) intersect with and profit from one another—something that has been surprisingly absent in contemporary philosophizing over pornography. Although my investigation in the book advances unapologetically from an analytic feminist philosophical perspective, it is neutral about pornography’s moral status at the outset. Given how complex a phenomenon pornography is, it argues, it is far from easy (if not impossible) to say that all pornography is harmful in some sense or that pornography does no harm at all. Our evaluative judgments about pornography must be made in a piecemeal fashion, and the prospects of making general

Many philosophers disagree with all of the above conceptions irrespective of their stance on the morality of pornography. Pre-theoretically, pornography involves the following: sexually explicit content, materials without social value, intention to sexually arouse consumers, being used in certain ways (e.g., as “masturbation materials”). How to understand any of these in detail and how to conceptualize their importance when examining pornography are live questions, though. As things stand, there is no agreed upon definition of pornography either in philosophy or in society at large. And yet, pornography seems to play a huge role in contemporary lives with pornography-related inquiries figuring as some of the most frequent internet searches. “Our” inability to say precisely what pornography amounts to is puzzling given how commonplace pornography has become.

One hindrance to defining and understanding pornography is its highly emotive and deeply divisive nature not only in the wider society, but also in philosophy. Over the past few decades, entrenched and seemingly straightforward anti- and pro-pornography positions have emerged. In popular press, those opposing pornography are often portrayed as prudish sex-negative feminists, who advocate censorship; pornography’s defenders are characterized as sex-positive liberals, who fight for free speech and expression. Lively philosophical debates about pornography have emerged since the 1980s, and there is by now a rich literature on the topic. Nonetheless, these debates are still fraught with many difficult questions and precious little agreement exists on even basic questions: What is pornography? What (if anything) does pornography do? Is the consumption of pornography a harmless private matter, or does it harm its users in some ways? Does pornography harm non-users, like women generally, by increasing the prevalence of sexualized violence? What, if anything, should legally be done about pornography? Is feminist pornography possible and if so, what would make pornography feminist? Not having a clear idea about what we are talking about when we talk about pornography has hindered philosophical attempts to answer these questions. There is still much confusion over the conceptual and political commitments of different anti- and pro-pornography positions, while different sides tend to portray a simplistic picture of their opponents. Participants in the debates end up easily talking past one another. Furthermore, given the emotive nature of the topic, interlocutors can miss the fact that existing positions are much more nuanced and far more complex than might at first seem. In fact, different sides to the debate might not even disagree with one another, contra appearances.

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normative claims about pornography are poor. However, I contend, this does not preclude meaningful philosophical work on pornography. In fact, there is still much to be done.

2. HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Before outlining the contents of the book more fully, let me briefly introduce some historical and philosophical background to the debates that I consider in this work. At the time of Justice Stewart's comment above, pornography in the USA and UK was understood on the model of obscenity. Most basically, a work is obscene if it is sexually explicit, primarily intended to produce sexual arousal in viewers, and it has a morally corrupting influence in being indecent or causing indecency. This understanding makes pornography a matter of public morality, and it pits conservative opponents of pornography against "sexual radicals." According to the former, pornography removes sex from its proper setting of monogamous, heterosexual marriage relation, which degrades humanity and regresses human progress. Pornography is morally corrupting and to prevent this, the state is permitted to prohibit access to pornography even for consenting adults.

Feminist philosophers and theorists, however, commonly renounce the obscenity standard, regardless of whether they oppose pornography or not. Feminists do not typically oppose pornography for its sexual content or putative offensiveness and so, vehemently disagree with pornography's conservative opponents. Rather, they argue, pornography harms women. One cluster of such arguments has been framed around the idea that pornography involves the degradation of women. These arguments advance content-based moral objections to pornography too, albeit in a very different form to those advanced by conservative critics. In short: although pornography is not morally objectionable due to its sexual content, in treating women as mere sex objects, it degrades women. What is morally objectionable about pornography's content is that it de-grades [sic] women by assigning them lower value and lower moral status. Typically, though, the mere depiction of lower value does not suffice. Rather, pornography is about verbal and pictorial materials that represent and describe "sexual behavior that is degrading or abusive to one or more of participants in such a way as to endorse the degradation." For pornography to endorse degradation is for it to communicate its approval and recommendation of sexual behavior that devalues women. More specifically, this means that the degradation is represented as pleasurable for both the male and female performers, and there is "no suggestion that this sort of treatment of others is inappropriate to their status as human beings." Furthermore, pornography supposedly tells deep and vicious lies about women that, e.g., Helen Longino considers defamatory.

Although sharing many aspects with the above positions, in championing their anti-pornography stance Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin influentially put forward a subtly different feminist analysis of pornography's harm. For them, pornography is not "a moral issue": a feminist argument against pornography should not be based on pornography being morally objectionable. Instead, they advanced a well-known view of pornography as a practice of sex discrimination: it is harmful in violating women's civil rights. This view is less about what pornography represents (its morally problematic content), and more about what pornography does. In short, pornography celebrates, promotes, and legitimizes sexualized violence against women. It eroticizes male dominance and female submissiveness, and puts this forward as the apparent truth about sex. Pornography purports to mirror reality, but it in fact constructs one. This is what pornography does and not merely what it depicts: "It institutionalizes the sexuality of male supremacy, fusing the eroticization of dominance and submission with the social construction of [gender]." With this in mind, and against the obscenity standard, MacKinnon and Dworkin famously defined pornography as "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and words." Pornography is said to be about power with sex used as a weapon of women's subjugation. Sexually explicit materials that are premised on equality and positive free choice count as erotica, which is about passionate love and mutual pleasure. If men, trans people, or children are used in the place of a woman, the work also counts as pornography. However, subordination is not the only thing that pornography does: it also silences women. In making violence the apparent truth about sex, pornography prevents women from saying otherwise. Women are thus "stripped of authority and reduced and devalued and silenced." In subordinating and silencing women, pornography is a practice of sex discrimination.

This Dworkin-MacKinnon account has been immensely influential both philosophically and legally; but (perhaps unsurprisingly) it has not convinced everyone. The view has been challenged by activists and theorists alike, and from both feminist and non-feminist perspectives. Some of the most devastating critiques came from challenges to the philosophical cogency of the Dworkin-MacKinnon position. Even while denying that pornography is somehow valuable, prominent liberal philosophers intensely critiqued the position during the late '80s and early '90s. Ronald Dworkin famously claimed that it was based on a "dangerous confusion" between negative and positive liberty. This is the well-known distinction between enjoying freedom from some interference and having the liberty to do something. Our negative liberty may be restricted in a manner that is consistent with free speech protections. However, the view that pornography silences women seeks to argue against pornography by appealing to women's positive liberty to be heard. Such guarantees are not within the remit of the law, though. Then again, William Parent held that the Dworkin-MacKinnon definition of pornography is philosophically indefensible because subordination is "an action or a practice engaged in by human beings and directed against other beings . . . the logic of 'subordinates' requires that it have some human action or actions as a subject." As books, magazines, and images are not human beings, anti-pornography feminism commits a category mistake: pornographic materials simply are not the sorts of things that can subordinate.

With such critiques in mind, Rae Langton defends the philosophical cogency of the MacKinnon-Dworkin position.
in her by-now classic article “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts.” She articulates further defenses together with Jennifer Hornsby. Langton’s defense marks a watershed moment in philosophical discussions about pornography. She draws on J. L. Austin’s speech act theory to make good the idea that pornography does something—that it is a practice of sex discrimination. Austin argued that our statements can (and do) do more than simply make true or false claims about the world—sometimes we perform actions other than just speaking with our utterances. With this in mind, Austin divides speech acts into locutions, perlocutions, and illocutions: the speaker’s locution (the words uttered) can perform some illocutionary action (in uttering something the speaker’s locution can count as saying), and the locution can have some perlocutionary effects (by uttering something the speaker’s locution can cause further extra-linguistic effects). Now, US legislation takes pornography to be a form of speech insofar as free speech legislation protects its manufacture and distribution; subsequently, Langton argues that pornographic speech illocutionarily subordinates and silences women. In saying something about women, pornographic speech does something other than make mere utterances. It functions like the speech of a priest who just in declaring “I pronounce you a married couple” performs the action of marrying. Pornographic speech, however, performs harmful actions. It subordinates and silences women in ranking them as inferior, in legitimating discrimination against them, and in depriving women of important free speech rights. This allows us to see that the Dworkin-MacKinnon position is not philosophically indefensible and that it does not rest on a category mistake: pornographic content, in being a form of speech, can perform subordinating actions.

The speech act theoretic defense of the Dworkin-Mackinnon position has dominated Anglo-American philosophizing about pornography over the past thirty years, and a number of theorists from various backgrounds have either critiqued or defended Langton's original position. In the book, I too examine the philosophical legacy of the speech act defense in detail, and consider how philosophical debates on pornography might take novel new turns.

3. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book has eight chapters in total, the first being an introductory one. In the subsequent chapters, I consider philosophical pornography debates along the following themes.

Chapter 2, “Subordination: Causal and Constitutive,” looks at the claim that pornography is and causes women’s subordination. At the request of the Minneapolis City Council in 1983, MacKinnon and Dworkin drafted anti-pornography ordinances that were premised on women’s civil rights violations, rather than on the moral condemnation, obscenity, or indecency of pornography. The ordinances make use of the definition of pornography cited above: pornography is “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and words.” In challenging the prevalent obscenity-based anti-pornography legislation, the ordinances did not advocate censoring or criminalizing the production, distribution, or consumption of pornographic materials. Rather, they intended to give women legal recourse to seek remedies for harms and injuries caused to them by pornography. In particular, these harms pertain to being trafficked into or coerced to perform in pornography, forcing pornography onto someone, and experiencing assaults caused by pornography consumption. The ordinance would have given performers and women in general the opportunity to sue those makers and consumers of pornography who had harmed them. Indianapolis City Council passed similar ordinances in 1984, although they were soon overturned as unconstitutional.

As noted above, the subordination claim, especially in its constitutive form, was vehemently attacked by liberal philosophers as being philosophically untenable, indefensible, and incoherent. Against such arguments Langton famously defends the Dworkin-MacKinnon idea that pornography is a practice of sex discrimination. In short, pornography is the illocutionary subordination of women: in saying something about women, pornographic speech subordinates them. The chapter examines this view and considers its plausibility. The general argumentative gist of the chapter is as follows. Contra critics of the causal subordination claim, I argue that the claim is not so implausible after all. Or, at the very least, prevalent critiques do not conclusively refute the subordination claim, as one author claims. Nonetheless, the chapter also shows that the constitutive formulation of the subordination claim is much harder to sustain.

Next, in chapter 3, “Does Pornography Silence Women?,” I turn to Langton’s other key view: that pornography causes and is the silencing of women. One of MacKinnon’s central claims is that pornography is not only words. Rather, pornographic speech does something harmful: it subordinates and silences women. Langton argues that pornography is verdictive speech in ranking women as inferior sex objects, and that it is exercitive speech—speech that confers or deprives powers and rights—in legitimating sexualized violence against women. What grants pornographic speech illocutionary force is its authoritativeness in the realm of sex. This might suggest that harmful pornographic speech should be countered by better speech, speech that undercuts pornography’s false depictions of and lies about women’s sexuality, in order to undermine its authoritativeness. However, if pornographic speech has the power to silence women, such counter-speech looks set to fail. That is, pornography is said to be exercitive not only in legitimating sexualized violence, but also in depriving women of important free speech rights—in silencing them. Call this “the silencing claim.”

This claim has attracted a huge amount of philosophical interest over the past couple of decades and the literature discussing it is by now extensive. In the chapter, I consider how we should understand the silencing claim by carefully dissecting the relevant literature. I further assess the philosophical and practical tenability of the claim. The main philosophical lessons to arise from this chapter are as follows. First, even though some aspects of the silencing claim have pre-theoretical plausibility, it remains to be established that pornographic speech is responsible for women’s silencing. Second, the silencing claim is often
discussed by appealing to intuitive “gut feelings” about specific cases. But this is not methodologically conducive to settling the matter.

The previous two chapters considered whether pornography is and/or causes women’s subordination and silencing. These issues are usually debated in connection with legal concerns: whether the subordination and silencing claims undermine a free speech defense of pornography. If pornography does what anti-pornography feminism claims it does, we have a strong legal case for restricting pornography. And, importantly, appealing to the central liberal value of free expression cannot mitigate the incurred harms. The previous chapters discussed the subordination and silencing claims divorced from this legal issue. Chapter 4, “Free, Regulated, or Prohibited Speech?” considers whether we can plausibly defend legal restrictions on pornography that are compatible with liberalism.

Some preliminaries are in order. Most crucially, we must bear in mind that regulating the manufacture, consumption, and/or prohibition of pornography is not equivalent to prohibiting pornography via censorship. Not clearly distinguishing these possible legal responses to pornography entrenches the supposed—though misguided—opposition between prudish anti-porn censorship feminism and “pro-sex” liberal champions of free expression. Moreover, regulating some x is not eo ipso illiberal. First, the manufacture of goods is regulated in all sorts of ways via (for instance) employment and environmental laws. After all, authorities are justified in closing down dangerous factories that do not comply with health and safety measures, and dangerous work practices cannot be defended by appealing to freedom of action. Second, the distribution of many goods is regulated without this being prima facie an affront to liberty. For instance, in many jurisdictions, alcohol can be purchased only from specialist outlets. Hence, even though this limits our freedom to purchase alcohol wherever and whenever, the restrictions are not unreasonable given further legal and societal considerations—we may be inconvenienced, but this is defensible within a liberal framework. Third, the consumption of various goods can be legitimately constrained. In many jurisdictions, smoking is only allowed in designated areas to safeguard nonsmokers. There is a huge difference between prohibiting the consumption of some product (like illegalizing smoking) and restricting consumption (like restricting where one can publicly smoke).

What about pornography, then? Staunch legal moralists would argue that since we must prevent citizens from engaging in actions that offend prevailing standards of decency and since pornography is indecent and offensive, there is a prima facie justification for outright censorship or prohibition of pornography. Thoroughgoing libertarians would reject any infringements on our liberty of thought and action and would argue that nothing should be done about pornography—this is a private matter and no concern of the state. Anti-pornography feminism is sometimes equated with legal moralism, and liberal defenders of pornography are sometimes painted in this libertarian light. However, it is a mistake to draw the opposition in this manner. Feminists and liberals typically reject both extremes, irrespective of whether they oppose pornography or not.

State censorship of materials on the basis of indecency is a blunt instrument that even opponents of pornography view with deep skepticism. And hardly any party to the debate eschews all forms of regulation or intervention—liberal philosophers typically do not hold that nothing should be done about pornography or that it is a thoroughly harmless private affair (e.g., liberal defenders of pornography were also in favor of zoning laws to restrict where pornography could be distributed). Between the two extremes, which are practically nonexistent in contemporary philosophical discussions, are many more nuanced views. This chapter then asks two broad questions: Are pornography regulations permissible? If so, in what form? In discussing these issues, I endeavor to show the following. First, in disentangling what different feminist and liberal views are committed to, we can see that the supposedly firm opposition between feminist pro-regulation and liberal anti-regulation positions is not so firm after all. Instead, there is much common ground between allegedly opposing sides. Second, some pornography regulations are permissible, even within a liberal framework and on paternalistic grounds. Third, although we have grounds to regulate pornography, criminalizing pornography production, distribution, and consumption is the wrong response to pornography’s problems.

Chapter 2 dealt with the subordination claim: that the manufacture and consumption of pornography play a causal role in perpetuating systematic sexualized violence against women. This is not the only sense in which pornography seemingly harms women. Feminists often critique pornography for being a major force in women’s sexual objectification. Most basically, objectification amounts to viewing and/or treating a person as a thing or an object to be used. With this in mind, anti-pornography feminism not only claims that pornography production objectifies female performers; rather, men’s consumption of pornography also ends up objectifying women as a group by conditioning men to view and treat women as objects to be used for their sexual ends.

Connected to this, Langton has more recently made an interesting suggestion that pornography produces a distinctive kind of maker’s knowledge about women. This is also relevant for free speech debates about pornography. Following J. S. Mill’s liberalism, the generation of knowledge is one justification for free speech. Hence, there may be a knowledge-based defense of pornography: if pornography creates knowledge, there is a putative case for allowing it. Langton argues that pornography indeed produces knowledge about women, where the mechanism of knowledge-production is women’s objectification. In so doing, pornography produces a peculiar kind of knowledge that “not only aims at truth, but makes its truth.” Nevertheless, this kind of projected and self-fulfilling pornographic knowledge is harmful in that it destroys women’s sexual autonomy. The knowledge-based defense of pornography is therefore undermined.

In chapter 5, “Pornographic Knowledge and Objectification,” I consider sexual objectification and its connection to pornographic knowledge. I examine what
sexual objectification amounts to and allegedly does, and whether pornographic maker's knowledge is harmful, as Langton claims. The philosophical lessons to emerge from my discussion are the following. First, even though we can make sense of the claim that pornography objectifies women, assessment of whether this claim is true typically involves a problematic focus on what pornography depicts in a context-neutral fashion. This is problematic since it is remarkably difficult to draw moral and ethical conclusions from apparently objectifying pornographic depictions alone. Second, even though some pornographic materials surely involve objectionable objectification of women and problematic requisite maker's knowledge, other materials plausibly do not. Determination of which materials are worrisome and which not depends on background social conditions and contexts. This, then, undermines Langton's view that pornographic maker's knowledge is always harmful in undermining women's sexual autonomy. Or so I argue in the chapter.

Up to this point, the book considered various debates in feminist philosophy on the topic of pornography. Feminist philosophers have not, however, been alone in considering pornography philosophically: philosophers of art have also notably debated the topic. Nevertheless, these two sub-disciplines seldom meet and there is surprisingly little crossover between them. Feminist debates usually focus on pornography's putative harms to women and what should subsequently be done about pornography in order to advance gender equality, whereas debates in analytic aesthetics have focused on imagination, pornographic fictionality, and media, as well as the ethics of represented depictions. One major point of contention dominates discussions in philosophy of art over pornography, though: whether something can be both art and pornography.

Chapter 6, “The Aesthetics of Pornography,” aims, on the one hand, to bring debates in feminist philosophy and philosophy of art closer together and, on the other, to discuss central topics of contention in the aesthetics of pornography. I consider three themes: fictionality of pornography, whether pornography and art are mutually exclusive, and what (if anything) is morally objectionable about digitally generated imagery. In so doing, I offer support for two broad views. First, that fantasies and pornographic fictions are not beyond moral reproach in virtue of being fantastical and fictitious. Second, to hold that pornography is centrally or necessarily about sexual arousal (as philosophers of art typically do) yields misguided analyses of the phenomenon. This chapter, then, tells us something important not only about issues relevant for philosophy of art debates pertaining to pornography, it also instructs us about the nature and morality of pornography.

In chapter 7, “Pornography as Liberation,” I discuss the idea that some pornography may liberate, rather than subordinate. Issues surrounding sexuality and pornography have tended to polarize the feminist movement and differences in views led to the so-called “sex wars” of the 1970s/1980s. The main opposing positions can be denoted with PorNo (short for anti-pornography positions) and PorYes (denoting pro-pornography and “sex positive” outlooks). PorNo feminist activism has in recent years gained renewed momentum. An international “Stop Porn Culture” movement, co-founded by the high-profile anti-pornography campaigner Gail Dines, is calling for an end to society’s “pornification.” Concurrently, the production of self-proclaimed feminist pornography has become more prominent. In addition, academic work on pornography that is not premised on a PorNo position has gained impetus with the first-ever peer-reviewed academic journal in such a vein, Porn Studies, established in 2014 and published by Routledge. Dines, who likened the journal’s editors to climate change deniers relative to pornography, fervently opposed its launch. However, the “Stop Porn Culture” movement has been criticized for being “unwilling to acknowledge the counterhegemonic possibilities in feminist and queer porn, unable to consider the possibility of improving rather than eradicating pornography, and [for] reject[ing] the possibility of neutral or even positive uses of sexually explicit materials.” PorNo positions are criticized further for assuming that “sex is inherently oppressive to women—that women are debased when they have sex on camera—which ignores and represses the sexuality of women.” PorNo feminism is said to amount to a pro-subordination stance in a sense. As PorYes advocates point out, an unqualified PorNo position seems blinkered: anti-pornography critics miss their target because they treat pornographic materials in too simplistic a manner and because they fail to appreciate differences in sexual tastes and desires. A number of queer theorists have accused anti-pornography feminism
of being heteronormative and heterosexist: of treating heterosexuality as the normative standard against which all sexuality is measured. This problematically naturalizes heterosexist sexual practices, where sex between cis-men and cis-women is "normal" while other practices are supposedly deviant. Hence, some queer theorists and philosophers rightly claim that anti-pornography feminism tends to examine pornography through a strict male-female binary and that anti-pornography legislation motivated by (white, Anglo-American) feminist concerns would restrict materials that contribute to the emancipation of gay, lesbian, trans, and queer sexualities. Although these claims have prima facie plausibility, earlier discussions in this book suggest that an unqualified PorYes position is also misguided: such a position ignores that pornography production and consumption are not just harmless private affairs. And to think that the raison d'etre of pornography is to transgress societies' bourgeois conventions (as Kipnis does) is surely exaggerated and overintellectualized.

We can see the makings of new sex wars in popular discourse and culture as well as in academic writings about pornography. Hence this chapter considers two questions. First, is feminist pornography possible and if so, what would make pornography feminist? Second, might pornography be a force for liberation and emancipation? My answer to both questions is yes and in the chapter, I consider some features of feminist and/or liberatory pornography. However, I also highlight that our answers to these questions must be more nuanced and qualified than existing debates typically allow. Different stances in fact share many basic commitments; but both sides tend to paint the opposition in an uncharitable light and in a manner that distorts the debate thereby disguising common ground.

In discussing the aesthetics and emancipatory potential of pornography, we can see that questions about pornography’s status as speech become much less pressing. This points to ways we can philosophically examine pornography that don’t hinge on accepting or rejecting the speech act approach. The book hence closes with chapter 8, “What is Pornography Revisited,” that considers social ontological analyses of pornography as potentially fruitful alternatives to the prevalent speech act theoretic approaches. In particular, the final chapter considers two pressing and as of yet unsettled questions from a social ontological perspective: What is pornography? What does pornography do (if anything)? I consider the second question particularly looking at a suggestion put forward by Katharine Jenkins.27 I also consider my own alternative way to understand what pornography is, which focuses on maker’s intentions and that does not depend on speech act theory.28 That said, even the final chapter leaves a number of issues open, and it is not possible in the book to settle pornography debates in philosophy once and for all. Instead, I hope to motivate alternative ways to think about the topic of pornography in philosophy and to provide an impetus for a continued philosophical examination of the topic. To this end, the chapter (and the book) concludes with some final methodological remarks that I wish to briefly flag to finish.

4. METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

Throughout the book, I make a certain methodological plea: that philosophical investigations should be more empirically engaged and informed when they deal with such a “this-worldly” topic as pornography. Of course, philosophy is not an empirical science. But our philosophizing should endeavor to avoid being brazenly inadequate empirically speaking. How should one then proceed when doing philosophical work on pornography? For one thing, I highlight throughout the importance of fitting examples. Pornography cannot be analyzed from the philosopher’s armchair a priori, and speaking authoritatively about issues relevant to pornography requires knowledge about the empirical realities of pornography as a cultural phenomenon and as an industry. Otherwise, one is not in a good position to advance empirically adequate analyses of pornography. What this requires in turn is open-mindedness and willingness to engage empirically with pornography. Of course, given how emotive of a topic pornography is, this may be psychologically challenging.

That said, in order to gain the relevant empirical knowledge, my view does not entail that philosophers should view pornography if they wish to write about it. As I see it, empirical familiarity with pornographic materials need not involve viewing pornography. Or rather, much depends on what debates one is engaged in. In order to discuss a number of topics I consider in this book, one need not view pornography, but can rely on research from other disciplines, like media theory and cultural studies. Writing about the aesthetics of pornography is conceivably a different matter. Perhaps precisely because the aesthetic side of these debates requires familiarity with pornographic works and because philosophical pornography debates have been predominantly conducted from anti-pornography positions, there has been so little crossover between feminist philosophical and philosophy of art debates. Whatever the explanation, the take-home message is as follows: good philosophical work on pornography requires familiarity with pornographic materials. In this sense, there is no requirement to view pornography, provided that one can gain the requisite knowledge through interdisciplinary research.

I should add, though, that one difficulty with doing empirically engaged philosophy of pornography is the lack of decisive empirical research on the topic. In an attempt to fulfill my preferred methodological desiderata, I tried to engage with empirical literature as much as possible while writing the book. But it is hard to find empirical research that takes a genuinely dispassionate look at pornography’s harms and benefits, and what pornography conceivably does. This being the case, doing empirically engaged philosophy of pornography is an endeavor fraught with difficulties—but this is something that we ought to be frank about. When it comes to empirical issues about what pornography does, one will find conflicting evidence and research that shows pornography to be either deeply detrimental to individuals and societies, or that it has no influence on human psychology and social relations whatsoever. It seems warranted to say that both of these extreme views are highly likely to be false. This
does not justify philosophical theorizing that is woefully out of sync with reality, and philosophical work should acknowledge the massive differences that exist within the phenomenon of pornography. Nonetheless, I am issuing a plea that philosophical work on pornography should wear its normative commitments on its sleeve and to recognize the massive differences that exist within the pornography industry. This will not only make our philosophical accounts better, but it will also ensure that we gain knowledge about a concrete topic using philosophical tools and that we can apply our philosophical theorizing to deal with important and pressing real-life matters.

NOTES
5. Ibid., 43–44.
8. Ibid., 172.
9. Ibid., 176.
23. Ibid., 292.

Is Feminist Pornography Possible?
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Mari Mikkola’s marvelous book, Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction (2019), is an extremely helpful, opinionated survey of the philosophical debates about pornography in English-speaking analytic feminist philosophy in recent decades. I know of no better introduction to these issues. In addition to discussing (and clarifying) the debates concerning speech-acts approaches to pornography, she also discusses, and emphasizes the relevance of, other approaches such as the aesthetics and the social ontology of pornography. In this note I am going to focus on one additional issue that Mikkola discusses, namely, the prospects of putatively feminist pornography. Is it possible? Can it have liberatory, emancipatory effects?

I will follow Mikkola in conceiving of feminist pornography as a normative notion. That is, feminist pornography is not a purely descriptive notion, of the sort “pornography that is actually labeled as feminist,” nor “pornography made by feminist authors or with feminist aims in mind.” Rather, the label “feminist pornography” will work as a normative ideal, so that then there is logical space for the question of whether feminist pornography is possible, and whether any pornography that is actually produced deserves to be labeled as feminist.

Some of the normative criteria that Mikkola puts forward in order to consider a pornographic work as feminist are the following. First, it should not be made from a masculinist point of view, or cater only to a male audience (that is to say, it should not give priority to male desires, male fantasies, and a male point of view, but it should also focus on and make visible female desires, female fantasies, and female pleasure). This is necessary in order for a pornographic work to be considered as feminist, but not sufficient, as Mikkola explains, since a pornographic movie, say, can be made with a female audience in mind, and still not be fully egalitarian. In order for it to be egalitarian, it should promote equality between men and women, that is, it should promote the value of female sexuality and female pleasure. Furthermore, in order to count as feminist, a pornographic work has to satisfy two additional criteria, according to my interpretation of Mikkola’s view. The first criterion is negative: it should not promote sexist ideologies, in the sense discussed in the first part of the book. That is to
say, it should not endorse negative ideologies about what women are for, in the sense defended by philosophers such as Rae Langton and others. As it is argued in the first three chapters of the book, pornographic works can sometimes constitute or at least cause the subordination and the silencing of women by means of promoting a vicious ideology according to which, for instance, women are or should be submissive to men, their value relies on being the object of men’s desires and contributing to male pleasure, they are not deserving of respect, they are always willing to have sex, and/or their consent to engage in sexual behavior can always be taken for granted/does not matter/should not be ascertained. (We can call this kind of pornography sexist or misogynist pornography.)

It seems clear, then, that feminist pornography should neither endorse nor promote these ideologies. But this negative criterion is not sufficient, or so I understand Mikkola’s view. Indeed, feminist pornographic works should not merely remain neutral on those ideologies (therefore not adding to the harm done by sexist pornography), but they should rather actively promote an alternative ideology which aims to refute sexist and misogynist views about women’s desire and women’s social roles, and to disseminate feminist ideals such as equality between men and women, and the value of women’s desires, women’s agency and autonomy. But all of this is still not sufficient, or so I understand Mikkola’s interesting view. The reason is that mainstream pornography is not only centered around the male gaze, but the white hetero-cis-male gaze. That is to say, the harm produced by mainstream pornography not only amounts to perpetuating false ideologies about women, but also promoting harmful ideologies about LGBTQ+ people and people of color, for instance. Therefore, Mikkola says, perhaps pornographic works can be a useful tool in order to resist hetero-cis-patriarchy and white supremacy. If so, then we can use the label “feminist pornography” to refer to pornographic works that have these emancipatory and liberatory aims.

So far, I have discussed some features having to do with the content of pornographic works, that is, what is depicted. Mikkola also discusses issues about the industry and production of pornographic works, such as the work conditions of employees, salaries, working hours, health care, etc. It seems clear that pornographic works labeled as feminist should not involve the exploitation of workers. In what follows, I will put issues about the production of pornographic works aside, and I will focus on the question of whether pornographic works could possibly instantiate the normative features regarding the content of what is depicted that I described above.

In this note, I will argue that the claim that feminist pornography is possible faces a dilemma. In particular, I will argue that works that aim to have emancipatory effects, by means of promoting the desires, the bodies, and the pleasure of members of non-normative communities, run the risk of actually promoting further stigma, subordination, and fetishization of those non-normative desires, bodies, and pleasure. For instance, as Mikkola explains, pornographic works have the potential to make visible the desires and experiences of non-normative communities such as queer people, people of color, differently abled people, trans people, and fat people. Pornographic works could help to change the canon of what is considered beautiful by promoting beautiful images of people of those communities, showing that their bodies can be beautiful. It can also help to promote positive messages about their desires and their experiences, by telling stories that depict them as having agency, autonomy, and subjectivity, and being worthy of respect. This could contribute to diminish the potential of harmful stereotypes about members of those communities. However, and this is the first horn of the dilemma, I believe that given the ubiquity of mainstream pornography, and the educational potential that it has, it seems likely that the pornographic works I am describing could have negative effects when they are consumed by a mainstream audience. My worry, then, is that mainstream audiences may receive these pornographic works in a way such that the sexualization of non-normative bodies and identities is likely to happen. That is, even if they are represented as having agency and autonomy, audiences who are embedded in a sexist and misogynist ideology might interpret the images as promoting the perception of members of non-normative communities as having less value, since their value relies on being the object of pleasure for a white hetero-cis-male subject. So increasing the representation of those communities in pornography, even in a positive light, might lead to more stigma and subordination, since for many audiences, these works would be interpreted as expressing the message that the desires, the pleasure, and the autonomy of those people have less value than the desires and pleasure of white, able-bodied, hetero-cis-males.

Can we think of a solution to this problem? Perhaps one solution would be to follow A. W. Eaton’s recommendations regarding the representation of the female nude in works of art in a way that is not objectifying, namely, to emphasize the subjectivity, agency, autonomy, etc. of the women who are depicted in the works of art. In this way, one could argue, we can emphasize the view that those women have agency and autonomy, and their value does not rely on being the object of male desire. However, this solution faces a worry. In my view, precisely because we are focusing on pornographic works, emphasizing agency and autonomy might also help to perpetuate the myth of the sexualization of members of these communities. That is to say, in my view pornographic works that aim to emphasize the value of the desires and fantasies of members of non-normative communities, while at the same time depicting them as having agency, autonomy, and subjectivity, might also contribute to perpetuate stereotypes about members of those communities, precisely because of the sexually explicit nature of pornographic works. That is, it is not clear to me how a work of pornography could emphasize the value of, say, queer people’s desires and pleasure, without also perpetuating myths about sexualization and fetishization of those communities. My worry here is that there might be other works of art that could be better suited to the task of sending positive messages about members of non-normative communities than pornographic works, precisely because they do not run such a big risk of perpetuating the sexualization and fetishization of non-normative bodies. However (and this is the second horn
of the dilemma), works of art that do not involve sexually explicit scenes might have less potential in order to make visible and promote the value of the desires and fantasies of members of non-normative communities. Therefore, it is not clear to me if there is a way out of this dilemma.

I will finish with a more optimistic remark. As I have stressed, my worry has to do with the case of pornographic works with emancipatory goals that are consumed by mainstream audiences. But it is clear to me that feminist pornography can have clear emancipatory and liberatory effects with respect to non-normative audiences. That is to say, pornographic works can be well suited, or so I want to suggest, in order to provide representations of the desires, fantasies, and sexualities of members of non-normative communities, and the beauty and value of their non-normative bodies, as well as promoting positive messages that help to refute false ideologies and harmful stereotypes about ourselves. This can be a very powerful tool for those individuals, since to see ourselves represented in a positive light can have a significant educational and empowering effect. In particular, for queer people, people of color, differently abled people, fat people, or trans people, to see our bodies represented as being beautiful, and to see our desires, fantasies, and sexual pleasure as having equal value to that of white, able-bodied, thin hetero-cis-males, can be a very important step in the fight for social justice. For this reason, the production of pornographic works with the emancipatory, egalitarian goals that Mikkola helpfully explains might be more than justified. Indeed, it might be an essential tool in the quest for social justice, in spite of its possible pitfalls.

NOTES

Thoughts on Mikkola: Pornography, Artifacts, and Pictures

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Professor Mari Mikkola’s book Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction is a must-read for anyone interested in pornography. It’s one of the best things I’ve read on the topic in quite some time. Here are some of the book’s virtues.

First, Professor Mikkola has a talent for synthesizing what is now a very large and unwieldy body of literature and distilling from it the core issues and arguments. The book is impressively clear and insightful and does a great service to those of us interested in the topic by imparting clarity and order on the complex tangle of academic work on pornography.

Second, Professor Mikkola is balanced and fair when it comes to controversial issues. The most important example of this is that she takes both antiporn feminism and sex-positive feminism seriously, and teases out points of agreement and draws out other connections between the two positions. While it is, of course, always good to be balanced and fair, this is especially important when it comes to discussing pornography. As the reader probably knows, there has been an acrimonious debate about pornography in feminist circles since the 1970s. This debate continues to adopt a stark agonistic for/against shape, where it is common for members of opposing sides to dig in their heels and obstinately refuse to genuinely listen to one another. In being balanced and fair, and in refusing to explain issues around pornography in a black-and-white way, Professor Mikkola explores the complexity of the issues and makes progress in moving us beyond what looked like an insurmountable impasse.

Third, the book is wonderfully interdisciplinary. With an informed and sensitive eye, it explores work in, for instance, aesthetics, film studies, critical race theory, and gender studies, as well as some disability studies and fat studies. Fourth, the book takes seriously the idea that there must be a significant empirical component to any study of pornography. This is something that philosophers tend to ignore or woefully underestimate. Taking the empirical seriously means not only giving psychological and sociological studies on porn their full due—which Professor Mikkola does handily—but also giving sensitive and informed attention to what pornography actually is and has been in the world. Pornography is no more a monolithic thing than video games or gardens are. This does not mean that these phenomena are so heterogeneous that there’s nothing to say about them, but it does mean that we need to stop talking as if “Dirty Pool” were all there is to pornography. Instead, we need to recognize and be informed about the variety and richness of the phenomenon. This, Professor Mikkola does admirably.

I now turn to two topics that come up in Professor Mikkola’s excellent book. The topics are inspired by this quotation, which I think makes an important and underappreciated point, a point related to what I said above about Professor Mikkola’s recognition of the heterogeneity of pornography.

The term “pornography” does not pick out an abstract entity but an array of concrete things—something that a proper philosophical understanding of pornography in my view should bear closely in mind. (240)

The two topics I’ll discuss in turn are (1) Professor Mikkola’s view of artifacts and (2) a particular kind of artifact, namely, pictures.

PART ONE: ARTIFACTS
In Chapter 8, Professor Mikkola offers her own original and very interesting thoughts about pornography in the service
of a bold ambition: to fix the class of pornographic artifacts in a way that navigates between the Scylla of ameliorative approaches (à la Sally Haslanger) and the Charybdis of descriptive approaches (à la Michael Rea). In Professor Mikkola’s words, “my proposal aims to fix the class of pornographic artifacts, after which we can debate whether some instances are subordinating, liberating speech in a legal sense or not” (242).

To fix the class of pornographic artifacts, Professor Mikkola develops her maker’s intentions model (drawing from her 2017 essay). The maker’s intentions model, as I understand it, goes roughly like this: An artifact counts as pornographic only if it is the product of a largely successful intention to create pornography.

To analyze this, let us back up for a moment to think about artifacts in general, of which pornography is a species. One of the big problems with pure intentionalist accounts of artifacts is that they appear to be committed to the idea that the maker’s intention to produce an object of type x is sufficient for the resulting object’s counting as an x. For instance, if I make a big scribble on a piece of paper while sincerely intending my markings to serve as a portrait of you, this suffices, on a pure intentionalist view, for the scribble to function as a portrait of you. On this simple view, at least, the maker’s intention carries the day. And this strikes me, and also Professor Mikkola, as wrong: the scribble is not a portrait, no matter how much the maker meant for it to be one. (Consider here Professor Mikkola’s example of the person who means to produce porn by filming a fully clothed person baking a cake (245.).)

Professor Mikkola’s account is not what I’m calling a “pure intentionalist” account; rather, it’s a kind of hybrid account in that it also appeals to things outside of the maker’s intentions in order to fix the class of pornographic artifacts. On Professor Mikkola’s view (here following Amie Thomasson’s), intention to produce a type of thing is necessary, but not sufficient, for the resultant object to count as a token of that type. Professor Mikkola adds to this the following two points: (a) the maker must have a “substantive conception” of the kind of artifact in question, and (b) they must intend to realize this substantive conception by imposing the kind-relevant features (these, I presume, are provided by the substantive conception) on the materials that they are using to produce the artifact. This strikes me as reasonable. I can’t just scribble on a piece of paper and proclaim it a portrait; rather, in order for it to count as a portrait—even as a failed portrait (I’ll come back to the point about failure shortly)—I (the maker) must have some understanding of what a portrait is and I must be guided by this understanding as I make my marks.

But notice that something else sneaks into Professor Mikkola’s definition. Here it is again: An artifact counts as pornographic only if it is the product of a largely successful intention to create pornography. I’m going to call this “the success condition.”

I contend that success, and not the maker’s intentions, is doing the real work here in fixing the class of pornographic artifacts. Before I explain, I would like to just note that the success condition would seem to make it conceptually impossible that there could be such a thing as failed pornography. When a person intends to make a cake but, say, due to ineptitude fails to realize their intention, what results is not something other than a cake; rather, what results is a failed cake, an artifact that belongs to the kind “cake” even though the intention to make a cake is not “largely successful.” What makes the burned pile of flour and chocolate a cake, on an intentionalist account, is the intention to make a cake, success be damned. Indeed, I had always thought it an advantage of an intentionalist account of artifacts that it could capture cases of failure in ways that function-based analyses traditionally cannot.

Professor Mikkola appears to acknowledge this point when she expresses her dissatisfaction with functionalist accounts of artifacts precisely because, she says—though I do not agree—they cannot accommodate damage and defect (248-49). To my mind, her success condition makes her own account vulnerable to a similar criticism: if I make a work using my substantive conception of pornography but I am inept or something goes deeply wrong in the process and so the work ends up deviating, perhaps wildly, from my initial conception, an intentionalist should want to count the work as pornography but acknowledge that the work is failed precisely because it does not realize my intention. So it looks to me like Professor Mikkola’s success condition is depriving her of one of the most important advantages of intentionalism.

But there is, to my mind, an even bigger problem with Professor Mikkola’s success condition. To see what this is, let us first ask what it means for the maker to have “substantive concept” of the artifact kind in question (243-44). The substantive concept, Professor Mikkola tells us, “provides criteria for distinguishing [the kind of artifact in question] from others” (243). So if I, the maker of an artifact, have successfully imbedded my materials with kind-relevant features—that is, features that serve as criteria for some artifactual kind—then the resultant object will display these kind-relevant features; that is, the resultant artifact will bear at least some of the markers that are identity conditions for the artifact’s counting as a particular kind of thing. But if this is the case, then all we need to do in order to type-identify an artifact is consult the object itself to see whether it has said kind-relevant features; we do not need the maker’s intentions at all. That is, successfully instantiating kind-relevant features obviates the role of the maker’s intentions.

Let me make this point more concrete by talking about porn specifically. On Professor Mikkola’s view, a person must begin with a substantive conception of pornography if she is to produce a pornographic artifact. Without this substantive conception, she would be doing the analog of my proclaiming that my scribbles count as a portrait. So, what is this initial substantive conception of porn like? Well, I confess to not knowing many pornographers—indeed, thanks to Hans Maes, I know exactly one—so I do not have anyone to ask at the moment. If Professor Mikkola has consulted a representative group of pornographers to find out what substantive conception of pornography is driving them, she doesn’t tell us so. Instead, she appeals to “everyday paradigm exemplars.” Now, I don’t have any
problem with this, but I am not an intentionalist. For an intentionalist—for someone who thinks that the maker’s intentions play an essential role in the type-identity conditions of artifacts—to appeal to “everyday paradigm exemplars” for this purpose is to put the cart before the horse. To see what I mean, I offer the following imaginary dialog between Professor Mikkola and an anti-intentionalist (or at least someone who does not accept her version of intentionalism).

- Anti-intentionalist: What makes this particular artifact count as a pornography?

- Professor Mikkola: The maker’s intention, which includes a substantive conception of pornography that has been successfully realized in the artifact.

- Anti-intentionalist: How do you know that this particular artifact was produced with a particular substantive conception in mind, and so how do you know that the conception has been successfully realized? Did you consult the maker?

- Professor Mikkola: No. I simply looked at the artifact and saw that it has the requisite kind-relevant features.

- Anti-intentionalist: How do you know what the kind-relevant features of pornography are?

- Professor Mikkola: They are the features exhibited in everyday paradigm exemplars of pornography.

- Anti-intentionalist: So, it looks to me like what makes this particular artifact a work of pornography is its similarity to paradigm exemplars of pornography, not the maker’s intention. After all, you’ve type-identified this artifact without knowing a thing about the maker’s intention, and you only inferred that the maker was working with a substantive conception of pornography after you’d already made the type-identification based on the paradigm exemplars. The maker’s intention is just a red herring.⁵

Professor Mikkola might respond by directing the anti-intentionalist to her CCTV case, which perhaps shows that intention to produce x is necessary for a thing’s counting as an x. Let us briefly look at this case in more detail. Imagine that, unbeknownst to them, a couple is caught on video surveillance camera having sex. Does the footage count as pornography? As you might have guessed, Professor Mikkola thinks not because the footage was not produced with pornography in mind. But now imagine that a security guard sees the footage and uploads it to a pornographic internet portal. Professor Mikkola says the footage should count as porn because the “security guard intentionally takes steps to distribute it as pornography” (247); in this case, it is the security guard’s intention that makes the footage count as pornography. I have no quibble with counting the security guard’s actions as a kind of making—Professor Mikkola rightly, in keeping with current work on authorship in the philosophy of art, counts repurposing of artifacts as authorship—but I do not think that the CCTV example establishes that intention fixes the artifactual kind; rather, it is function that does the work here. To see what I mean, consider that the security guard without her knowledge and completely accidentally uploads the footage to the company’s website, whereby it is discovered by thousands of teenagers who regularly masturbate to it. Would it now count as pornography? I think so. After all, it would fit Professor Mikkola’s notion of “everyday paradigm exemplars” which, I remind you, have the following features (244):

- Sexually explicit
- Contains nudity and scenes of a sexual nature
- Has the potential to sexually arouse viewers
- Often used as masturbation material

Once again, it seems to me, the maker’s intention is hardly relevant.⁶ Rather, what is relevant is the function of the artifact in question, where “function” does not mean mere “use,” as Professor Mikkola seems to think, but rather should be understood as proper function in the sense that Ruth Millikan and others have developed.⁷ To my mind, this would be a more appropriate model and sound model for Professor Mikkola to use in her account of pornography than the maker’s intention model.

PART TWO: PICTURES
As I mentioned earlier, I very much appreciate the fact that Professor Mikkola devotes an entire chapter of her book to aesthetic issues related to pornography. In this chapter (chapter 6), she takes up three topics: the fictionality of pornography, the question of whether pornography can be art; and the question of the moral character of digitally generated imagery. She does a superb job of representing the current state of the philosophical conversations around these themes and of showcasing some of what aesthetics (the field) has to offer ongoing discussions about porn. So what I’m about to say is not a criticism of Professor Mikkola’s chapter, nor is it a criticism of the field of aesthetics; in fact, it’s not really a criticism at all. But I do want to draw our attention to two important things that have been missing or woefully underdiscussed in philosophical conversations about porn, and I want us to notice that these things are something that aesthetics/philosophy of art (the field) is especially well-suited to explore. So, although what I am about to say stems from a dissatisfaction, I would like us to think of it as a call for a new direction in the philosophical study of pornography.

This first thing that has been missing from most conversations about pornography is a discussion of pictures. You might have noticed that while Professor Mikkola mentions pictures throughout her book, there’s no detailed discussion of any pictures, nor a substantive discussion of how pictures work in any of the theories she discusses.⁸ This is not a fault on Professor Mikkola’s part; she’s just representing the state of the field. By far most philosophers today who talk about porn construe it as a linguistic phenomenon, one that can then be analyzed using tools and methods from the
philosophy of language. Witness, for instance, Mary Kate McGowan’s recent excellent book: Just Words: On Speech and Hidden Harm (Oxford University Press, 2019). While this linguistic approach has produced a profound body of work that has moved feminism forward in many ways, as Professor Mikkola so ably demonstrates in her book, the focus on language is nevertheless curious because by far most contemporary pornography takes the form of pictures (moving or still). [Something similar could be said about the (scant) philosophical literature on propaganda.]

I think that this is not a minor problem. Not only is it generally agreed that pictures represent the world in ways that are different from the ways that language represents the world—in the philosophy of art we say that pictures “depict”—but all pictures have extradepictive features (features distinct from what is depicted), like design, that bear on the properties that pictures attribute to the things they depict and also on the responses that pictures solicit from their viewers. For example, some pictures (both in pornography and in high art—here trying not to beg any questions about whether these are distinct, which is an issue that Professor Mikkola takes up) depict acts of sexual violence as sexy (attributing the property of sexiness to an act of sexual violence) and solicit an erotic response from their audience in regard to what is depicted.

These two things are intimately connected, since what it is to attribute the property of sexiness to x just is to solicit an erotic response to x from the audience, just as what it is to attribute the property of frightfulness to x just is to solicit fear of x from the audience.

It is my view that pictures can work in ways that are quite different from language. And it is my conviction that understanding the ways that pictures work will give us a better handle on how pornography works than if we continued to treat pornography as if it were an exclusively linguistic phenomenon. I don’t have time to lay out the entire argument for this here, but in my current work, I’m trying to show that a shift to the pictorial allows for a better understanding of the persuasive power of pornography [and also advertising, and propaganda] both in terms of what pornography persuades us of, and in terms of its mechanisms of persuasion (that is, how it persuades). In addition to the various things that pornography purportedly does—subordinates, silences, degrades, sexually objectifies, produces maker’s knowledge, all of which Professor Mikkola very ably explains in her book—pornography also persuades, perhaps in the manner of advertising.

This brings me to my second dissatisfaction with the current state of philosophical discussions about porn, namely, that in analyzing pornography’s effects (both harmful and beneficial), philosophy is overly doxastic and intellectualizing. I mean this in the sense that when it comes to thinking about pornography’s effects on its audiences and on society more generally, the focus is overwhelmingly on the beliefs and knowledge that pornography embodies and propagates. This is especially true of feminist discussions of pornography. Now, while I do not disagree with the idea that false beliefs play a significant role in sustaining women’s subordination (and so that propagating true beliefs is an important part of social equality), and while I accept that pornography may well lead its audiences to internalize beliefs that are relevant to social justice (both true and false, depending on the kind of pornography we’re talking about), I am with Rae Langton when she urges that our discussions of pornography move “Beyond Belief.”

On my view, accounts of pornography should give more attention to the role of the affective life in both sustaining and undermining sexism (again, depending on the kind of porn we’re talking about), and in particular more attention to pornography’s effects on what I call “erotic taste”—that is, its effects on its audience’s likes and dislikes, desires and aversions, and aesthetic values and disvalues.

But—and here is where my two dissatisfactions connect up—if we are to move “beyond belief,” as Langton exhorts, I think that we also need to move beyond language and start thinking about pictures, and in particular the pictorial dimension of pictures. After all, pictures— from their role in, say, Christianity to their role in advertising—can be not just entertaining and appealing but also tremendously persuasive. And while pictures can, of course, persuade us to believe particular truths or untruths, they can also persuade us to feel in particular ways. While I don’t mean to pretend that the mechanisms for this are perfectly well understood, it is part of the business of fields like art history, visual studies, film theory, and communications to understand how pictures work, how they do their work. To my mind, it would be very much in the spirit of Professor Mikkola’s interdisciplinary, empirically informed, and concrete approach to feminists start exploring these issues.

NOTES

1. Professor Mikkola does discuss “Dirty Pool” (165), but it is by no means allowed to stand in for the whole of pornography.


4. This, by the way, is one of the points made in the now classic essay by Wimsatt and Beardsley: W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” The Sewanee Review 54, no. 3 (1946): 468–88.

5. Or consider Professor Mikkola’s very interesting exposition of what it means to successfully realize one’s intention:

Imagine that one intends to create a piece of pornography and one has some contentful conception of pornography that matches that held by some prior pornographers (e.g., that the artifact be sexually arousing and used as “masturbation material”). But imagine that one intends to realize that concept by imposing no intuitively pornography-relevant features on the object. Rather, imagine that one makes (say) a film of a fully clothed person baking a cake. Despite the intention to create a pornographic artifact, we would be hard pressed to call this “pornography” precisely because the maker fails to impose any apparently pornography relevant features on the object—and so the object would not count as a pornographic artifact (245).

This example proves the point I was just making. Despite the intention to create a pornographic artifact—Professor Mikkola’s words—the artifact ought not count as “pornography” precisely because it fails to exhibit any “pornography relevant features.” It
is the “pornography relevant features” that do the work here of fixing the category, not the maker’s intention.


8. Professor Mikkola does briefly discuss Louise Antony’s argument that speech act theory is not applicable to pictures (56-57).

9. By the way, something similar could be said about the philosophical literature on propaganda. Modern propaganda also has a strong, if not dominant, visual component, and yet the pictorial is practically ignored in this literature. For instance, in his recent book (*How Propaganda Works*, Princeton University Press, 2015), Jason Stanley boldly announces that while it is “natural to think of representations [by which he means visual] as propaganda,” his focus in the book is “rather on claims, or arguments, and representations only insofar as they play a role in these claims or arguments” (41). It’s not surprising, then, that there is not a single picture reproduced or discussed in his entire book. See José Medina’s recent paper, “Resisting Racist Propaganda: Distorted Visual Communication and Epistemic Activism,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 56 (2018). I mention propaganda because I, like Rae Langton, think that pornography and propaganda often have much in common.


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**Pornography and Melancholy**

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Anton Chekhov and Lev Tolstoy, two giants of Russian literature, both had an extraordinary ability to express and evoke a sense of melancholy. Here is a passage from Chekhov’s famous short story, “The Lady with the Dog”:

Yalta was hardly visible through the morning mist; white clouds stood motionless on the mountain-tops. The leaves did not stir on the trees, grasshoppers chirruped, and the monotonous hollow sound of the sea rising up from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep awaiting us. So it must have sounded when there was no Yalta, no Oreanda here; so it sounds now, and it will sound as indifferently and monotonously when we are all no more. And in this constancy, in this complete indifference to the life and death of each of us, there lies hid, perhaps, a pledge of our eternal salvation, of the unceasing movement of life upon earth, of unceasing progress towards perfection. Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, soothed and spellbound in these magical surroundings—the sea, mountains, clouds, open sky—Gurov thought how in reality everything is beautiful in this world when one reflects: everything except what we think or do ourselves when we forget our human dignity and the higher aims of our existence.¹

And this is from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*:

After dinner Natasha, at Prince Andrei’s request, went to the clavichord and began to sing. Prince Andrei stood by a window, talking to the ladies, and listened to her. In the midst of a phrase he fell silent and suddenly felt choked with tears, a thing he had thought impossible for him. He looked at Natasha as she sang, and something new and joyful stirred in his soul. He had decidedly nothing to weep about, but he was ready to weep. About what? His former lover? The little princess? His disappointments? . . . His hopes for the future? . . . Yes and no. The main thing he wanted to weep about was a sudden, vivid awareness of the terrible opposition between something infinitely great and indefinable that was in him, and something narrow and fleshly that he himself, and even she, was. This opposition tormented him and gladdened him while she sang.²

What does the sentiment of melancholy, as it is described and expressed in these passages, have to do with pornography? Nothing much, it may seem. Indeed, it might be difficult to think of a bigger contrast: the refined prose of these authors vs. the crude visuals of porn; the wisdom that exudes from the cited passages vs. the cheap arousal offered by sites like Pornhub. And yet, in this paper, I want to investigate the connection between pornography and melancholy. My motivation for doing so is twofold. Firstly, I’m drawn to this topic because I have a longstanding interest in another unlikely pairing, namely, that of pornography and art. I have argued in the past that both are not mutually exclusive and that some pornography can attain art status.¹ However, possessing art status does not entail possessing great artistic value. (After all, there is a lot of bad art out there.) The possibility of the latter remains to be investigated in the case of pornography. But if it can be argued that pornography can be expressive of melancholy—one of the qualities that I, and many others, admire most in art—that will bring us a step closer to making the case that there may indeed be some pornography, and perhaps some feminist pornography in particular, with considerable artistic value.

Secondly, I have been inspired by Mari Mikkola’s book. On the very first page, she writes: “someone once remarked to me: Is there really that much to say about pornography philosophically? . . . someone else remarked that since the topic is so profoundly disgusting and vulgar, I cannot call my work philosophical in any genuine sense at all.” Like her, I think such remarks are thoroughly misguided. There really remains much more to be said about pornography. For instance, pornography’s relation to melancholy has, to my knowledge, never been investigated. Furthermore, even if a topic is considered disgusting and vulgar by some, that doesn’t mean that you can’t think or write philosophically about it. (Indeed, disgust itself is nowadays a major topic of philosophical discussion.) Finally, and quite obviously, not all pornography is disgusting or vulgar. In fact, there
may be very refined pornography out there—pornography that is able to elicit some of the more “elevated” emotions such as melancholy. That is at least one of things I will try to establish. So this paper is not so much critically responding to, but rather gratefully inspired by Mikkola’s book.

In section 1, I propose a new philosophical account of melancholy. In section 2, I examine, and ultimately reject, the reasons why one might think that pornography and melancholy are incompatible. In section 3, I discuss some successful examples of melancholic pornography and argue that feminist pornographers are particularly well placed to produce such material.

1. MELANCHOLY

What is melancholy? In answering this question my primary aim will be to give an account of the intense, profound, and bittersweet emotion as it is expressed in the passages cited above, as well as in other great works of art and literature. Before sketching my account, however, I want to make clear that I will not be engaging in what Sally Haslanger has called a “conceptual project,” whereby one tries to track the ordinary usage of a term. This sort of project would be as ill-advised in the case of melancholy, as it is in the case of pornography. As Mikkola rightly points out, “This is because our intuitions about the concept at issue are too muddled and unclear, and our uses of the term expressing that concept too idiosyncratic.” In the course of history, the term “melancholy” has sometimes been reserved for a particular kind of illness, or a character trait, a mood, various sorts of psychological pathologies, and even a form of cultural decline. I am not interested in any of these uses of the term. My project should rather be considered “ameliorative” in nature, that is, my aim will be to clarify what melancholy is and ought to be in a manner that does justice to the intense and valuable experience expressed in (and afforded by) the works listed above.

With that in mind, I propose to characterize melancholy as a complex and prolonged emotional process triggered by the affective appraisal of (what is perceived to be) a profound but typically harsh truth about human existence that puts the precarious value of something that you (feel you should) care about in sharp relief in such a way that you come to appreciate it more deeply. As a result, negative feelings or emotions (e.g., sadness, grief, angst) will co-occur or alternate with positive feelings or emotions (e.g., joy, gratitude, peacefulness).

Some clarifications are in order. The existential truths that give rise to melancholy can be varied in nature. They can relate to the transience of all things, the indifference of the universe to the life and death of each of us (as in Chekhov), the “terrible opposition” we find in ourselves (as in Tolstoy), the “eternal sleep awaiting all of us” or the world’s mortality in a cool and detached way. Yet it is only when you start to grasp the implications for yourself (or those close to you) that an emotional response might ensue. As Tolstoy reflects in The Death of Ivan Ilyich,

“One could certainly apprehend, say, the general idea of mortality in a cool and detached way. Yet it is only when you start to grasp the implications for yourself (or those close to you) that an emotional response might ensue. As Tolstoy reflects in The Death of Ivan Ilyich, “Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal” had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius—man in the abstract—was mortal was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from others.”

Only when the main character realizes that he is in fact not different from others and that death awaits him, too, is he plunged into the emotional turmoil that is at the heart of the story.

Affective appraisals typically cause physiological responses, motor changes, action tendencies, and changes in facial and vocal expression. They may then be followed by a higher order cognitive appraisal or monitoring which kicks in to see if the initial affective appraisal is appropriate. Now, when someone really comes to grasp a harsh existential truth, their response may just be one of sadness, horror, or despair. But it can also be more complex and multifaceted. And that’s when melancholy may ensue. The harsh existential truth may come to accentuate the precarious value of something that you (feel you should) care about in such a way that you come to appreciate it more deeply. This gives rise to more positive feelings or emotions that help to offset the initial feelings of sadness or despair. Hence, the bittersweet nature of melancholy.

Melancholy, it should be noted, is not always or necessarily aesthetic in nature. But if an aesthetic experience is integrated into the complex emotional process described above, we may speak of aesthetic melancholy. An aesthetic experience occurs, we might say, “when we value our aesthetic perception of an object for its own sake and are moved in virtue of that perception.” If that is so, then it seems that the characters in the passages I quoted from Tolstoy and Chekhov are indeed experiencing aesthetic melancholy. Prince Andrei appreciates the beauty of Natasha’s music and is deeply moved in virtue of it. Gurov is aesthetically savoring his surroundings whilst being in the thralls of melancholy. Moreover, readers of Tolstoy and Chekhov may also be experiencing aesthetic melancholy in savoring these beautiful passages. When you read about the “eternal sleep awaiting all of us” or the world’s “complete indifference to the life and death of each of us” you are invited to contemplate these existential truths. And doing so may put the precarious value of beauty, and particularly the beauty and artistry of the prose you are reading, in sharp relief in such a way that you come to appreciate it more deeply.

2. PORNOGRAPHY VS. MELANCHOLY

Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog” and Tolstoy’s War and Peace are highly expressive of melancholy and, in virtue of being so, will readily elicit melancholy in their audience. This is part of what makes them so valuable as works of
art. It is commonly assumed that this sort of achievement and value is lacking in pornography. Granted, one can be overcome with sadness, and perhaps even melancholy, as a result of consuming pornography. Think of so-called “cranking.” Or one can imagine someone being struck by the depravity of human nature as a result of consuming pornography and consequently coming to appreciate the nondepraved aspects of, or people in, one’s life more fervently. However, in such cases the pornography itself is not expressive of melancholy (though it may inadvertently give rise to feelings of melancholy).

Pornography, it might be thought, simply cannot be expressive of melancholy due to its very nature. Various arguments could serve to support such a conclusion. First, melancholy is reflective at heart. It requires one to dwell on certain existential truths. But pornography, by virtue of what it is, seems to make reflection impossible. As St. Augustine already pointed out, “The promptings of sensuality are the most strong of all, and so the most hostile to philosophy. . . . What man in the grip of this, the strongest of emotions, can bend his mind to thought, regain his reason, or indeed, concentrate on anything. . . .”

Second, bending one’s mind to the harsh reality of the human condition is part and parcel of melancholy. But pornographers, because they need to gratify the viewer, rather refashion reality as the compliant object of said viewer’s desires. Pornography depicts the world as its consumers would want it to be: full of healthy, attractive people who seem to wish nothing more than to satisfy every possible sexual desire. Third, while the depths of the human psyche are explored in melancholy, pornography is really only “skin deep.” Its whole raison d’être is to show naked bodies and any psychologizing would just get in the way. Fourth, there also appears to be a fundamental difference in uptake. Whereas aesthetic melancholy is savored for its own sake, a pornographic film or photograph is simply used to satisfy a need or gratify a desire. The former is a matter of appreciation, the latter one of consumption.

Finally, the pleasure of pornography seems to require a certain “narrowing of the mind.” Not just in the sense that one becomes utterly oblivious to one’s surroundings when one engages with pornography, but also in the sense that a certain willful blindness seems required if one wants to enjoy this sort of material. For instance, one can’t really think of all the pain and suffering in the world whilst consuming pornography because that would almost certainly serve to destroy the mood. By the same token, one may also need to ignore certain facts about the pornographic work itself, such as the exploitative working conditions of the actors, if one wants to use that material to indulge in one’s fantasies. The contrast with melancholy seems clear. Here the pleasure is (at least partly) the result of a broadening of the mind. In the experience of melancholy, we are precisely reminded of things that we normally tend to ban from our consciousness: the fact that we are mortal, that life is transitory, etc. This confrontation with a tough existential truth then allows us to become more appreciative of the present moment or of something that we hold dear.

In sum, there are various reasons why one might think that pornography, due to its very nature, cannot be expressive of melancholy. However, as I will now go on to argue, none of these arguments are ultimately compelling.

To begin with, even if we grant, following St. Augustine, that the state of sexual arousal is irreconcilable with the kind of reflection that is required for melancholy (or philosophy), and even if we grant, pace Mikkola, that pornography necessarily involves the intention to produce sexual arousal, this still does not show that pornography is of necessity inimical to melancholy. Because nothing says that pornography should have sexual arousal as its only or even central intent. As Mikkola rightly argues, “producing sexually arousing materials may be a means to some other end, rather than the central purpose of pornography production per se.” Furthermore, the “pornographic intention of soliciting sexual arousal may be constitutively intertwined with other intentions in a way that makes it impossible to separate ‘the’ central pornographic intention from additional nonpornographic intentions.” In light of this, pornography could very well induce reflection on certain profound existential truths by means of, or in addition to, sexually arousing its audience.

Second, it is just not true that pornographers will always seek to distort reality to comply with viewers’ desires and fantasies. Some pornography aims to capture the realities of sex, including some of its not-so-pretty elements. This is particularly true of the so-called “docu porn” branch of feminist pornography, where authenticity, realism, truthfulness are key. BED PARTY (2014, dir. Shire Louise Houston and Shae Voyeur) is a good example. It features Eden Alexander and Sebastian Keys and has been aptly described as “a ‘Porno Vérité’ documentary style look behind the private doors of porn’s public performers” offering “an all access and unfiltered glimpse into the personal life of the couple.” Third, there is no reason to assume that the explicit nature of pornography and its depiction of naked bodies are incompatible with psychological complexity. Similarly, and fourth, there is no reason to think that something cannot possess both intrinsic value and instrumental value. Consuming and appreciating often do go hand-in-hand, as in the case of a nice meal or glass of wine.

Finally, one cannot draw a strict dividing line between melancholy and pornography based on their tendencies to either broaden or narrow the mind. For one thing, it appears that melancholy often also relies on a certain narrowing of consciousness. Not just in the sense that when you’re engrossed in a Tolstoy novel you become oblivious to your surroundings, but even in the sense that you may have to ignore certain uncomfortable truths in order to be able to indulge in these melancholic works of art. After all, while you are leisurely leafing through your expensive hard back copy of War and Peace there are people dying of starvation elsewhere (the “bourgeois predicament,” as R. Jay Wallace calls it). Conversely, the pleasure of pornography may potentially be enhanced, instead of impeded, by the sort of “broadening of the mind” that is characteristic of melancholy. For if there is any truth to the oft-reported finding that funerals and other vivid reminders of mortality...
are powerful enhancers of the erotic drive, then it’s not hard to see how this sort of effect could, at least in principle, be put to good use in the creation of pornography.

3. MELANCHOLIC PORNOGRAPHY

What we’ve established so far is that the combination of melancholy and pornography seems at least possible in theory. What remains to be shown is whether that combination could actually work in practice. Are there überhaupt any existing and successful examples of melancholic pornography? The importance of asking such questions is justly emphasized in Mikkola’s book: “Pornography cannot be analyzed from the philosopher’s armchair a priori, and speaking authoritatively about issues relevant to pornography requires knowing something about those issues. In other words, philosophical theorizing about pornography requires having knowledge about the empirical realities of pornography.”

One film that may serve as an example is Michael Winterbottom’s 9 Songs (2004). This sexually explicit story of a passionate love affair between an exchange student and a climate scientist is framed by the latter’s work in (and reflections on) the Antarctic. The vastness and coldness of the outside world serves to accentuate the warm intimacy found in bed, and reminiscences about the impermanence of human relationships seem to enhance the appreciation of the beautiful and ecstatic time they had together. Its pervasive melancholy is epitomized in the movie’s last line, “It’s beautiful!” immediately followed by the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club’s Love Burns (with the telling chorus “Now she’s gone, Love burns inside me.”).

Another example is Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie’s Lost Girls (2006). This “porno-graphic novel” depicts the sexually explicit adventures of three female fictional characters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Alice from Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz, and Wendy from J. M. Barrie’s Peter and Wendy. They meet as adults at the mountain resort Hotel Himmelgarten, on the eve of World War I, and recount and share erotic adventures. The melancholic tone is set on the very first page with a motto taken from Lewis Carroll: “We are but older children, dear, who fret to find our bedtime near.” The transience of life and the challenges of aging are among its central themes, as is the idea that war, violence, and oppression are always lurking in the shadows, ready to destroy the freedoms that people enjoy (including the freedom to explore and express their sexual fantasies). The latter truth is expressed very poignantly on the final pages, when the hotel is abandoned, the war erupts, and a young soldier is slaughtered on the battlefield. But the overall mood of the book, it should be observed, is not one of depression or horror. These harsh truths really serve to accentuate the beauty of the (past and present) moments the characters are able to share and the precarious value of the freedoms they enjoy (and we enjoy today). That is what makes Lost Girls highly expressive of melancholy.

Now, given Mikkola’s understanding of feminist pornography as “materials that genuinely have been produced under ethical and fair-trade conditions and that celebrate non-gender-stereotypic bodies, scenarios, and desires,” it would seem that Lost Girls qualifies as such. The book certainly shows and eroticizes a number of non-gender-stereotypic scenarios and desires. However, that is not all it does. In certain passages, Lost Girls also seems to gloss over as unproblematic some of the worst sexist tropes (e.g., women desiring and enjoying incestuous and nonconsensual sex). This should give one pause in labeling the work as feminist. And it indicates that Mikkola’s characterization of feminist pornography needs further refinement.

That said, the claim that feminist pornographers, in order to be worthy of that label, should at the very least seek to produce work within an ethical working environment and celebrate non-gender-stereotypic bodies and desires, seems entirely plausible. Furthermore, implementing these two conditions should be highly conducive for the production of melancholic pornography. Firstly, if feminist porn is produced under ethical and fair-trade conditions, there will be no need for viewers to turn a blind eye to any abuse or exploitation that went on in its production. In other words, there will be no need for a deliberate narrowing of the mind that seems required for the consumption of so much other pornography but that is typically detrimental for melancholy. Secondly, when feminist pornographers set out to celebrate non-gender-stereotypical bodies and desires, they will inevitably do so against the backdrop of a world and an industry that is still largely hostile towards such bodies and desires. That is a harsh truth that can be (and often is) acknowledged in the work itself in order to accentuate the beauty and value of such desires and bodies.

A case in point, and the best example of melancholic pornography that I know, is Marit Östberg’s When We Are Together, We Can Be Everywhere (2015). The film, as the wistful voice-over makes abundantly clear, is in part a love letter to Berlin: “a place safe from the capitalist order” where we can “unleash our fantasies on broken facades and fallen walls.” Elsewhere in the film the voice states: “There’s nothing we can’t project on Berlin, both trauma and freedom. Queer bubbles next to far right parties all over Europe.” Against this background queer desires of all varieties are unflinchingly and joyfully explored. The awareness of transience (“the Summer ended; like they all do”) coupled with an appreciation of what has been, the occasional brooding of the characters, with quasi-mournful flashbacks and the unmistakable reference to Dürer’s famous engraving Melencolia I (1514), just add to the bittersweet nature of this beautifully melancholic and yet hard-core feminist porn film.

CONCLUSION

Melancholic pornography—pornography that elicits melancholy in virtue of expressing it—is not a contradiction in terms. It exists and there are some striking examples out there. If only there would be more of it, I’m now inclined to add. Not so much, or not only, because facing up to certain existential truths can function as a sexual tonic, but because there are so many fundamental but difficult truths relating specifically to sexuality that are just waiting to be thematized (e.g., sex as a sublime force, pleasurable and terrifying at the same time; or the world as a hostile
place for all sorts of non-gender-stereotypical bodies and fantasies, etc.). Dealing with such truths, in a way that might be conducive to melancholy, is something that pornography seems eminently placed to do. For it offers the most direct and explicit representation of sexual relations whilst aiming for a bodily, visceral, emotional response—thereby facilitating the sort of affective appraisal needed for melancholy. Thus, at least as I see it, pornography and melancholy are not irreconcilable. If anything, the opposite may be true: they are made for each other. This, I admit, is a rather provocative thesis. But, in the spirit of Mikkola’s book, my hope is first and foremost “to motivate alternative ways to think about pornography and to provide an impetus for a continued philosophical examination of the topic.”

NOTES

2. Lev Tolstoy, War and Peace, 1869.
5. E.g. Céline Sciamma’s film Portrait of a Lady on Fire, Ozu’s Late Spring, the song Bella Ciao (as sung, for instance, by Goran Bregović or the characters of Berlin and the Professor in La Casa de Papel), and Titus Simoens’s photobook For Brightie.
9. I am paraphrasing Mikkola here. In her book she embarks on a similar kind of ameliorative project with regards to pornography.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. See https://www.pinklabel.tv/on-demand/film/bed-party/.
20. Ibid., 211.
21. Ibid., 232.

Pornography, Social Ontology, and Feminist Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

Mari Mikkola’s Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction is a rich, thorough, and important book. With great skill and precision, Mikkola maps the conceptual terrain of pornography; summarizes and assesses key debates in the existing literature; and contributes her own insights—chiefly, in my view, an appealing artefactual definition of pornography, and a strong case for a methodological commitment to discussing pornography in a way that is grounded in empirical reality. The result is much more than the promised “introduction”: it is a key critical study that will, I am sure, play a major role in shaping future debates on this topic.

I’m going to focus on a brief part of the book where Mikkola offers a critique of a paper of mine on pornography and social ontology. In short, I think Mikkola’s critique is correct, and I’ll attempt a reworking of the argument I made in that paper which, I hope, avoids the problems she identifies. Given the richness of the book, this focus on Mikkola’s response to my own work is probably somewhat selfish. However, I hope to mitigate this selfishness by using the discussion to highlight some broader points about the relationship between feminist philosophy and pornography—points which, although they are primarily prompted by my own experience, I hope may resonate with others.

PORNOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

In my 2017 paper “What Women Are For: Pornography and Social Ontology,” I offered a way of sympathetically interpreting two claims made about pornography by Catharine MacKinnon:*

The subordination claim: pornography subordinates women.

The constructionist claim: pornography constructs women’s natures in a way that is, in some sense, wrong.

I drew on John Searle’s account of social ontology, according to which social entities are created by the imposition of status functions through collective intentional recognition. For example, if we all collectively recognize that certain pieces of paper are to serve as currency, this transforms those pieces of paper into money. This is a status function because the pieces of paper can only function as currency on the basis of our collective recognition of them as having that status (compare: a screwdriver can function to screw and unscrew screws even if we have no beliefs at all about what it is for). Status functions can be expressed by the formula “X counts as Y in context C.”
My suggestion was that

[W]e can read MacKinnon as claiming that m-pornography determines the status function that defines women as institutional entities, and that this status function is something like <“females” count as objects for male sexual use [around here]>.

This supports the subordination claim in a pretty straightforward manner (being constructed as an object for the sexual use of others is clearly subordinating). I then offered two routes to cashing out the constructionist claim, specifically its second component: the idea that the way women are socially constructed is somehow wrong. The first route, inspired more by MacKinnon’s writings, is simply to enact a performative refusal to go along with the social construction. The idea here is that for us, it is wrong to say that women are objects for male sexual use, because we reject and refuse to participate in the collective intentional acceptance of the relevant status function. The second route, inspired more by Haslanger, is to say that the construction of women as objects for male sexual use is wrong in the sense that it is falsely presented as a natural fact when it is really a social fact—a “debunking” move of the kind commonly made in work on social construction.

MIKKOLA’S CRITIQUE

Mikkola argues that although my reconstruction of the subordination and constructionist claims is comprehensible, the claims as I reconstruct them are implausible due to their reliance on Searle’s account of social ontology (233–40). She notes that, for Searle, collective intentionality involves an irreducible we-intention, as when the members of an orchestra intend to play a symphony together, rather than each simply intending to play their own part of the symphony. This means that in order for women to be constructed as objects for male sexual use, as Mikkola puts it, “there would have to be something like a sexist conspiracy that constructs women’s natures in some particular manner,” involving “a shared collective agreement to impose particular status functions on groups of people in order to construct them as gendered individuals in some specific way” (239). Mikkola argues, and I agree, that this is simply not a plausible picture of how a gendered social system is maintained. If we look for the kind of explicit intentional agreement among individuals to maintain gendered social practices (that are profoundly sexist) which is required for the Searlean versions of the subordination and constructionist claims to be true, we will not find it. Thus, the paper does not succeed in offering a sympathetic interpretation of the subordination and constructionist claims, which was its aim.

This is Mikkola’s principal criticism of the paper, but her book actually raises two further criticisms—one in a footnote, and one that is implied by the methodological commitments that she argues for.

In a footnote, Mikkola raises worries about the performative rejection version of the constructionist claim. She finds it too weak because it gives up on the idea that the construction is false, and indeed amounts to an assertion along the lines of “I don’t like it.” This is a compelling point. Certainly, the performative rejection interpretation of the constructionist claim does not seem to do justice to MacKinnon’s assertion that pornography is a lie.

Finally, towards the end of the book, Mikkola makes a strong argument that

[Philosophical theorizing about pornography requires having knowledge about the empirical realities of pornography as a cultural phenomenon and as an industry—otherwise one is not in a good position to advance empirically adequate analyses of pornography. (259–60)]

This is something that my 2017 paper conspicuously fails to do. For example, instead of engaging with the issue of whether the content of pornography really is such that it presents women as sexual objects for the use of men, I duck the issue by stipulating that I will talk only about “m-pornography,” or misogynist pornography—pornography that meets the MacKinnon/Dworkin definition as essentially subordinating—without taking a stance on what proportion that amounts to of the pornographic material that actually exists today. Although I cite two empirical studies that have led me to believe that much of the pornographic material that exists today is profoundly misogynistic, I don’t actually undertake the kind of empirical engagement that Mikkola—rightly, in my view—advocates.

So, to sum up, Mikkola raises—directly or indirectly—three problems for my paper:

1. The reliance on Searle creates a requirement for explicit collective agreement to enact gendered social practices, rendering the claims implausible.

2. The “performative rejection” interpretation of the constructionist claim does not really secure the idea that the construction is wrong in as strong a sense as might have been hoped.

3. In talking about misogynistic pornography whilst refusing to take a stance on how much of pornography is misogynistic, the paper fails to engage meaningfully with the empirical reality of pornography.

These problems all strike me as genuine, and in the rest of this paper I’ll try to respond to each of them in turn.

BEWARE WHAT YOU BORROW

Problem 1: The reliance on Searle creates a requirement for explicit collective agreement to enact gendered social practices, rendering the claims implausible.

Firstly, it’s worth noting that even Searle starts to see in his later work that it’s a mistake to theorize the social world as if it runs on explicit collective acceptance. He comes to focus more on collective recognition of deontic powers than on acceptance, and to allow for naturalizing ideology. However, I’ve come to the view that it’s all rather too
little, too late. The solution here is not to focus on Searle's later work, but to move to a different account of social ontology, one that does not emphasize explicit collective intentionality in the same way.

Johan Brännmark offers an account of institutional reality in which deontic powers are understood in terms of patterns of deontic incidents—incidents such as being treated as having a duty to do P, or being felt to have overstepped the mark in doing Q. In other words, Brännmark conceives of deontic powers (both constraints, such as duties, and enablements, such as entitlements) in terms of the social moves that are effectively “open” to an individual, where this is determined by how people actually respond to one another in various situations. Whereas Searle holds that the existence of deontic constraints and enablements requires people to have explicit beliefs about the entitlements, duties, and so on of others, Brännmark rejects this requirement. This means that he can allow for deontic constraints and enablements that are generated by, for example, racist and sexist implicit attitudes on the part of the people who would disavow explicitly racist and sexist beliefs. As Brännmark puts it,

People can identify types of responses as sexist and racist in the abstract and think that being a woman or being a person of color does not really warrant having fewer moves open to one; but they can still, in a patterned way, regard specific actions by a concrete person occupying these social positions as overstepping boundaries—it is just that being a woman and being a person of color will not be consciously recognized as the cues to which they are responding.8

For example, a person might not explicitly believe that women should speak less than men, but (due to unconscious sexist bias) they might reliably perceive a woman who speaks for 50 percent of the time in a two-person conversation as dominating that conversation, where they would not have that perception if a man did the same.9 The point also applies equally well to the question of which actions are perceived as not overstepping boundaries. For instance, a person might consciously believe that Black people deserve as much respect for their bodily boundaries as white people, but might not perceive touching a Black person’s hair without invitation as a disrespectful thing to do, although they would consider it disrespectful to do the same to a white person. The existence of a pattern of incidents of this sort is sufficient for there to be deontic constraints and enablements. A person can then be thought of as having a certain deontic status, comprised of all the deontic constraints and enablements they are under in a context, and having such a status is what makes someone a member of an institutional kind.

Although the apparatus of status function formulae (“X counts as y in c”) is specific to Searle’s model, Brännmark’s account maintains the idea that social status is central to the construction of social entities. This enables us to say that the social kind women consists of a status that is made up of deontic constraints and enablements that are subordinating—for example, the absence of protections from unwanted sex. This supports the subordination claim in much the same way as the Searlean version does. But unlike the Searlean version, the Brännmarkian version does not require an explicit collective intention to uphold (deeply sexist) gendered social practices. Instead, it just requires that agents have patterned, gender-based responses in particular situations that constitute those practices. The kinds of responses that are relevant here might include the following: perceiving sexual behaviors towards women that are in fact nonconsensual as consensual or otherwise permissible; perceiving women as acting inappropriately when they refuse to consent to sex; perceiving women’s justified acts of resistance to sexual violence, such as speaking out publicly, as inappropriate; and perceiving women primarily in sexual terms in contexts that make this perception inappropriate. Jointly, these kinds of responses create an inferior deontic status—one characterized by a disadvantageous set of deontic constraints and enablements—and it is having this status that makes someone a member of the institutional kind woman. The existence of such a pattern of responses is much more plausible than the existence of a “sexist conspiracy”; indeed, it seems to me to be difficult to deny.

My question to myself at this juncture is why did I use Searle’s account of social ontology in the first place? Granted, Brännmark’s account specifically was not yet published, but other accounts were available that included feminist commitments, for instance, Åsta’s conferralist account.10 Moreover, I was at the time (2016) working on the ways in which Searle’s theory would need to be modified in order to do justice to race and gender oppression (a project I’ve since abandoned as both impossible and unnecessary). So I was hardly unaware of the kind of difficulties Mikkola so rightly raises, though I didn’t appreciate their full weight in relation to this case.

I think the reason I still used Searle’s account is because using the most mainstream account of social ontology that I could lay my hands on to try to vindicate these claims that have been so often dismissed as nonsense seemed like a really appealing argumentative move. This is, of course, the move Langton makes to such effect in “Speech Acts and Unspeaking Acts,” using Austin’s theory of speech acts.11 And I do think it is a powerful move. Being able to say, look, you don’t need to accept any new theories of how the general phenomenon (social entities, speech acts, etc.) works—just apply your current understanding to this case; now do you see how this radical feminist claim about pornography is something that by your own lights you should be taking seriously? But it is also a move fraught with danger: what we are borrowing may well be hostile to what we’re trying to do in various ways.

The lesson I learn from this is to be very careful what I borrow from theories that have obviously not been created with feminist aims in mind. Searle, for instance, assumes without argument that women is a natural or biological kind, not a social kind—hardly a promising starting point. And, of course, his record of sexual harassment, though unknown to me at the time I wrote the paper, is highly suggestive of his general political stance in this area (In June 2019, he was formally stripped of his status as a UC Berkeley emeritus...
due to being found to have violated university policies on sexual harassment and retaliation). Now, it is possible that an account developed by a deeply sexist individual who is paying no attention whatsoever to gender oppression in his analysis might turn out to be a useful resource for feminist arguments. But, let’s be honest, it’s not going to be surprising if it doesn’t. So despite the temptation for feminists of pulling the “gotcha!” move outlined above, and garnering the aura of legitimacy that may follow from using mainstream accounts of the relevant phenomena, we would do well to treat these accounts with the scepticism they deserve and to look instead to accounts with feminist commitments built in. This is, of course, by no means a new or startling insight; but I think the present case serves as a good illustration of the pitfalls of the temptation given how much better Brännmark’s account does than Searle’s when it comes to rendering the subordination claim plausible. I think it’s also helpful to be honest about the existence of the temptation, and its appeal to feminist philosophers, especially early career philosophers, who are making our way in a discipline that so often seems fundamentally hostile to feminist projects.

**EMBRACE THE NORMATIVE**

*Problem 2: The “performative rejection” interpretation of the constructionist claim does not really secure the idea that the construction is wrong in as strong a sense as might have been hoped.*

One obvious option for responding to this problem is simply to abandon the performative rejection interpretation and rely solely on the “debunking” version. However, this strikes me as less than fully satisfactory. The debunking version allows us to criticize the construction of women as sexual subordinates on the basis that it falsely presents a social fact as a natural fact; but this, we might think, is not the only thing about the construction that is wrong. Consider: if the construction was transparent (like the social construction of money, say) and the subordinate status of women was fully understood to be a social construct, this wouldn’t make everything OK! Many constructions are defective in the sense of being naturalizing, but this particular construction seems defective in a further way. I agree that performative rejection doesn’t give us what we want here, but it seems something further than the debunking interpretation is called for.

In the paper, I shied away from cashing out this defectiveness in explicitly normative terms, but I now think that that is exactly what is required. In fact, I think that the work here can be done by a concept I have developed, that of **ontic injustice**. Ontic injustice is a distinctive form of injustice that concerns the social construction of human kinds, and which captures the way in which an individual can be wronged by the very fact of being socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind.

Here is a definition of ontic injustice:

**Ontic Injustice:** An individual suffers ontic injustice if and only if they are socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind where that construction consists, at least in part, of their falling under a set of social constraints and enablements that is wrongful to them.

I understand the wrong of ontic injustice to consist of a moral injury, which is understood roughly as an “affront to value or dignity.” An individual suffers a moral injury when they are treated in ways that give the false impression that they have lower moral worth than they really do.

The key idea in the notion of ontic injustice is one of a mismatch between what someone is ethically entitled to, given the sort of being that they are and the type of moral worth such beings have, and the social constraints and enablements that constituted their membership in a social kind. For instance, in England and Wales prior to 1991 the existence in law of the marital rape exemption meant that being a member of the social kind wife consisted, in part, of lacking the social entitlement to control fully sexual access to one’s own body. A man could rape a woman with full legal impunity, provided that she was his wife. Being without the entitlement to be protected from rape by a specific man (one’s husband) was, in Brännmark’s terms, a deontic constraint that partly constituted the overall deontic status that characterized the social kind wife in that context. This constraint was wrongful to those individuals who were socially constructed as wives because it removed their social entitlement to do something that they were morally entitled to do (namely, to control fully sexual access to their own body). So the social kind wife at this time was a site of ontic injustice.

In a similar—and indeed very closely related—way, the constraints that comprise the deontic status that characterizes the kind woman, if the picture presented in the previous section is accurate, are very seriously wrongful. The social construction of women as sexual subordinates is an ontic injustice: in virtue of the kind of beings women are (human beings, for example), women have moral entitlements such as being free from sexual violence, and these moral entitlements are at odds with the social entitlements that they have qua women. In terms of the constructionist claim, this means that we are entitled to say that the construction of women as sexual subordinates is defective in terms of being wrongful. Note that the concept of ontic injustice helps us to say that what is wrongful is the construction itself, and not solely the acts that may follow from, or be made more likely by, the construction. All of this is compatible with the construction not being strictly speaking false. However, it makes sense of why one might want to say, as MacKinnon does, that the construction is a “lie”: it gives the impression that subordinating ways of treating women are normatively appropriate when in fact they are not.

The more general point I take from this is not to be shy of making normative claims. Feminists, I think, need to be willing to make normative, indeed moral, claims in spelling out why oppression, including oppressive social construction, is wrong. If we stop short of this, as I did in the paper, then there may well be something unsatisfying about the positions we reach.
PORNOGRAPHY AS A SAFETY BLANKET

Problem 3: In talking about misogynistic pornography whilst refusing to take a stance on how much of pornography is misogynistic, the paper fails to engage meaningfully with the empirical reality of pornography.

I find it very interesting to reflect on this problem. I agree strongly with Mikkola that empirical engagement is important, and this is in line with my broader views about how I want to do political philosophy. Yet I rather spectacularly failed to follow through on it in the case of my 2017 paper.

Now, there are a couple of reasons I ducked the issue of how much pornographic material is misogynistic in nature in the paper. One is space, because it takes words to explain and defend an empirical claim such as this and then one has also to make the philosophical argument. I think this is a structural barrier to empirically engaged philosophical work, given the typical constraints of length for both journal articles and chapters in edited volumes, and one that merits serious reflection. But I don’t want to rely on this as an explanation in this particular case, because I didn’t in fact have a lot of material on the empirical dimension that I had to leave out. In fact, I wasn’t terribly interested in it at all, to tell the truth. And I think this was because what I wanted to say in the paper wasn’t really something specific to pornography. Although I frame the argument in terms of the subordination and constructionist claims, I was really interested in exploring the relationship between cultural representations in general and the construction of social kinds. Essentially, I was interested in ideology and social construction, and the role of cultural representations in both. For example, I actually think the argument applies just as well to the Twilight series of young adult novels as it does to most pornography.

However, pornography was a convenient and safe hook on which to hang these points. At the time at least, analytic feminists weren’t talking a great deal about ideology, and the debates in continental philosophy felt difficult to access given my training. The existing literature on pornography in analytic feminist philosophy gave permission and context to explore those ideas. In this sense, pornography was functioning as a “safety blanket” for me as an analytic feminist philosopher, allowing me to explore topics that would otherwise feel uncomfortable or precarious, and I suspect I may not be alone in this. Now, this emphatically isn’t about pointing fingers or saying people should have gone about their research differently, so I won’t say which papers, but I’ve certainly read papers on pornography that make me think that what the person is really interested in is some much more general phenomenon, of which pornography is just one example, but framing it as a paper on pornography allowed them to slot it into an existing literature and get the point across to analytic readers in a way that is more likely to be sympathetically received.

This can be a fine move: we all need to get our work published, and where others have been talking about similar issues, it’s good to make connections. But I do think that we also need to consider the costs associated with the pornography-as-safety-blanket approach. In my view, there are several. For one thing, such an approach mystifies the social world by making the points raised sound like they arise specifically in response to pornography, rather than being relevant to a wide variety of cultural products in our sexist world. For another, it can help to set up an impression that we want to promote policies or restrictions concerning pornography specifically (this impression can be cancelled, but I think it’s in the air whenever we single pornography out). Finally, it is less radical than a more broad-ranging critique of misogynistic cultural products would be: it calls fewer elements of our social world into question, and therefore does not go as far in demonstrating that far-reaching social change is called for. So if I were to rewrite the paper—something I shan’t attempt here—I would make it a general argument about misogynistic cultural representations, and not about pornography specifically.

What I take from this is that we should not only heed Mikkola, and engage with the empirical realities of pornography, but we should also check that pornography is really what we want to be focusing on, rather than merely serving as a safety blanket. Ironically, then, one thing I take away from Mikkola’s excellent book on pornography is that I myself probably should never have been writing about pornography in the first place.

NOTES


8. Ibid., 9.


13. Sally Haslanger tried to get me to appreciate this point in 2015; I wish I’d taken her words on board more fully then.


Pornography: A Philosophical Introduction: Response to Commentators

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To have such a stellar group of philosophers commenting on one’s work is a deeply honoring and humbling experience. Having the opportunity to respond to their comments is also a daunting one. As I noted in the book, I think that there is still much to say about pornography philosophically and the contributions from Esa Díaz-León, Katharine Jenkins, A. W. Eaton, and Hans Maes attest to this. Since I think that there is much more to be said, I won’t be able to reply to these four comments fully and definitively. However, I wish to take this opportunity to expand on some of the themes noted.

Esa Díaz-León brings up a possible dilemma with feminist/emancipatory pornography: a work may aim to have emancipatory effects “by means of promoting the desires, the bodies, and the pleasure of members of non-normative communities,” but it may still “run the risk of actually promoting further stigma, subordination, and fetishization of those non-normative desires, bodies, and pleasure.” This is because the educational potential of emancipatory pornography may be undermined by audiences who have received a “mainstream” pornographic education—that is, “mainstream audiences may receive these pornographic works in a way such that the sexualization or fetishization of non-normative bodies and identities is likely to happen.” Audiences embedded in a sexist and misogynist ideology might come to interpret images intended to be emancipatory in a manner that promotes “the perception of members of non-normative communities as having less value, since their value relies on being the object of pleasure for a white hetero-cis-male subject.” The worry for Díaz-León is that pornography intended to be emancipatory may end up being oppressive, and we need some way to prevent this worrisome slide.

I agree that the dilemma should concern us. The worry that Díaz-León raises is in line with a question that I struggled with while writing the book: How can we distinguish between pornography that is genuinely emancipatory and pornography that is problematically fetishizing? One possible solution Díaz-León identifies draws on A. W. Eaton’s work on the female nude: that representations in feminist/emancipatory pornography should emphasize the subjectivity, agency, and autonomy of those depicted. I wish to here resist this solution, though, and offer some remarks to introduce my preferred subsequent way of thinking about emancipation and fetishization. The reason that an appeal to subjectivity and agency in relation to Díaz-León’s dilemma does not, in my view, work is the following. As I see it, and maintained in the book, emphasis on subjectivity and agency is already part and parcel of feminist and emancipatory pornography. This is what those works that risk being fetishized are already doing. Otherwise they wouldn’t be even prima facie candidates for being feminist/emancipatory; hence, I hold, the emphasis depiction of the world, and in particular of women, in terms of male or masculine interests, emotions, attitudes, or values. More specifically, “the male gaze” usually refers to the sexually objectifying attitude that a representation takes toward its feminine subject matter, presenting her as a primarily passive object for heterosexual-male erotic gratification.

I note in the book that the currently prevalent “pornographic gaze” is of course not only male: it tends to be heterosexist and -normative, racist, ableist, and fattist too. But this is not so, I now hold, when we are dealing with genuinely feminist/emancipatory pornography: such materials do not cater for a mainstream, industrial, run-of-the-mill pornographic gaze. Díaz-León is of course right that one can view materials aimed to be emancipatory with such a pornographic gaze. This is something we cannot prevent insofar as “we” cannot control audiences. The risk that someone views works through a problematic pornographic gaze is unfortunately always present. Still, just because some audiences may view works through a pornographic gaze, this shouldn’t eo ipso diminish their emancipatory value and potential because this value and potential hinges on those materials aiming to cater for a different gaze. We can at least in principle, then, distinguish pornography that is emancipatory and that is fetishizing on the basis of which gaze the work aims to cater for. Moreover, this offers us critical tools with which to interrogate putatively feminist and emancipatory pornography. As I discuss in the book, just because a maker declares some work to be feminist, this doesn’t make it so. Hence, declaring one’s work to be emancipatory while catering for a mainstream pornographic gaze allows us to critique the work as being problematically fetishizing and perpetuating myths about non-normative communities. This idea needs more fleshing out and developing, but I hope it begins to alleviate the sorts of worries Díaz-León helpfully brings up.

My response to Díaz-León alludes to a general view I have of pornography and of the importance of makers’ intentions. In the book, I proposed a social ontological understanding of what pornography is. In short, I offered an elucidation of what makes something a pornographic artifact in a way that does not hinge on a speech act analysis of pornography. The term “pornography” does not pick out an abstract entity, but an array of concrete things—something that a proper philosophical understanding of pornography, in my view, should bear closely in mind. Paradigm examples of pornographic artifacts include films made in San Fernando Valley with sexually explicit content usually sold in specific outlets and accessible via internet portals like youporn.com; magazines like Hustler; pictures we can find on the internet with ease; and books with sexual scenes not (usually) sold in the “Literature” sections of bookshops.
Taking as my starting point such paradigm examples, my view aims to be descriptive. However, as I noted in the book, my aim is to account for what pornography is and should be in a manner that does justice to the pornography industry. Hence, my artifactual analysis aims meaningfully to revise how we should understand what pornography is, but in an empirically informed manner. In this sense, the goal is to strike a balance between normative and descriptive analyses.

With this in mind, I propose a maker’s intentions-model of pornography that draws on Amie Thomasson’s account of what individuates non-institutional ordinary objects—that is, what makes some ordinary object that object. I hold the following view about pornography:

Some x (film, book, picture) is of the kind “pornographic artifact” only if it is the product of a largely successful intention to create pornography, where the maker of the artifact intends that the artifact is an instance of pornography only if

a) they have a substantive concept of the nature of pornography that largely matches the substantive concept held by some group of other prior pornographers, and

b) the maker intends to realize that concept by imposing pornography-relevant features on the object.

In her illuminating contribution, A. W. Eaton takes issue with this view of pornographic artifacts. In short, her worry turns on whether my account is genuinely intentionalist, as I intend it to be. I certainly take Eaton’s point and can see how this concern arose. I wish to next address how I nonetheless view my account as being genuinely intentionalist.

Eaton rightly notes that my view isn’t a “pure intentionalist” account, where the identity conditions of an artifact are fixed merely by the maker’s intention. Eaton uses the following example:

> if I make a big scribble on a piece of paper while sincerely intending my markings to serve as a portrait of you, this suffices, on a pure intentionalist view, for the scribble to function as a portrait of you . . . [But] the scribble is not a portrait, no matter how much the maker meant for it to be one.

This much we agree on. Eaton also rightly notes that my account is a kind of hybrid in that although maker’s intentions are necessary, they are not sufficient for some x to count as a pornographic artifact. After all, the intention must also be successful on my view. Eaton calls this the “success condition”: “An artifact counts as pornographic only if it is the product of a largely successful intention to create pornography.” However, this success condition supposedly undermines my intentionalism and ultimately results in artifacts counting as pornography by virtue of having some kind-relevant features. This is because if I make a work using my substantive conception of pornography but I am inept or something goes deeply wrong in the process and so the work ends up deviating, perhaps wildly, from my initial conception, an intentionalist should want to count the work as pornography but acknowledge that the work is failed precisely because it does not realize my intention.

However, the work will count as pornography if one has (as Eaton puts it) “successfully imbued my materials with kind-relevant features—that is, features that serve as criteria for some artificial kind.” But now, all that we need for type-identification is to “consult the object itself to see whether it has said kind-relevant features; we do not need the maker’s intentions at all. That is, successfully instantiating kind-relevant features obviates the role of the maker’s intentions.”

I can see how my view might give rise to this interpretation. But I think that Eaton misses a central condition in my account. In short, for me some artifact counts as pornography only if it is the product of a largely successful intention to create pornography, but for the maker to intend that the artifact is an instance of pornography, not any old intentions will do. That is, the substantive conception of pornography needs to match one held by some group of prior pornographers. So relative to Eaton’s point above about the failure to realize one’s conception, there are a number of things that can go wrong. For a start, if I make a work using my conception of pornography and this in no sense matches that of prior pornographers, the work fails to be a pornographic artifact. The example I give in the book is of someone shooting footage of a fully clothed person baking a cake. This is failure because it in no sense matches a substantive conception of pornography of any prior makers. And it seems reasonable to conclude that in such a case we do not just have a failed piece of pornography akin to a failed cake I have produced due to my bad baking skills; in this case, one really hasn’t produced a piece of pornography at all. However, Eaton’s critique cited above suggests that there is another way to fail. Say that I intend to create a piece of emancipatory pornography but (as discussed above) it caters entirely to the mainstream, run-of-the-mill pornographic gaze. I have failed to create a piece of emancipatory pornography, but (on my view) I have still produced a piece of pornography. That is because I still have the intention to produce something that matches a substantive conception of pornography of prior pornographers and my intention is sufficiently successful in that the work has some pornography-relevant features (features that we can loosely characterize by looking at paradigm examples). So my intention to produce pornography (in part) hinges on aiming to impose pornography-relevant features on the object. Still, for this we need not (I take it) consult makers in the manner that Eaton suggests. There may be particular instances that are borderline cases, where we are not sure whether they count as pornographic artifacts or (say) French art house films. But I do not see this undermining my general point about how to fix the kind of pornographic artifacts. For what it’s worth, I have met many producers...
and performers of what we might term feminist and/or emancipatory pornography. They are in the business of making pornography has never been in doubt. In fact, those on this side of the industry tend to find the idea that their work is “mere erotica” or something other than pornography “proper” odious.

I think that Eaton’s critical take discussed above does not undermine my intentionalism. However, Eaton’s piece for this symposium contains a second, immensely important discussion about the relevance of pictures for analyses of pornography. I agree wholeheartedly with Eaton and readily admit that with my training in analytic philosophy I am not best placed to undertake the sort of representational analysis Eaton is advocating for. My hope is to learn more from philosophers like Anne who is eminently more qualified to undertake such investigations than I am.

This brings me to the discussion of pornography and melancholy by Hans Maes, which also brings to the fore considerations from the aesthetics of pornography. Taking as his starting point literary examples of melancholy, Maes considers whether there could be something like melancholic pornography: “pornography that elicits melancholy in virtue of expressing it.” Maes holds that pornography and melancholy are not irreconcilable. In fact, “the opposite may be true: they are made for each other.” Maes’s contribution is true to his style in being insightful, extremely interesting, and novel. As always, I learned much from Hans’s piece (not least that such a phenomenon as cranking exists). In the course of his discussion, Maes considers various objections to thinking that melancholic pornography is a contradiction in terms.

1. [M]elancholy is reflective at heart. It requires one to dwell on certain existential truths. But pornography, by virtue of what it is, seems to make reflection impossible.

2. [B]ending one’s mind to the harsh reality of the human condition is part and parcel of melancholy. But pornographers, because they need to gratify the viewer, rather refashion reality as the compliant object of said viewer’s desires.

3. [W]hile the depths of the human psyche are explored in melancholy, pornography is really only “skin deep.”

4. Whereas aesthetic melancholy is savored for its own sake, a pornographic film or photograph is simply used to satisfy a need or gratify a desire. The former is a matter of appreciation, the latter one of consumption.

5. [T]he pleasure of pornography seems to require a certain “narrowing of the mind” . . . [W]ith melancholy . . . the pleasure is (at least partly) the result of a broadening of the mind.

Maes goes on to argue against these objections and, I think, rightly so. However, I wanted to offer some reflections on the fourth objection by way of friendly additions to the argument Maes puts forward. These pertain more to his treatment of melancholy than pornography.

Maes aims to establish that there may be “very refined pornography out there—pornography that is able to elicit some of the more “elevated” emotions such as melancholy.” What I want to suggest—and that goes against objection 4 above—is that perhaps melancholy can be a “cheaper” emotion too and one that we can consume rather more like people are taken to consume pornography. Start by recalling Maes’s definition of melancholy: it is a complex and prolonged emotional process triggered by the affective appraisal of (what is perceived to be) a profound but typically harsh truth about human existence that puts the precarious value of something that you (feel you should) care about in sharp relief in such a way that you come to appreciate it more deeply. As a result, negative feelings or emotions (e.g., sadness, grief, angst) will co-occur or alternate with positive feelings or emotions (e.g., joy, gratitude, peacefulness).

Even though the examples Maes uses are literary, I take it that melancholy can be experienced in relation to, e.g., music, news stories, film, and many other ordinary life occurrences. Now, I take it that Maes would agree with this in that he holds not all melancholy is aesthetic. Such aesthetic melancholy occurs “if an aesthetic experience is integrated into the complex emotional process described above.” And an aesthetic experience occurs “when we value our aesthetic perception of an object for its own sake and are moved in virtue of that perception.” This idea of valuing something for its own sake undergirds objection 4 above: We appreciate (that is, savor) aesthetic melancholy for its own sake, but consume (that is, use) pornography to satisfy a need.

However, I want to suggest that we can and do consume melancholy to satisfy a need in a similar fashion. Anecdotally, this need pertains to some form of emotional release, and as a native Finn it strikes me that melancholy is used extensively precisely to experience deeply negative feelings in order that we can appreciate positive ones. At least this is a common occurrence in the Finnish way to-be-in-the-world. The Japanese practice of rui-katsu or “tear-seeking” fits this idea as well. Bluntly put, this is a practice—and now a service one can buy—of crying in a room with others while (for instance) watching short films or listening to melancholic music. It is considered to be an effective stress-reliever and a coping mechanism against the demands of working life in Japan. Here is a short description:

The audience started sniffling well before the end of the first video, a Thai life-insurance commercial titled “Silence of Love,” which revolves around a teenage girl and her deaf father. By the ad’s conclusion, the sniffing had given way to open weeping. Over the next 40 minutes, as a series of ever sadder selections played—animated shorts, movie clips, YouTube memorials for pet cats—the sobs only grew louder.¹
It seems that melancholy is being used and consumed to satisfy an emotional need—much like the way pornography, according to many, is said to be consumed. If this is right, the objection that melancholy and pornography are by their nature incompatible is undermined. Having said that, it does not seem that aesthetic melancholy is compatible with pornography in this manner insofar as aesthetic melancholy is by definition something we savor for its own sake. Nonetheless, Maes’s use of literary examples suggests a further possibility. He starts the paper with passages from Tolstoy and Chekhov. My pretheoretical first reaction to these passages was to think of them as exciting melancholy in the readers. After introducing the notion of aesthetic melancholy, I assumed that Maes had shifted from the readers (or spectators more broadly) experiencing melancholy to experiencing aesthetic melancholy—a more heightened emotion to be made compatible with pornography. Nonetheless, Maes goes on to write following the characterization of aesthetic melancholy that “the characters in the passages I quoted from Tolstoy and Chekhov are indeed experiencing aesthetic melancholy.” I found this somewhat puzzling, however. Whatever the characters in literary works (or pornography) are experiencing, I would think that the issue is what the readers and spectators are experiencing. It seems, then, entirely possible that the characters in a work are experiencing aesthetic melancholy while I as a reader am experiencing just melancholy. As the latter need not be appreciated for its own sake and can be a means to satisfy some need, there is a rather obvious way to remove at least one obstacle for some work being a piece of melancholic pornography. In any case, I look forward to Maes’s future work on this fascinating pornographic genre.

Katharine Jenkins comments on a number of points I made in the book to discuss three concerns that pertain to her own earlier work. First, in her 2017 article, Jenkins relied on John Searle’s social ontology to elucidate two claims Catharine MacKinnon makes: the constructionist and subordination claims. But I argue in the book that this is problematic because Searle’s social ontological theory is not well equipped to do the work Jenkins wants it to do. Second, I take issue with (what Jenkins calls) the “performatory rejection” interpretation of the constructionist claim. Third, Jenkins considers a methodological critique and plea I make throughout the book: that philosophical work on pornography should be empirically grounded and informed. In a move that is uncharacteristically refreshing in analytic philosophy, Jenkins largely concedes the critical points I make. Jenkins eloquently and frankly accepts that her earlier work did fall short in some respects and is in need of revision. I have nothing but admiration for Katharine for such a brave display of intellectual humility. Her contribution to this symposium is an important one for philosophy as a whole and one that everyone in the profession should read to foster civility.

Instead of making use of Searle’s social ontology, Jenkins now draws on the work of Johan Brännmark. This is an interesting move and I look forward to Jenkins’s future work that offers new social ontological accounts of gender. What I wish to briefly comment on is the treatment of the “performatory rejection” and her own view of ontic injustice. My comments are not in the spirit of critique, but rather in the spirit of seeking clarity and hoping to understand Jenkins’s view better.

In order to account for how the construction of gender can be false and a lie (as MacKinnon holds), I argued in the book that we must appeal to some stronger normative grounds than those Jenkins offers in her 2017 paper. Jenkins’s subsequent and ongoing work aims to do this with the notion of ontic injustice:

An individual suffers ontic injustice if and only if they are socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind where that construction consists, at least in part, of their falling under a set of social constraints and enables that is wrongful to them.

Jenkins further qualifies that the wrong of ontic injustice consists of a moral injury in the sense of Jean Hampton: it is an affront to value or dignity. By way of example, Jenkins offers the case of the social kind wife. During the time (depressingly, not that long ago) in England and Wales without enforceable laws against marital rape, “being a member of the social kind wife consisted, in part, of lacking the social entitlement to control fully sexual access to one’s own body.” Lacking an entitlement to be protected from marital rape is, following Jenkins’s use of Brännmark, a deontic constraint. And this constraint, then, partly constituted “the overall deontic status that characterized the social kind wife in that context.” So far, I find the story perfectly compelling. However, I remain slightly puzzled by the wrongness-making feature of this sort of ontic injustice. This injustice (for Jenkins) is of a distinctive kind and concerns the social construction of human kinds: it supposedly “captures the way in which an individual can be wronged by the very fact of being socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind.” Still, when discussing the example of wife, Jenkins notes that the constraint not to have sexual control over one’s body is wrongful to individuals socially constructed as wives “because it removed their social entitlement to do something that they were morally entitled to do (namely, to control fully sexual access to their own body).” But now I am slightly failing to see how one is wronged in virtue of being constructed as wife: the wrongfulness rather seems to hinge on having some social entitlements removed as a result of being socially constructed as a wife. This suggests that wrongful social construction isn’t what is doing the normative work; rather, the work is being done by the subsequent ways in which constraints and entitlements are distributed. This impression is reinforced when Jenkins remarks that ontic injustice allows us to conceive of MacKinnon’s claim that the construction of gender is a “lie”: the constructed lie about gender “gives the impression that subordinating ways of treating women are normatively appropriate when in fact they are not.” But again, this is a claim about how women are treated seemingly after the fact—that is, after they have already been constructed as woman. I am therefore still failing to see how the “concept of ontic injustice helps us to say that what is wrongful is the construction itself,” as Jenkins maintains.
Of course, Jenkins could here appeal to the idea of moral injury. In socially constructing the kind wife, kind members experience a moral injury. However, I worry that this won’t alleviate my concerns. After all, it now looks like what is doing the normative work is the fact that some social constructions end up positioning one in ways that generate morally injurious constraints and enables—not the social constructions themselves. This is part of Jenkins’s ongoing work and, as noted, my comments here are meant in the spirit of getting clearer on her fascinating view. I look forward to hearing more about ontic injustice and how it connects to feminist discussions of pornography.

Having said that, I look forward to hearing more from all of the commentators. Being able to engage with Esa, Anne, Hans, and Katharine has really been a pleasure and a privilege that I wish will be repeated many times in the years to come. My sincerest thanks for the extremely insightful and thought-provoking commentaries!

NOTES

BOOK REVIEWS
Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms, Transformation, and Resistance

Reviewed by Michael Monahan
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Two decades into the twenty-first century, the discipline of philosophy in North America seems to be showing some signs of awakening to the presence of rich philosophical voices and traditions from Latin America and from Latinx philosophers in the US and Canada. To be sure, this awakening has been fitful, and all too often happens only reluctantly or even resentfully, but the signs are hard to mistake. The recently formed Society for Mexican American Philosophy has regular panels at meetings of the American Philosophical Association, as does the Roundtable on Latina Feminism (which has nurtured the work of many of the editors and contributors to the volume I am reviewing here), while the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy held its first meeting in Mexico just this year. At the same time, recent books in major university and trade presses by Mariana Ortega (2016), Carlos Alberto Sánchez (2016; 2017), and Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr. (2019) are all, in different ways, contributing to this developing momentum and enriching the conversation within the discipline of philosophy in the US. It is thus at a critical moment, both within the discipline of philosophy and within the country at large, that Andrea J. Pitts, Mariana Ortega, and José Medina’s important edited volume, Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms, Transformation, and Resistance appears on the scene.

The volume’s seventeen essays, by both established and emerging scholars representing the Americas North and South, are organized thematically into four sections. All are focused, in various ways, on past and present feminist resistance, but their methodologies and approaches vary widely. They take up not only historical and contemporary philosophical figures and traditions, but also popular culture, the visual arts, literature, advertising, anthropology, environmentalism, and spirituality. The resulting collection of essays offers an extraordinarily rich and provocative engagement with Latinx and Latin American feminisms that will be indispensable to students and scholars ranging from the neophyte to the adept. There are careful studies of some of the great luminaries of the field like Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones, alongside more broad and thematic explorations of recent movements (such as Xhercis Méndez’s extraordinary study of decolonial feminism) and historical resources (as in Francesca Gargallo’s exacting history of philosophical feminisms within Latin America). In keeping with its title, what Theories of the Flesh exemplifies is a living, breathing network of intellectual traditions with deep historical roots and a vibrant present. Above all, the essays are intimately (and I use that word very purposefully) connected to the struggles, challenges, and moments of joy that motivate and frame them. It is at the same time a much-needed challenge to the status quo within both the discipline of philosophy and “mainstream” feminist theory, and an exemplification of the possibilities for truly radical theory and praxis. While I cannot fully do justice to all of the individual essays in this collection, I will attempt in this review to briefly touch on each, while focusing on their thematic coherence within each of the four main sections of the book.

The first section of the text, “Decolonial Movidas: Gender, Community, and Liberation,” draws together five essays that offer critical theoretical analyses of the relations between colonialism/coloniality, feminism, identity, and the prospects for solidarity across difference. At the heart of the problematic that animates each of these essays is a tension between the need for solidarity and coalition-building on the one hand, and the tendency for such efforts to result in a pernicious elision of difference on the other. In the context of feminist struggle, this danger can manifest as what Linda Alcoff describes as “imperial feminism,”
which “assumes a fixed and stable universal meaning to the idea of feminism” that “does not view feminism as a dialogic, irreducibly multiple and local project.” Imperial feminism is thus linked to ways in which Euro-modern gender concepts are constitutively tied to colonialism (and thus, to racism) in a way that María Lugones has referred to as the “coloniality of gender.” As a result, the mainstream of decolonial theory can be inadequately attentive to the role of gender (a focus of both Feminias’s and Pérez’s contributions) every bit as much as feminist theory can be inattentive to the role of coloniality. The essays in this section offer a rich analysis of this problematic, and in various ways endorse what Feminias calls a “polyphonic” effort to negotiate identity, struggle, and liberation, one that “includes the discursive operation of otherness and allows validating the distinctive voices of Latin American difference.” The section concludes with Xhercis Méndez’s exceptional analysis of the present state of decolonial feminist movidas and her provocative advocacy of an ever-evolving decolonial feminist practice—one that emphasizes embodiment, attention to difference, and the cultivation of rituals (citing Santería as an example) that not only habituate one to “moving differently in the world,” but also “tell us something about alternative systems of valuation that are not reducible to merely surviving in the face of extreme violence.”

While section one dwells on questions of solidarity in the form of collective movement and resistance, section two turns to the subject, both individual and collective, of that resistance. Under the collective heading “Making Feminist Selves: Self-Authority, Affect, and Narrativity,” the four essays gathered in this section focus on different aspects of the Latin American and Latinx feminist struggle to articulate and enact agency or selfhood in a world that all too often denies or disavows that very possibility. They confront, in other words, the question of how one can make one’s perspective intelligible to oneself and others under conditions that deny that one even has a perspective. Francesca Gargallo’s sweeping and detailed history of philosophical feminism in Latin America offers a powerful genealogy that makes abundantly clear not only the vibrancy of her subject matter, but also the ways in which philosophical feminism in the Latin American context, as with every other historical context, has often emerged outside of the narrow boundaries of “proper” academic philosophy. Ofelia Schutte’s essay, drawing on an existentialist reading of Gloria Anzaldúa and Friedrich Nietzsche, explores themes of identity (both individual and collective) and shame under conditions of alienation and oppression. The final two essays of the section, in harmony with Anzaldúa’s own *modus operandi*, offer rich engagements with fiction and memoir. Paula M. L. Moya uses the the analysis of a novel, in conjunction with the work of Anzaldúa and Fanon (among others), to make a case for understanding decolonial thinking as necessarily ambiguous—as a “thinking otherwise” than the either/or in favor of the both/and of “onto-epistem-ological multiplicity.” Just as Latin American and Latinx philosophical feminism has crossed disciplinary and methodological boundaries, decolonial thought must express such border-thinking at its (always ambiguous) core. Building on this momentum, Theresa Delgadillo turns to memoir to explore the profound role that spiritual practices (in this case Orisha worship among Puerto Rican communities in 1950s New York) play as modes of self-expression and resistance within a particular community in diaspora. Taken collectively, the essays in this section demonstrate the need to frustrate efforts to police boundaries (whether of disciplines or identities) at the heart of practices of resistance, and exemplify the kind of “hybrid genre” that Anzaldúa referred to as “autohistoria-teoría,” and described as “a way of inventing and making knowledge, meaning, and identity through self-inscriptions.” Crucially, and in keeping with so many feminist traditions globally, these self-inscriptions, in Sonia Kruks’s phrase, “exceed the boundaries of the discursive,” and are always rather embodied, historical, affective, and yes, spiritual practices.

Entitled “Knowing Otherwise: Language, Translation, and Alternative Consciousness,” the third section draws together essays exploring the promise and perils of communication across and within difference. In other words, they offer insights into the ways in which coloniality, racism, sexism, and so forth damage or inhibit not only the sense of self, but one’s ability to communicate that self across the colonial/racial/gendered divide as well as within and among other oppressed or marginalized communities and individuals. Claudia de Lima Costa appeals to the notion of “translation as equivocation” to think of the coloniality of gender as an ontological divide that requires a strategy of translation, but one that eschews dichotomous logics in favor of equivocations and ambiguity. In other words, the Western concept of “gender” can and should be translated across various Latin American contexts, but never with the expectation that it will yield a one-to-one correspondence of meaning. This allows her to develop the concept of “translational resistance” as a means to contest the coloniality of gender, without necessarily having to abandon the category of gender altogether. Natalie Cisneros appeals to Anzaldúa’s work to offer, in a sense, just such a resistant “translation” of Nietzschean genealogical method. What emerges remains a powerful conceptual tool for unpacking and elaborating the ways and means of power, but one that is more immediately and emphatically *embodied* than Nietzsche’s, and that emphasizes community, contra Nietzsche’s more individualistic tendencies, with special attention to diversity within communities. Elena Flores Ruiz in turn offers a diagnosis of “hermeneutic violence” that accounts for the way in which “the relation between self and world, language and disclosure, is not symmetrically given to all in the postcolonial world, so that our deepest social epistemologies are metaphilosophically compromised.” She points toward the Latina feminist cultivation of “alphabets of survival”—those moments of self-authoring (and self-authorizing) that emerge from the margins and borderlands of the underside of modernity (what Ruiz refers to as the “blood-soaked limen”) as one strategy of resistance to such hermeneutic violence (ibid.). To conclude the section, Pedro J. DiPietro offers a further elaboration of a strategy of resistance to hermeneutic/epistemic violence in their discussion of *loquería* consciousness. If, under conditions of coloniality, what is * orderly, normal, and proper* represents the perspectives and interests of the colonizers, then resistant epistemological and communicative practices will appear...
as extraordinary, disorderly, and improper. Drawing from Latina and Xicana feminist theories, DiPietro reveals a rich tradition of such resistance, and offers insights into what they call “hallucinating knowing,” thereby demonstrating a clear resonance with Dalgadillo and Méndez’s emphasis on spiritual practices as vital modes of self-expression and resistance.

Stephanie Rivera Berruz’s essay offers a perfect segue from the previous section’s focus on knowledge, communication, and translation by linking these themes to aesthetic performance, which is the primary emphasis of the fourth and final section, “Aesthetic Longings: Latina Styles, Bodily Vulnerability, and Queer Desires.” Beginning with María Lugones’s account of “boomerang perception,” she describes the ways in which the colonial/racist/sexist/ableist perception of the colonizer constructs the colonized as dependent and ultimately deficient. This can lead, Rivera Berruz argues, to the evocation among communities of color of a fake/real dichotomy in which authenticity is linked, ironically, to a correspondence with that colonizing “boomerang” perception. This in turn generates, among other things, an elision of racial particularity, such that appearing as a “real” Latina means appearing minimally African or Indigenous. Making a case study of Chonga politics and aesthetics, Rivera Berruz points toward ways in which “we can dismantle and re-compose the self” that resist boomerang perception.10 This close examination of the racial/aesthetic politics of Latinidad in the US continues in Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo and Mary K. Bloodworth-Lugo’s contribution to the section. Through a study of the L’Oréal cosmetic company’s use of Zoe Saldana in their “True Match” campaign, they draw out the important ways in which “outside forces” (that is, boomerang perception) influence the articulation of latinidad.11 While the first two essays of the section point toward the ways in which the pernicious erasure of racial difference are manifest in and resisted through aesthetic practices, Mariana Ortega’s essay emphasizes a similar pattern with respect to sexuality. Offering a powerful analysis of Latinx and Latin American artists who center their queerness in their work,12 Ortega shows how this is an effort not to place that queerness in contrast with or as an adjunct to their Latinidad, but is rather best understood as an effort to queer Latinidad itself. By including elements of narrative and memoir in her writing, Ortega makes clear the way in which these aesthetic practices are a profound mode of articulating an individual and collective self not only for the artists themselves, but for all those who encounter themselves in the work.13 Ortega shows how this is an effort not to place that queerness in contrast with or as an adjunct to their Latinidad, but is rather best understood as an effort to queer Latinidad itself. By including elements of narrative and memoir in her writing, Ortega makes clear the way in which these aesthetic practices are a profound mode of articulating an individual and collective self not only for the artists themselves, but for all those who encounter themselves in the work. Finally, Julie Avril Minich looks at the work of muralist Juana Alicia to draw out the ways in which aesthetic practices “can unite multiple movements for justice,” (citation?) including environmental justice and disability activism, by pointing toward a collective struggle from a position of shared vulnerability. All of the essays in this section thus bring together the recurring themes of the volume as whole by raising important questions about self, community, oppression, and resistance.

I hope to have offered some glimpse of the depth and breadth of the essays offered in this volume. This is not a survey or “introductory” text, but a rich and vibrant engagement with and expansion of that set of developing traditions gathered under the rubric of Latinx and Latin American feminisms. As such, and drawing together as it does a wide generational and international spectrum of thinkers, Theories of the Flesh is on the cutting edge of profound and important interventions in philosophy and feminist theory. This is a truly important collection that will, in due course, come to stand as a watershed moment in the ongoing efforts (movidas) by Latinx and Latin American feminists to shift the geography of reason.15

NOTES


2. For those not already familiar with the term “coloniality,” María Luisa Femenías offers the following brief description in her essay: “if ‘colonialism’ refers to historical occupation of America... ‘coloniality,’ refers to a cultural strategy, that is, to the colonial heritage that persists and reproduces itself even after colonial occupation has ended.” Andrea J. Pitts, Mariana Ortega, and José Medina, eds., Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms, Transformation, and Resistance, 40.

3. Ibid., 12.

4. María Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender.” The use of “Euro-Modern” here is meant, following Lewis Gordon, to refer to the specific mode of modernity that emerged from Europe during the colonial era, thus leaving open the conceptual possibility for other modernities. See Lewis R. Gordon, “Thinking Through Some Themes of Race and More.”

5. Pitts, Ortega, and Medina, Theories of the Flesh, 42.

6. Ibid., 89-90.

7. Poetry, fiction, and memoir were all central not only to Anzaldúa’s self-concept as a writer, but remain indispensable to any effort to understand her as a theorist and thinker (unlike, for example, Nietzsche, whose poetry, with the exception of some of the verses in Zarathustra, is ancillary to his philosophical work). As AnaLouise Keating put the point regarding Anzaldúa’s fiction in particular, “she viewed her fiction as central to her entire creative process and a major catalyst for her thinking.” Gloria Anzaldúa, The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader.

8. Ibid., 152.


11. Pitts, Ortega, and Medina, Theories of the Flesh, 215.

12. Ibid., 250.

13. Ibid., 254.

14. Ortega is emphasizes that she “use[s] the term ‘queer’ as an acknowledgement that sexuality is fluid and open-ended and that it may present itself in a plurality of ways.” Pitts, Ortega, and Medina, Theories of the Flesh, 268.

15. “Shifting the Geography of Reason” is the motto of the Caribbean Philosophical Association (with which several of the contributors to this volume are affiliated), and refers to the effort to alter both our understanding of where and by whom reason is represented on the globe, as well as the ways in which these latter efforts may cause our understanding of reason itself to shift.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


When Time Warps: The Lived Experience of Gender, Race, and Sexual Violence

Reviewed by Caleb Ward
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Megan Burke locates When Time Warps at the juncture between two major developments in feminist phenomenology. First, Burke joins the recent movement in Simone de Beauvoir studies to read The Second Sex as a rigorous phenomenology of women’s oppression, replacing previous cultural and sociological interpretations with specifically philosophical analysis. Second, Burke identifies their work with the emerging constellation of critical phenomenology, which investigates lived realities of oppression by supplementing phenomenology’s attention to first-person perceptual experience with “a reflexive inquiry into how power relations structure experience as well as our ability to analyze that experience.” For feminists, critical phenomenology marks a shift away from pure phenomenological descriptions of female-bodied experience and women’s oppression under patriarchy, mobilizing instead an increasingly interdisciplinary attention to intersectionality and complex sociohistorical interrelations, especially colonialism. While Beauvoir’s socially situated phenomenology has inspired many identifying their work as critical phenomenology, critical phenomenology’s interdisciplinarity and its critique of the exclusions of the classical phenomenological method put it in tension with the contemporary reading of Beauvoir as a thoroughgoing existential phenomenologist.

This tension plays out in Burke’s ambitiously interdisciplinary monograph, which states its aim as developing “a feminist phenomenology of the temporality of feminine subjectivity that discloses how racialized colonial sexual domination is temporally woven into the fabric of that subjectivity” (3). Burke locates the object of inquiry squarely within traditional Beauvoirian feminist phenomenology: When Time Warps is about the nature of “feminine existence,” which Burke defines orthodoxy as a “constrained mode of gendered embodiment,” in which one “lives freedom through men and thus lives a relative existence” (4). Burke’s primary innovation is to foreground the temporal structure and effects of normative femininity, in contrast with feminist phenomenologists’ usual focus on women’s bodily comportment in space. Burke’s first major claim, supported by an original reading of The Second Sex, is that to become woman is to adopt the particular “temporal style” dominated by waiting, what Burke calls the “passive present,” in which a woman lives a temporality that is not her own (25). Burke argues that the passive present is “the overarching temporality of domination that structures the lives of those who are or are taken to be women in a heteropatriarchal society” (31). This claim seems controversial in light of the diverse forms of domination women experience—an issue raised by many who criticize Beauvoir for overlooking the effects of race, class, ability, and other positionalities on women’s experience. Burke takes on board these critiques, however, and responds by locating feminine existence as a particularly white, bourgeois ideal of womanhood: what Burke calls feminine existence is posited as a normative gender, the governing norm of femininity in a society structured by white supremacy. Thus, Burke uses a specialized definition of “women” and “feminine existence” that is fully indexed not only to the oppressive social expectations of normative gender but to the norms of whiteness: feminine existence is the situation of sexualized oppression that plagues cis-, bourgeois, heterosexual white women and at the same time confers privilege on them in the form of “recognition in a heteromasculinist world” (4).

Chapters two and three turn to Burke’s critical project, which is to demonstrate that normative gender is produced and perpetuated through histories and present practices of racial domination. Burke argues that white women’s gendered existence is inextricable from the legacy of colonialism—including especially sexual violence against women of color: “normative genders are lived and undertaken in the service of racialized gendered state violence that is always sexualized” (44). Rather than trace a genealogy of “woman” in the manner of Denise Riley’s classic Am I That Name?, Burke sets out from their earlier claim that feminine existence is constituted by temporality. Burke suggests a connection between the linear time of heteronormativity critiqued by queer theorists and the linearity of colonial time identified by María Lugones and other decolonial theorists. Through a detailed and welcome reading of Lugones’s colonial/modern gender system, Burke argues that a colonialist distinction between (white, human) woman and (nonwhite, nonhuman) female founds feminine existence and the dominant conception of woman that persists in the present. It follows that sexual oppression against white women imposes the temporality of feminine existence on them, whereas sexual oppression of women of color targets them as animal, as female rather than woman. These divergent “markings” impose divergent effects on the lived time of both those who are taken to be candidates for the ideal of woman and those who are excluded from that ideal.

Chapter three specifies one way in which legacies of racialization shape the temporality of feminine existence,
namely, through the myth of “stranger rape,” which Burke claims is identical to the myth of the nonwhite rapist. Burke’s fundamental aim here is to show a particular relationship between history and the present actualization of feminine existence in people’s lives, namely, that colonial legacies remain central in women’s temporality in the form of the “regulative gender apparatus” of rape myths. The uncomfortable implication for white women—which Burke suggests but does not unpack in detail—is that fears of stranger sexual assault reflect a degree of complicity in the actual historical (and ongoing) violence suffered by colonized and otherwise racialized others. For Burke, it is not a point of counter evidence that women of color might share this fear; they may have internalized the racist imperatives of normative femininity, or they might be sensitized to the intersectional threat posed to them not as women, but as female racialized others.

Burke then shifts to the present, tracing how the violent historical legacy attributed to normative femininity evades detection in everyday life. Chapter four provides a compelling reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of habit as arising from sedimentation and the anonymity of the past, contending that the colonial history of gender is lived only as an absence: the forgotten history of a habit that hides itself (97). Burke proposes this as an alternative to Judith Butler’s notion of gender as performative repetition, which Burke criticizes for underestimating the obstinacy of normative gender. Merleau-Ponty’s anonymity describes “the accumulation of a past that allows a particular I to be realized without conscious reflection,” which explains how the habit of “normative gender . . . is not lived as habit; it is lived as me” (98). This extends the view of habituation to account for the disappearance of its past: normative gender is a “forgotten habit,” not merely a repeated social construct but a sedimentation of “past events, actions, interactions, ideologies, and histories” that enables it to be “deeply personal but yet almost impossible to perceive” (99). The past habituation that leads to present normative gender practices is not something that has happened to a subject, but something that has been actively pursued and then forgotten, making those practices especially difficult to resist.

Chapter five uses the metaphor of haunting to thematize how the fear of rape becomes a “constitutive temporal constraint” on women’s subjectivity (13). Following Ann Carrill’s conception of feminine embodiment as a “previctim” existence, Burke argues that “the fear of rape generates a negated body” (114) through “a continual deferral of [the] claim to freedom” (115). This notion of the “present absence” of rape as the “temporality of normative threat” is compelling as a structuring force on subjectivity. However, it is not evident whether Burke improves on Carrill’s account by using haunting, specters, and ghosts as framing metaphors, especially because Burke explicitly dismisses the generative excess that defines spectrality in the work of Jacques Derrida, Butler, and Avery Gordon. However, the temporally circulating character of haunting—the “continual return of the specter” (116)—reveals an interesting reorganizing of the temporality of the “forgotten habit” of femininity discussed in chapter four; it is the persistence of rape as present absence rather than its disappearance that constitutes “previctim” existence. Burke leaves this resonance unexplored, instead arguing (controversially, as I discuss below) that the fear of rape imposes a disruption of temporality akin to that imposed by actual, lived trauma in that it “freezes time” in a passive present (119).

Burke closes their discussion of specters with an engaging description of “feminist ghostbusting” enacted in Emma Sulkowicz’s Mattress Performance, which exposed the present absence of her own rape and its threat at Columbia University by “making it a presence,” and thereby “uncovering the affective, material, and historical conditions that constrain, police, and enforce normative gender” (122). The sixth, final chapter is about further avenues for resistance, setting out from the bold claim that “reconfiguration of temporality” is a necessary condition for ending sexual domination (128). Rather than follow many continental feminist philosophers by focusing on the open potentiality of the present to produce novel futures, Burke argues that feminist politics must renegotiate the affective grip of the past. In particular, the role the past plays in the present must be made “malleable” rather than “heavy” (140), enabling hidden pasts that remain “pregnant with meaning and potential” (104). Burke articulates three possible modes of resistance to achieve this aim, each posed as a “feminist politics of temporality” (128). These include (1) “untimely events”—both Elizabeth Grosz’s “virtual leap” that pulls disavowed pasts back into the present and Alia Al-Saji’s conception of a “hesitation” that slows down habit and brings the possibility of disruption—(2) Lisa Guenther’s conception of “doing time” as a reclamation of temporality, and (3) a queer “habit of indeterminacy” that refuses the sedimentation of normative gender. Ultimately, for this reader, the most promising avenue is that adopted from Al-Saji; each of the others seems to suffer from the same problem of foreclosure—the stubbornness of a “forgotten habit”—that motivates Burke’s dismissal of Butlerian performative resistance to repetition.

The discussion of resistance would have benefited from a reckoning with the role of the past in the first section of the book, namely, Burke’s earlier claims about histories of colonial domination. If the historical past of slavery in the Americas, for example, is to be refurged by a feminist temporal politics, it will be highly significant who shapes the new meanings attributed to that past, particularly who wields power over which meanings of the past are forgotten and which are retrieved. Here a return to Lugones might have served Burke well, invoking perhaps how the decolonial feminist resists by “seeing the colonial difference, emphatically resisting her epistemological habit of erasing it. Seeing it, she sees the world anew, and then she requires herself to drop her enchantment with ‘woman,’ the universal, and begins to learn about other resisters.”

When Time Warps makes a convincing case that temporality is central to normative gender and sexualized oppression, with the upshot that feminist phenomenology should not limit itself to considering the spatial dimensions of gendered embodiment. Burke’s treatment of gender norms as “forgotten habits” is especially welcome to
deepen discussions of ideology and habitation, not reducible to concepts of repetition or gender scripts. This is an importantly fine distinction for critical philosophy seeking to overcome the perceptual invisibility of norms of gender and race. Further, Burke should be recognized for performing a feminist phenomenology that puts questions of race and the legacy of racializing trauma at the heart of the analysis.

Unfortunately, many of Burke’s insights are overshadowed by unnecessarily stark causal claims that ultimately give *When Time Warps* an aura of unfulfilled promise. For example, Burke is right to locate a shared genealogy between the myth of stranger rape and the myth of the black rapist, but the claim that “the two myths are actually the same myth” is unnecessarily reductive (71). More broadly, Burke demonstrates that “white supremacy and heterosexism shape and constrain the way woman is lived” (116), but this does not justify the claim that “...underlies the existences of those who inhabit normative gender formations” (57, my emphasis). What is it for a historical practice to underly one’s existence? And what counts as inhabiting the norm of femininity? Colonialism produces complicated lines of causality, and the experiences of women of color testify to the effects of multiple modes of oppression. The work of Hortense Spillers, for example, would have added another layer of complexity to Burke’s explanation of the historical ungendering of women of color. Finally, the closing chapters of the book make much of the analogy between normative femininity and traumatization, including the aggressive claim that “to become a feminine existence is to become a traumatized subject” (119). This claim is certain to rile scholars who examine the uniquely devastating effects of trauma, which Burke somewhat anticipates by describing a survivor of rape as facing “at least a double haunting—that of the trauma of rape and that of the specter” (120). However, Burke appears to double down on this reduction in the final chapter, where feminine existence is likened to the temporal destruction of subjectivity in solitary confinement. For such an abstract claim to be justified, the method of critical phenomenology demands that it be held accountable to the actual experiences of women who have been in solitary confinement.

This last concern points to a methodological tension—touched on in the introduction to this review—that holds back the political possibilities of Burke’s analysis. Burke’s overarching focus on the temporal structure of normative femininity is true to Beauvoir’s project of existential ontology, but it remains overly invested in describing “existence” according to transcendental structures of temporality rather than experience as it appears in life. Burke correctly attributes to Beauvoir the methodological innovation of attending to “the way in which the particularity of the historical and social phenomenon of gender mediates the generality of lived time” (29–30), but Burke overstates the radicality of this innovation, claiming that “Beauvoir argues that a triadic temporal horizon is not a given feature of human existence but is instead conferred by the material conditions in which one lives” (30). However, according to Burke’s own account, feminine existence discloses itself within a transcendental framework of immanence and freedom, and Burke’s retelling of Beauvoir’s feminine existence is located always with respect to modifications of the past, present, and future—precisely the transcendental triadic structure of existence that Burke claims to be displaced by Beauvoir’s method. My concern is that, despite Burke’s political commitments, the transcendental terms of existential ontology prevent Burke’s investigation from doing justice to the complexity of the subjective experience in which every situation of gender (and race) is lived out.

To do critical phenomenology with Beauvoir requires examining how the oppressive situation imposed upon women is each time responded to and taken up, always differently and with different affordances for resistance. Claims about the existential structure of normative gender must be checked against lived experience, where gender takes on different guises, and normative femininity is always only one part of the story, dominating though it may be. Burke’s wariness of discussing the experience of gender likely stems from concern about the epistemological limits of subject-centered accounts; by sticking to “feminine existence,” Burke seeks to avoid an overinvestment in subjectivity as the seat of knowledge and action. This is a principled position, but it overlooks how critical phenomenology is built on feminist innovations that facilitate critique at the level of experience while avoiding dehistoricizing or atomizing subjectivity.

Insofar as Burke demonstrates that Beauvoir’s account of feminine existence can be informed by intersectional historical analysis, the Beauvoirian aspect of this project succeeds. However, many of the claims Burke extrapolates from Beauvoir’s existential ontology are less plausible for critical phenomenology because they underestimate the complexity of lived experience and the unruiliness of subjectivity, thereby both overlooking the diversity of experiences of oppression and missing how dominating structures retain power through continual adaptation. The promise of critical phenomenology is that it can trace dynamic effects of histories of domination in the register of particular human lives, in which differently situated women experience the world and from which solidarities must form to change it. The problem of resistance in the face of normative femininity becomes less intractable with the recognition that sexual oppression produces harms experienced across a multitude of social positions—as Lugones would agree—even if rape is invested with divergent meanings due to histories of racial domination. Navigating the multiple meanings of different experiences of oppression is where the “world-traveling” and “complex communication” Lugones calls for might begin: “to recognize that there is more than one reality and that women cross back and forth between them.”

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**NOTES**

1. One of the founding texts of this movement is Sara Heinämaa, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Phenomenology of Sexual Difference,” *Hypatia* 14, no. 4 (1999): 114–32.
Antagonizing White Feminism: Intersectionality’s Critique of Women’s Studies and the Academy


Reviewed by Shay Welch

Chaddock’s and Hinderliter’s Antagonizing White Feminism is a timely book, indeed. The purpose of this book is to interrogate the ideology of White Feminism that has long served as the dominant narrative and rigid, exclusionary framework for Feminism, as it is broadly understood; these authors take to task the oppressive—and often suffocating—pervasive attitudes of White Feminists in Women’s Studies spaces. In this book, they curate a series of chapters that define, oppose, resist, and circumnavigate these narratives, attitudes, and spaces. This book is not timely for its general project since the insidious narratives and projects of White Feminism have been operative and harangued since before the abolitionist movement. Its timeliness is in its focused response to the sweeping mass outrages of white feminists in the US (and Canada, the UK, etc.) towards the 2016 election of a racist and misogynist president of the United States of America. This book, while mundane and redundant for folks similarly situated to the included authors, is—and should be—electrifying for many of the readers who claim alliance with them. Regardless of how inclusive one thinks their feminism is, many chapters in this book shake the reader into discomfort, at least, and, more likely, a denial to avoid the brutal, but necessary, invitation to (an unwanted) deep existential reflection. If you are of the first sort—good, that’s the point. If you are of the latter sort, I suggest you read this book twice.

The chapters in the book are largely narrative and richly contextualized; but I focus on the authors’ motivations and goals given the present space limitations.

In “Introduction: Antagonizing White Feminism,” Chaddock and Hinderliter demonstrate that a problem with Women’s Studies is that this supposed safe space for women enacts “restrictive membership and authenticity management” of who gets to count as a woman (xiii)—and thus, of who deserves protection. As such, Women’s Studies is “mono-dimensional” and can often be the most exclusionary, antagonist space where faculty fake-act on issues of race and actively thwart gender spectrum inclusivity. In resistance, they bring forth new tools to “dismantle” biological essentialism and reject exclusionary biases of womanhood in white cisgender feminism (xiii). They engage in “Afrofuturistic world-building that dreams the world we need into being” and conjures feminism that draws on African American hoodoo and herbalist traditions (xiii). Their goal is to utilize these tools to mark difference as celebratory while extending kinship networks (ibid). They argue that “[f]eminism has been aligned with whiteness as a system of persecution since its inception, and these allegiances must be unlearned so that new forms of radical freedom can be established” (xvii).

In “White Feminism Is the Only Feminism,” Chaddock avows that through a series of painful and exploitative interactions with white feminists and Women’s Studies, they do not identify as a woman or feminist. They define mainstream feminism as a constructed space meant only for “white Western, heteronormative, cisgender, able-bodied, academia-related, upper-middle-class women” (1) who intentionally bat away questions about, and advocacy for, intersectionality; it is a transphobic and racist space that deploys white women’s marginalization to authorize discriminatory spaces throughout the academy. As is the case for many, they exclaim—in a way that I think snatches the whole of the problem—that “I have been rewritten by the very people who claimed to be in sisterhood and solidarity with me and who claimed to be ‘people like me’. I cannot imagine a greater ideological betrayal” (8, italics mine).

In “Unsettling Dominant Femininities: Promissory Notes Towards an Antiracist Feminist College,” Piya Chaterjee, a Brahmin-savarna woman, “unsets” the role of dominant femininity and transnational caste supremacy in elite white feminism at women’s colleges. She examines how caste privilege and the acceptance of white-adjacency can make one complicit in supremacist and feminized logics. Additionally, the empowerment of elite women’s colleges frames excellence in cisgendered terms, but as the visibility of queer and transgender movements impress themselves...
on these spaces, they must reconsider and reconceive what is meant by gender justice and explicitly include “anti-racist feminism in their titles” (25). She concludes, with respect to these spaces, that “[c]ultivation engenders violence; beauty can be steeped in cruelty. That is power, certainly. But it is time to imagine power, otherwise” (ibid).

In "Repo Fem," Timothy W. Gerken proffers a performative analysis of the experiences of gay men who engage the world as femme in resistance to identity metaphors that function as "techniques of alienation" (28). He eliminates the “me” from femme to iterate a purposeful, ambiguous, fugitive fem identity that is unwieldy and unbounded. Further, he "strategizes with vagueness" because “[s]tability and predictability discipline diversity. Binaries and boundaries abandon curiosity and stifle collaborations. . . . The Fem bring vagueness and Vegas to the masses, and Vegas is far from inefficient” (27, 37). His methodology is the Queen’s gossip, which is “both radical and empowering” (29). Gerken acknowledges that we will read folks as various kinds of gender identities. Yet he warns that we should not then take those readings and act on them according to the ingrained and historical myths and metaphors that constrain them, thereby occluding both our and their opportunities of and for multiplicity.

In "White Innocence as a Feminist Discourse: Intersectionality, Trump, and Performances of "Shock" in Contemporary Politics,” Sara Salem argues that intersectionality can explain the liberal feminist’s shock that 53 percent of white women supported Trump. For Salem, shock is rather just a performance of white innocence (48) since only an active, willful ignorance could have produced this emotional response. If feminism were properly intersectional, then the response would have instead been that one was not surprised. To this end, Salem recalls two historical moments to demonstrate the “ideas of the global order articulated by white, liberal feminists that did not always centre race and empire as central configurations of power, and thus constructed ideas of the global order within which the appearance of far-right racist forms of politics are unexpected” (50). Post-election, she observes that liberal feminists found themselves needing to confront something; that something, one would suspect, would be about gender and a failure of solidarity among women. But to the contrary, Salem shows us that it was never about gender at all since it was white women who threw themselves behind the misogynist-in-chief. Rather, the master category was that of race (62), as it usually is. Intersectionality reveals that the shock white liberal feminists felt was due to a prioritization of gender at the expense of race, class, and empire (63).

In "Building Kinfulness," Hinderliter argues that white fragility impedes coalition projects. They note that white women in feminist spaces pay lip service to shallow identity-based versions of intersectionality in a way that purposefully manipulates its intended goal of interrogating structures of oppression so as not to be challenged themselves; as “frequent ally-occasional enemy,” they trade inclusion for diversity, which itself is not inherently intersectional. This manipulation "enacts divisions and enforces barriers to communication and relationship building . . . a lot of academic feminism studies the language of intersectionality, only in order to replicate it in the right context without doing the emotional work or building the needed lived relationships to turn that language into more than just hollow words” (72, 73). In short, they argue that solidarity is merely posited rather than enacted (73). They draw on Ruha Benjamin’s notion of kinship, which rejects objectifying logics that define relations through oppression and serves to build relationships that are nurturing and creative for a transformative future (73-74). To remain true to intersectionality, white feminists must abandon fragility and expect and appreciate being called out. Through practices of kinship, white feminists can engage in relations of “power with” rather than “power over” to become effective co-conspirators through coalition.

In "Educational Trajectories of the Female Trans Student of the Mocha Celis Secondary School in Argentina," Pablo Scharagrodsky and Margalí Pérez Riedel introduce us to the first school that is inclusive of and attentive to transgender and transvestite students in a country where the life expectancy of a trans person is less than forty years. They survey the recent political advancements that have allowed space for this school, including the Comprehensive Sex Education bill and the Gender Identity Bill. This chapter outlines the principles and practices of the Mocha Celis school, grounded in critical theories of pedagogy, and shows how such institutions can intercept discrimination, violence, and abandonment that students experience on the outside. To do so, the school and its curriculum seek to empower trans students through self-managed work cooperatives. They argue that “this research shows why a critical (feminist and queer) perspective ought to be part of this and of other innovative, disruptive and disobedient proposals on education” (85).

In "To Be New, Black, Female, and Academic: Renaissance of Womanism within Academia," Vanessa Drew-Branch, Sonjia Richardson, and Laneshia Conner call for a Womanism renaissance, which calls forth a “love for Black female culture” (132), to intercept and reconceive controlling images to overcome Black women’s stereotypes and biases within the academy. They argue that academic Black women are torn between authenticity and assimilation and Womanism can provide the framework through which to self-define Black women’s culture and identity and to “freely express self-love” (108-109). They further integrate a reworked resilience-Womanist framework sensitive to the historical association of Black women with the labor class that allows them to reconstruct negative controlling images through a Womanist lens (124). They claim that “[c]ultural-specific indicators of quality of life that go beyond traditional resiliency factors, such as how one manages minority stress, sexism, and the harsh reality of being a Black woman in the workplace, can contribute to the importance of reframing the narrative” (121). The positive transvaluation of controlling images incites persistence and motivation for new Black female academics to navigate oppressive spaces (132).

In "A Rejection of White Feminist Cisgender Allyship: Centering Intersectionality," Hinderliter and Chaddock take up the problematic notion of allyship head on and
consider its rejection. They assert that "white feminism" as it is our assertion that no matter how you frame ‘feminism’, intersectional or not, it is still a performance of white domination and privilege that goes unseen as such by the ‘women’ leveraging their privilege in that space" (138). Thus, allyship, as defined in feminist space, is a one-side “contract” sans the consent of the other and can be rescinded; it fails to bridge solidarity relations of inclusive feminism that foster mutual connectivity and shared responsibility for interdependent well-being. It is unsustainable precisely in that it cannot sustain trust. They claim that "allyship does not and cannot exist without direct attachment to the oppression, suppression or suffering of the object of the allyship . . . when it is highlighted or asserted, you can probably be sure it isn’t happening" (137). Allyship is fragile and should be performed; it is not an identity that can be self-claimed or awarded (ibid.) because, in fact, it is usually weaponized. They introduce the notion of the ally-subject to capture how the object of their allyship must remain subordinate to them, often in violent ways, if they are to retain this descriptor. As an alternative to allyship, they argue that white feminists should position themselves as co-conspirators absent aspirations of congratulations. They must enter into shared spaces of consequence, loss of personal-social capital and privilege, and be ready for critical feedback (142, 143). They conclude that this “is the only way to either save feminism or put it to rest . . .” (143).

Noelle Chaddock has been family to me since the day we met. Over the years, they have invested a lot of their valuable emotional labor into teaching me things I didn’t think that I didn’t know. And here you see that they and the other authors yet again muster the energy to teach you things you didn’t think you didn’t already know. For this reason alone, you should listen, take them seriously, and respect the free but burdened investment they are making in you too.

**Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic**


Reviewed by Jamie Ritzo

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In this book, Serene Khader masterfully argues for a transnational feminist ethic that retains moral universalism. Khader develops an account for a genuinely anti-imperialist universalism that is able to address sexist oppression based on a minimalist but universal account of human rights. Her account critiques the dark side of Western feminism as an imperialist endeavor with colonial roots, but argues that ultimately, transnational feminism need not be imperialist. She elucidates the ways in which Western feminist values, such as individualism, gender role eliminationism, and secularism, can contribute to sexist oppression in practice in missionary interventions. As Khader explains, "The only way out of unreflective assumptions that Western values are the feminist answer is to raise explicit questions, and consider arguments and empirical evidence, about which values can motivate reductions in sexist oppression under conditions of global injustice" (5).

In this book, Khader does just that. Using vivid real-world examples, Khader argues that the costs of contemporary Western imperialist interventions ought to be more closely scrutinized. When Western feminists pay attention to both the legacies of colonialism and contemporary global structures that are in place, these interventions are revealed to be much more problematic than many Western feminists may have initially and unreflectively assumed. Explaining the urgent need for critical reflection on the part of Western feminists, Khader writes, "Many cases in which Westerners caused harm undoubtedly involved Westerners intending, or claiming to intend, to help ‘other women,’ but such interventions neither necessarily justify intervention nor justify the forms of intervention that have been preferred" (44). Khader makes it clear that Western values, even ones that combat sexism in the West, can and do contribute to sexist oppression in other contexts.

The strengths of Khader’s account are twofold. First, she carefully considers the role that ideology plays in transnational feminist praxis, questioning the implicit assumptions made in the name of feminism. Second, she establishes normative guidelines for a transnational feminism that avoid the pitfalls of Western missionary feminism (chapter 5) and offers a path beyond missionary feminist preconditions for combating sexist oppression.

Regarding the first strength, the crux of Khader’s theory is a defense of nonideal universalism that is both feminist and anti-imperialist (21). In chapters 2 to 5, Khader argues against the false dichotomy between relativism and universalism and develops her account of a nonethnocentric universalism as a way out of the anti-imperialism/normativity dilemma. Her account of nonideal universalism is based on an appeal to a minimalist and nonexhaustive account of human rights (21, 40). Borrowing terms from Amartya Sen (2009), Khader focuses on a justice-enhancing praxis rather than justice achievement, which opens up space to critique imperialist interventions made in the name of feminism.

Khader retains universalism to preserve the feminist view that some things that happen to people due to their gender are morally wrong and argues that this form of universalism can indeed be held cross-culturally (28), also noting that there is a need for cross-border feminist politics in an increasingly globalized world. In addition, a kind of universalism is needed in order to be able to criticize practices beyond the local scope. Given this fact, Khader argues that it is implausible that a rejection of universalism can yield coherent anti-imperialist positions.

Khader points to the invisibility of the human costs of intervention and the often-misplaced priorities of Western imperialist interventionists (26). Describing the problem of Western imperialist interventions that claim to promote feminist values, Khader writes, "What is wrong with Western feminist judgments . . . is that they advocate for changing them in ways that worsen the lives of those they
advocate for and do so because of the missionary feminist precommitments” (12-13). These “missionary feminist precommitments” are values, often ethnocentric ones, that are held by Western feminists, which are often accompanied by justice monism. Per Khader’s definition, justice monism is the view that “only one type of social or cultural form can house gender justice” and that only the “right” kind of society is capable of achieving gender justice (30). These precommitments commit Western feminists to a single, Western vision of feminist strategy and can be a Trojan horse for racist, imperialist views to sneak in under the banner of feminism. She also criticizes the Enlightenment teleological narrative and the assumption that Western intervention in global contexts is equivalent to “other” women’s salvation (32). Khader convincingly highlights the fact that war can worsen women’s vulnerability to a particular cultural practice (27). Citing the war in Afghanistan as an example of US intervention, she argues that war that is justified by Western interventionists as something that will fix gender oppression (4). By framing feminism this way, Khader avoids linking feminism to one singular cultural blueprint. Instead, there can be many different forms of feminism that come from culturally different visions of how to remake a world without sexist oppression. Given this claim, Khader’s practical feminist strategy is more than simply getting from Point A to Point B. On her view, an effective strategy is contextually specific, meaning that what will help in any given situation is contextually specific. There is no single way to fight oppression but instead a multiplicity of ways. By allowing for a multiplicity of possible solutions, Khader’s strategy avoids the paternalism that often accompanies interventionism. Khader criticizes the commitments of missionary feminists on the basis of their use of a single, moral vernacular, which is highly inadequate for reducing sexist oppression in varied contexts.

Khader offers several epistemic prescriptions for addressing the question of what, if anything, Western feminists can do to combat sexist oppression without falling into idealization or moralism. First, what she calls the imperialism-visibilizing prescription, speaks to the need to see what imperialism is doing to women’s lives in particular contexts (43). When Western feminists seek to politically engage with “other” women, they should seek to educate themselves about the role that historical and contemporary global structures may have played in “other” women’s oppression. This prescription works against the forces that have obscured imperialism, particularly the idealized social ontology that has rendered these effects less visible to Western feminists.

Second, the justice-enhancement prescription argues that effective nonimperialist feminist strategy choices are partly case-dependent (44-45). Strategy choices should aim to make the world better, not to make an ideal world. This strategy calls for “rich and longitudinal empirical attention to contexts and asking case-specific questions about what will make a difference” and requires specific knowledge of what types of actions might be helpful in a given context (44).

Western feminists, due to epistemic gaps, may not see the ways in which colonial legacies color Western interventions. Privileged groups often have blind spots due to gaps in their knowledge and experience. Some have argued that noncentered, marginalized groups often have more objective knowledge than their structurally privileged counterparts (Harding 1991, Pohlhaus 2011). This is due to having to contend with both a mainstream, centered experience, and with one’s own experience as a marginalized person.

Given the importance of epistemic issues in effective feminist strategy, I think it would be fruitful to place Khader’s work in conversation with other work in social epistemology, with a particular focus on José Medina’s The Epistemology of Resistance (2013). Medina argues that epistemic lacunas, that is, gaps of knowledge that may be missing from one’s everyday experience, can and often do lead to complications in cross-cultural cooperation because different populations have different bodies of knowledge. Medina’s insights may contribute to answering some of the questions raised by Khader in Decolonizing Universalism, specifically the arguments regarding the interrelation of racist and sexist epistemic injustices.

Medina’s account offers a corrective for these deficiencies through what he calls beneficial epistemic friction, which can reduce problematic epistemic lacunas and facilitate cross-cultural cooperation. Beneficial epistemic friction occurs when subjects experience critiques of their ideas and begin to cultivate the virtue of open-mindedness (Medina, 21). When one actually sees epistemic others as concrete individuals, one encounters epistemic friction that can lead to meta-lucidity. When one has developed adequate self-regarding attitudes, one is more likely to notice the epistemic lacunas one may have. This seems to be a necessary component of Khader’s imperialism-visibilizing prescription, because the experiences of epistemic others often remain invisible to privileged subjects until they gain a self-awareness (meta-lucidity) of their own epistemic lacunas and shortcomings. An important step in addressing imperialist legacies is for all epistemic subjects, privileged and marginalized alike, to develop epistemic virtues necessary to overcome ignorance. In light of the conjunction of Khader and Medina’s work, new questions are raised about the way different groups perceive the world. What is the best way to address epistemic deficiencies in privileged persons? Can cross-cultural cooperation exist without these problematic epistemic lacunas?

According to Medina, the way to remedy a lack of beneficial epistemic friction is to cultivate epistemic virtues such as open-mindedness. A consequence of this view is that virtuous epistemic subjects have the obligation to learn about the experiences of others. If, as Khader suggests, what is wrong with Western Feminist judgments is that they advocate for change in ways that may worsen the lives of those women they claim to want to help, and do so because of the missionary feminist precommitments, then it seems that Western feminists need to actively put themselves
in situations where they encounter epistemic friction and have their beliefs and values challenged.

At the heart of Khader’s analysis is the idea that although an uncritical feminism can be a tool of imperialism, a genuinely anti-imperialist transnational feminist ethic can retain moral universalism and guide an activist praxis to reduce sexist oppression. Khader’s book will be particularly helpful to Western feminists and a wake-up call to white feminists whose vision of feminism is a vehicle for implicitly imperialist values. By raising explicit questions about the harms of missionary feminism, addressing values as they impact public life, and considering empirical evidence about normative claims made by feminists, Khader has made a meaningful contribution to the field.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Criticism and Compassion: The Ethics and Politics of Claudia Card

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Criticism and Compassion: The Ethics and Politics of Claudia Card, edited by Robin S. Dillon and Armen T. Marsoobian, is an important collection of Claudia Card’s previously published essays written over the span of twenty years (1996 and 2016). The collection also includes several new essays by scholars whose work is influenced by Card. In this volume, a range of issues in feminist philosophy are explored. This book challenges norms about marriage, gender, and war. While cross-disciplinary in many ways, each essay offers powerful philosophical analyses.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One, “War, Genocide, and Evil,” includes twelve essays, by Card and other scholars, about weapons of war, social death, and genocide. In the first essay, “Rape as a Weapon of War” (1996), Card discusses mass martial rape as a weapon of war for genetic imperialism. Rape removes the basic control of oneself and one’s body and male dominance attempts to make rape “natural” (22). Card’s fantasy solution to rape as a weapon of war is compulsory transsexual surgery—the removal of the penis and construction of a vagina-like canal. Card notes that an objection is that this solution reinforces misogyny by making a vagina a punishment (23). This essay also includes an addendum in the second chapter, published in 1997, where she raises further objections to her fantasy punishment of compulsory transsexual surgery. Card emphasizes that the overall goal should be changing the significance of rape to something other than domination. While Card does raise concern about the transmisogynistic symbolism of this proposed surgery/punishment, this short addendum does not touch on the ways in which this fantasy solution aims to pathologize trans women. She argues, however, that there should be a clear distinction between those who willingly participate in what she calls transsexual surgery (now referred to as gender confirmation surgery or gender reassignment surgery) and those who receive the surgery as a form of punishment. Regardless of this distinction, and the fact that Card does acknowledge that this compulsory surgery may actually just reproduce domination, on her account, this surgery paints trans women as abnormal, categorizes their existence as a form of punishmet, and is therefore entirely transmisogynistic, thereby rendering her position to be highly problematic.

In “Women, Evil, and Gray Zones” (2000), Card discusses the ways in which the moral character damage that comes as a result of oppression may put one in danger of becoming evil themselves. Card calls this challenge a “moral gray zone”—when the oppressed side with oppression. She explains that oppression sets moral traps for victims to play into their own oppression. These gray zones confuse moral judgment and inhibit one’s ability to make a clear moral choice (46). An effect of this phenomenon is a lack of group trust. This is because when an oppressed individual acts as an oppressor, trust is fractured. Card argues that the grayness of these zones expresses the ambiguity of the moral decision-making. In this grayness, ordinary moral judgment is suspended (51). Card ultimately claims that exploring these gray zones is important so that we may have a fuller understanding of responsibility and obligation under the condition of oppression (57).

In “Genocide and Social Death” (2003), Card argues that social death is a central part of genocide. Social death, according to Card, is the dismembering of social relations, which destroys social vitality. It is what primarily separates genocide from mass murder (66). Card explains that centering social death means that genocide does not always have to be homicidal (67). Cultural destruction that results in social death is another form of genocide. Card institutes two elements that constitute an evil: (1) culpable wrongdoing and (2) reasonably foreseeable and intolerable harms (70). Card uses these two elements to explore the ways in which the scope of genocide may be restricted. Genocide attempts to wholly annihilate a group that contributes to the social identity of its member, resulting in social death.

In “The Paradox of Genocidal Rape Aimed at Enforced Pregnancy” (2008), Card explains the “logical glitch” of using enforced pregnancy as a mode of genocide. The paradox is that genocide aims at the annihilation of a people while enforced pregnancy results in new people being born (86). Genocidal rape aimed at enforced pregnancy uses sperm as a weapon of biological warfare (88). Pregnancy
Further, their actions may actually undermine their own autonomy as the ability to act intentionally (159). However, in her analysis of survival agency, Meyers notes that victims of their own integrity (158). Meyers understands agency and at the same time may prevent them from surviving in terms where individuals are forced to make survival decisions that are unintelligible (156). The gray zone is a double bind of evil forced to live and shows how the choices that are made in their existence. The offspring are a permanent reminder of trauma and may be largely unwanted.

Chapter eight introduces a shift in the first section of the book to four new essays by philosophers who have been heavily influenced by Card's work. These essays further develop many of the themes that were explored by Card, thereby expanding her philosophical legacy.

In "Perpetrators and Social Death: A Cautionary Tale," Lynne Tirrell argues that due to our inherent intersubjectivity, in destroying another groups' social vitality, the perpetrator also destroys their own by eradicating the "other" (115). This ultimately results in the social death of the perpetrator as well. This is why Tirrell argues that genocide is a doomed project. Eradicating the "other" destroys the meaning of one's own identity. Tirrell warns against understanding perpetrators of evil as monsters. Seeing the humanity in perpetrators helps to hold them accountable. This is because when individuals are viewed as monsters, their actions are simply written off as what monsters do. She argues that perpetrators are cultivated and may become attached to the social vitality that comes with others' approval of their own wrongdoing.

In "Claudia Card’s Concept of Social Death: A New Way of Looking at Genocide," James Snow explains the disconnect between scholarship on genocide and testimonies from those who experienced genocide firsthand. He explores the gendered experiences in genocide and explains that women’s stories, specific to their gender, tend to be erased. He explains that body counts and death tolls are centered in the frame of genocide. The number of deaths is used to measure the magnitude of the act (136). Snow notes that Card’s emphasis on social death works to expand the entire frame of genocide. This makes genocide distinct and takes the focus away from body counts, instead focusing on real experiences. Snow argues that delegitimization and denial of history, as well as denial of memory, can lead to social death.

In "Surviving Evils and the Problem of Agency: An Essay Inspired by the Work of Claudia Card," Diana Tietjens Meyers offers ideas about autonomy, agency, and survival. She discusses the gray zones in which many victims are forced to live and shows how the choices that are made by individuals who exist in the gray zone may be morally unintelligible (156). The gray zone is a double bind of evil where individuals are forced to make survival decisions that at the same time may prevent them from surviving in terms of their own integrity (158). Meyers understands agency and autonomy as the ability to act intentionally (159). However, in her analysis of survival agency, Meyers notes that victims in gray zones may not be able to act wholly with intention. Further, their actions may actually undermine their own moral character. As a result, autonomy and agency may be hindered in the moral gray zones. Survival agency often coerces victims into certain situational opportunities for protection that have a negative impact on their character. Meyers acknowledges, however, that perhaps victims can postpone the addressing of their moral character until after an evil is past (166).

"Institutional Evils, Culpable Complicity, and Duties to Engage in Moral Repair" by Eliana Peck and Ellen K. Feder discusses the moral responsibilities of those who are culpably complicit in collectively perpetrated evils with a specific focus on apology. They use the case of medical management of intersex anatomies to explain that an agent must be epistemically aware of the harms, in order for them to be wholly complicit in the wrongdoing (178). Epistemic unawareness may cause complicity, although this does not negate responsibility (181). In their discussion on the reparative work of apology, they explain that an apology must have an acknowledgment and description of the wrongdoing, identification of the persons harmed, and recognition of the impact of the harm. They conclude that good apologies can help to build moral communities (190).

Part Two of this volume is titled "Feminist Ethical Theory and Its Applications." This section includes four of Card’s previously published essays and five essays from scholars who take up Card’s themes. Card uses feminist ethical theory to discuss many social and political issues, and this section expands upon topics that are often understood as central to feminist ethics. It also challenges traditional societal norms such as marriage, misogyny, and gratitude.

The first essay, by Card, is “Against Marriage and Motherhood” (1996). It is divided into two main parts: “Lesbian (or Gay) Marriage?” and “Why Motherhood?” This essay was especially controversial as it was written two decades before same-sex marriage was constitutionally guaranteed by the US Supreme Court. Here, Card argues that marriage and motherhood actually work to reproduce patriarchy because the marriage contract does not give individuals freedom to outline their own limits (198). Card argues that marriage should not be fought for by same-sex lovers because marriage is regulation. Further, the unspecificity of the marriage contract hinders spousal accountability (207). In the second part of this essay, Card explains that motherhood centralizes parenting on the mother while revolutionary parenting widely distributes child-rearing. She hypothesizes that fostering a safe environment in all communities would actually rid us of the need for motherhood as an institution.

The next few essays by Card, "Gay Divorce: Thoughts on the Legal Regulation of Marriage" (2007), "Challenges of Global and Local Misogyny" (2014), and "Taking Pride in Being Bad" (2016), all raise issues around marriage being regulated by the state, the war on women, and badness in moral decision-making. The following three essays by Robin May Schott, Kathryn J. Norlock, and Mavis Biss explore Card’s views on care ethics, Card’s contributions to nonideal ethical theory, and Card’s analyses of moral luck and taking responsibility.
The final chapter is “The American Girl: Playing with the Wrong Dollie?” by Victoria Davion. In this essay, Davion offers a feminist exploration of the American Girl Just Like You doll. She acknowledges that toys, such as dolls, impact children’s socialization and are worth consideration. Davion explains that the astronomical prices of the American Girl dolls promote poor global citizenship. Further, she pulls on the work of Sandra Bartky to argue that Just Like You dolls produce docile bodies because the doll teaches disciplinary practices, such as curling hair and putting on makeup, that align with traditional femininity (337). While the dolls claim to be empowering for young girls, they in fact fail to challenge traditional feminine ideals. That is, the dolls affirm and entrench traditional practices and actually train young girls into the practices of heterosexuality (340). Davion concludes by explaining that the American Girl doll is worth discussing as it shows the complexities of patriarchal societies and girlhood.

In sum, Criticism and Compassion: The Ethics and Politics of Claudia Card offers insightful critiques of domination that lead the reader to consider the ethical complexities of living in an oppressive society. Themes such as genocide, complicity, social death, hate crimes, and evils are discussed and help to further feminist philosophy and challenge common oppressive ideologies. I hope to have given insight into this important collection that furthers some of the world’s leading philosophers of art. Maes explains that the astronomical prices of the American Girl children’s socialization and are worth consideration. Davion concludes by explaining that the American Girl doll is worth discussing as it shows the complexities of patriarchal societies and girlhood.

CONTRIBUTORS

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A. W. Eaton is an associate professor in the Philosophy Department at University of Illinois-Chicago (aka Chicago Circle). She received her PhD from The University of Chicago in both philosophy and art history. She works on the pragmatics of pictures, race and aesthetic value, epistemological and ontological status of aesthetic value, the relationship between ethical and artistic value, feminist critiques of pornography, representations of rape in the European artistic tradition, and artifact teleology (for more details and publications, see https://sites.google.com/site/eatonaw/). Eaton was a Laurence Rockefeller Fellow at Princeton’s Center for Human Values in 2005-2006, a Senior Research Fellow at Lichtenberg Kolleg, University of Göttingen in the summer of 2017, and the Brady Distinguished Visiting Associate Professor at Northwestern University, 2019-2020. She is the outgoing editor of the Aesthetics & Philosophy of Art section of Philosophy Compass.

Katharine Jenkins is a philosopher specializing in social categories, especially the metaphysics of social categories, with particular interests in gender, race, sexuality, and disability. She received her BA and MA from the University of Cambridge, and her PhD in 2016 from the University of Sheffield. She held a Junior Research Fellowship at Jesus College, Cambridge, before joining the Department of Philosophy at the University of Nottingham as an assistant professor. She is currently a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Glasgow.

Hans Maes is senior lecturer in history and philosophy of art at the University of Kent, United Kingdom. He has authored papers on a variety of topics in aesthetics, including the art of portraiture, the role of intention in the interpretation of art, the aesthetics and ethics of sexiness, and the relation between art and pornography. The latter is the subject of two essay collections: Art and Pornography (co-edited with Jerrold Levinson, Oxford University Press, 2012) and Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013). His most recent book is entitled Conversations on Art and Aesthetics (Oxford University Press, 2017). It contains interviews with, and portraits of, some of the world’s leading philosophers of art. Maes is past president of the Dutch Association for Aesthetics and co-director of the Aesthetics Research Centre at the University of Kent.

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Shay Welch is an associate professor of philosophy at Spelman College. She is currently the 2020-2021 Carnegie Mellon Corporation and Rockefeller Foundation Distinguished Researcher/Creative Scholar. Her areas of specialization are Native American philosophy, feminist ethics, social/political philosophy, feminist epistemology, philosophy of dance, and embodied cognition theory. Additionally, Shay is a performing aerialist and aerial arts choreographer.
FROM THE EDITORS

Outgoing Editor’s Farewell

Carlos Alberto Sánchez
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

Being an editor is very challenging work. This challenge is compounded when editing a “newsletter,” and this because of an implicit (and unwarranted) belief that a newsletter just doesn’t seem like a “legitimate” venue to publish work that may have to be scrutinized come dossier evaluation, job application, or proposal submission. There’s thus an extra level of aggressiveness required to fulfill our normal editorial responsibilities: One has to impose oneself on someone’s time and creativity, at times beg, while always assuring and reassuring possible contributors that their efforts will be worth the while, that the essay or interview or book review will be peer reviewed, that the formatting will be just right, and that the finished product will be of the highest quality. But these same challenges are also what make this job so rewarding. In the process of encroaching on someone else’s creative and philosophical space, I’ve had the honor of working with some of the brightest and most innovative Hispanics/Latin@s in our country; more than that, in pursuing philosophers for their philosophical merchandize, I’ve also been the first to see their work once it leaves the sanctity of their head-space. It’s as close as I can be to the ecstasy of discovery! (Or the joy of simply being there when something happens.)

I have been the editor of this Newsletter since 2013, having previously served as co-editor with Bernie Cantens beginning in 2010. My objective as co-editor and editor over the past decade has been to encourage and showcase work that represents the very best that Hispanic/Latin@ philosophers/thinkers have to offer. Perhaps this is the Newsletter’s greatest virtue: it is a place where new ideas can be tested, where new voices can emerge, and where new philosophical identities can be forged. Being its guardian has thus benefited me the most! I’ve witnessed the birth of new ideas, new lines of inquiry, the emergence of philosophers, and the normalization of traditions. For this, I am forever grateful.

I published my first paper on Latin American philosophy here in 2007. That short essay went on to become my first book on Mexican philosophy. That first publication gave me the confidence I needed to get my decade’s long research project off the ground, and my hope is that I have helped others in a similar way.

It has certainly been an honor to work with the greatest minds of my generation, and I take my leave in these uncertain times confident that our future in philosophy is in good hands.

I leave the Newsletter in the capable hands of Lori Gallegos. She joins, as I did, a distinguished procession of editors that include Eduardo Mendieta, Gregory Pappas, Arleen Salles, Bernie, and others, who have sought to encourage, promote, and archive that which lends Hispanic/Latin@ philosophy its difference and its eternal value.

Editor’s Introduction

Lori Gallegos
TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

To open this issue of the Newsletter, we are honored to feature an interview, conducted by Amy Reed-Sandoval, of Joseph Carens, a leading theorist of open borders. Carens retired this year from his position as Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto. In the interview, Carens looks back at his career, reflecting on what has influenced his work and on the reception to his ideas by academic circles over the years.

Following the interview is a parting gift from co-editor Carlos Alberto Sánchez. Sánchez introduces English-language readers to the philosophy of Elsa Cecilia Frost, a thinker who is “one of Mexico’s most celebrated philosophers of culture,” but who is “critically overlooked” in the US. In his article “Elsa Cecilia Frost: Culture and Nepantla,” Sánchez offers a summary and analysis of two of Frost’s works, highlighting the development of Frost’s thought about Mexican culture over time. Sánchez concludes by reflecting on the failure of many Latin American philosophers in the US to recognize the contributions of women to the field.

Also translating from the original Spanish-language text, Sergio Armando Gallegos Ordorica makes a case for the most important work of the Mexican philosopher Emilio Uranga. In the article “Foundations of a Mexican Humanism in Emilio Uranga’s Análisis del Ser del Mexicano,” Gallegos Ordorica presents Uranga’s ontological analysis of Mexican being, or Mexicanness (lo mexicano). Rather than viewing themselves as substances, as Europeans do, Uranga proposes that Mexicans conceive of themselves as accidents (and, in virtue of this, eminently contingent and fragile). Uranga sees this self-awareness as the foundation of a new form of humanism, one which Gallegos...
Ordorica argues is not underscored by the problems and shortcomings that afflict the humanism of Jean-Paul Sartre.

In the third and final article for this issue, “Latinx Identity in the United States: A Pragmatist Inquiry,” Héctor Herrera III weighs in on the widely debated questions of how “our demographic” should refer to itself and why it matters. The article begins by drawing from the work of Robert Brandom to describe the purpose and importance of naming, proposing that “our language indicates our normative commitments in discursive practices.” Then, Herrera III considers three possible names, one proposed by Jorge J. E. Gracia, one by Linda Martín Alcoff, and one by Christine Garcia. The author finds that “Latinx” is the best name “given our current normative commitments.”

We conclude the issue with a review of Reed-Sandoval’s own book, Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration Justice. Reviewer Luis Rubén Díaz-Cepeda describes being able to personally identify with Reed-Sandoval’s main theoretical contribution—the identity category of “socially undocumented,” which Reed-Sandoval defines as people who “are presumed to be undocumented on the mere basis of their appearance [and in consequence] are subjected to demeaning immigration-related constraints.” Díaz-Cepeda’s review celebrates a number of the book’s theoretical contributions, but Díaz-Cepeda also wonders whether the identity category of “socially undocumented” is strong enough to elicit the commitment of its members.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy is accepting contributions for the SPRING 2021 issue. Our readers are encouraged to submit original work on any topic related to Hispanic/Latino thought, broadly construed. We publish original, scholarly treatments, as well as reflections, book reviews, and interviews. Please prepare articles for anonymous review.

All submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Electronic submissions are preferred. All submissions should be limited to 5,000 words (twenty double-spaced pages) and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting. All articles submitted to the newsletter undergo anonymous review by members of the Committee on Hispanics.

BOOK REVIEWS

Book reviews in any area of Hispanic/Latino philosophy, broadly construed, are welcome. Submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Book reviews may be short (500 words) or long (1,500 words). Electronic submissions are preferred.

DEADLINES

Deadline for spring issue is November 15. Authors should expect a decision by January 15. Deadline for the fall issue is April 15. Authors should expect a decision by June 15.

Please send all articles, book reviews, queries, comments, or suggestions electronically to the editor, Lori Gallegos, at LORIGALLEGOS@TXSTATE.EDU, or Department of Philosophy, Comal Building 102, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

FORMATTING GUIDELINES


INTERVIEW

Interview with Joseph Carens

Joseph Carens, a leading theorist of open borders, retired in spring 2020 from his position as professor of political science at the University of Toronto. He is the author of six books, including, most recently, The Ethics of Immigration (OUP, 2013), as well as numerous academic articles dealing with philosophical dimensions of immigration, human rights, and social justice.

Amy Reed-Sandoval (ARS): Where did you grow up, and what were your childhood and adolescence like? What sparked your initial interest in philosophy?

Joseph Carens (JC): I grew up in Wellesley, a suburb of Boston, in a middle class Irish Catholic family. Each of my parents had attended college only for a year. My father was a businessman, and my mother began working as a secretary when I was in the seventh grade. So there were no other academics, and not much intellectual discussion, in my family. I was a very good student, but very conventional. I just tried to do well whatever the teachers told me to do. I was also very religious, deeply committed to the very traditional Catholicism of the 1950s. I became interested in philosophy in college primarily because of its links to theology, which was my real interest.

ARS: What drew you to political philosophy and the ethics of immigration?

JC: I became a political philosopher almost entirely by accident. I had entered a PhD program in religious studies at Yale, but by the time I had completed my third year and my general exams, I had stopped believing in God. Lots of people study religion for purely academic or intellectual reasons, but my interest had always been tied to my faith, and when that disappeared so did my desire to get a PhD in religious studies. I had no idea what I wanted to do. In normal times, I would probably have dropped out of school for a while and figured things out, but it was 1968-69, the
middle of the Vietnam War. If I dropped out, I would lose my student deferment and get drafted into the army. Since I was not willing to join the army, I would either have to go to jail or go to Canada. Those seemed like dire fates. (I know. My thinking of going to Canada as a dire fate is one of life’s little ironies.) So I decided to try to stay in school. Yale had a rule that permitted grad students to transfer from one PhD program to another without going through the normal application process. So I wandered about Yale looking for a department that might take me in. My passion for religion had been replaced by a passion for politics, and so I went to the Department of Political Science. At the time Yale was a bastion of behavioral political science, but the director of Graduate Studies was a political theorist. I was not really a likely candidate for admission to a PhD program in political science because I had never before taken a course in political science—any course—and for that matter, I had never before taken a course in any social science (unless you count a first-year course in the History of Western Civilization). All the rest had been humanities—Latin, Greek, French, English, theology, and philosophy (but not political philosophy). But the director of Graduate Studies saw that I had good grades in my religious studies program, and when he found that I did not need fellowship support because I had an external fellowship that could be transferred, he signed my form, and I officially became a political scientist (or at least a graduate student in political science).

I had no immediate interest in questions about immigration. I wrote a dissertation (which I subsequently published) about how one could use moral incentives to combine markets and income equality, a kind of egalitarian market socialism. In 1980 the American Political Science Association created a seminar on citizenship for junior professors, and the price of admission to the seminar was a promise to write a paper. I wanted to go just for the intellectual stimulation. I had not previously thought about citizenship at all. I began casting about for a topic. It was a time when lots of Haitians were seeking asylum in the United States. While many people on the left were arguing for the admission of these refugees, others were clearly worried that the arrival of large numbers of foreign refugees would have negative consequences for marginalized and dispossessed Americans. That was the link to my citizenship seminar—how to weigh the claims of citizens against the claims of outsiders in need. So I decided for the first time to try to think about immigration.

ARS: When you wrote your extraordinarily influential paper “Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders,” you initially struggled to get it published—an experience you describe briefly in your more recent book The Ethics of Immigration. Speaking more generally, what was it like trying to motivate an egalitarian “open borders” position in the 1980s (which is when your early “open borders” paper was eventually published)? How did people react to such arguments at conferences and in other academic contexts?

JC: As I remember it, the real challenge in the 1980s was getting academic philosophers to take questions about immigration seriously, whether those questions were about open borders or any other immigration issue. It was generally seen as a marginal topic in political philosophy. Not many people were interested in it.

ARS: You went on to devote much of your career to defending “open borders,” which continues to be viewed as a “radical” ideal by many. How has being associated with a controversial and “utopian” view shaped your experiences as an academic philosopher?

JC: When I was in graduate school in the late 1960s, the highest accolade one could receive from one’s peers was to have one’s work described as “radical.” So I have always been pleased, rather than put off, when people have viewed my work that way, although, as I indicated, on the topic of immigration I did not set out to come up with a radical view. That was just where my reflections led me. It has never bothered me to have my views seen as utopian. The subtitle of my first book was “An Essay in Utopian Politico-Economic Theory.” I think that we would gain intellectually by having more utopian reflections so that we can get a clearer sense of the extent to which the practical political goals that we pursue have within them concessions to forms of power that we actually think are unjust but too deeply entrenched to change in the immediate future.

ARS: On a practical and political level, is there any sense in which we have moved any closer to a “world without borders” than when you started advocating for it?

JC: Yes, definitely. First, there is the experience of the European Union. When I started writing about open borders, it was not uncommon to have people say to me that no sovereign state could have open borders, as though that were a fundamental conceptual truth. For some time now, I have been able to point out that the states in the European Union are more effectively sovereign than most states and yet they have open borders with one another. Recognizing that open borders is a possibility that we can imagine actually existing between states changes the discussion. It makes it easier to get people to see regulating immigration is not a necessary function of state sovereignty like having a legal system. Beyond that, whatever one thinks of the phenomenon of globalization, it is hard not to see that the world is much more interconnected today than it was in the past. Migration is part of that phenomenon. Of course, there are also ways in which borders have come to play a more important role than they did in the past, and restrictions on migration have become a much more salient political issue.

ARS: You have argued that we need both “realistic” and “idealistic” approaches to immigration ethics, and you illustrate both approaches in The Ethics of Immigration and other works. Does it concern you that the “realistic” and the “ideal” seem, at least in many important respects, to be growing increasingly distant from one other in the realm of immigration politics? Has this “distancing” impacted your metaphilosophical views on immigration ethics?

JC: The increasing antagonism towards immigrants in the United States and in many European states certainly concerns me, and that may be taken as one illustration of an increasing gap between the real and the ideal. On the other hand, in some respects the gap has narrowed.
For example, almost no European state today thinks it can have a citizenship policy based purely on descent as many did in the past, most democratic states have significantly narrowed the differences between the rights of residents and the rights of citizens, no democratic states adopt the kind of openly discriminatory admissions policies that were common in the mid twentieth century (even if they sometimes try to sneak them back in under another guise), and so on. So I’m less pessimistic about the overall trend than your question.

From a metaphilosophical perspective, even the negative developments have reinforced my view of how important it is to get clarity about the reasons why we may advocate for or against particular immigration policies. In my view, to act effectively in politics, it is crucial to have a realistic view about what is possible and what is not possible in a given time and place. So it may be wise to limit the political demands that we advance in the area of immigration. Nevertheless, an adequate philosophical approach has to be able to recognize when the limitations on what is possible stem from deeply entrenched injustices. I think there is a real danger of legitimating policies and practices that we cannot change here and now for contingent but deep political reasons by treating these constraints on change as though they flow from the human condition.

ARS: You have done a considerable amount of high-profile public philosophy. How has this been challenging, and in what ways has it been fulfilling?

JC: I guess I am glad to see you say this, especially the “high-profile” part, but I’m not sure I agree with the premise. I do not really think of myself as a public intellectual. I try to write in a way that is accessible to ordinary people and I try to write about real issues, but I do not write many op-eds or have a blog or even a Twitter account, and I do not very often comment on current political issues. In part this is simply a matter of temperament and personality. I tend to be a perfectionist. (It took me thirty years to finish my book on immigration.) That is not a good trait when one is facing a deadline or, worse, many deadlines. Also, I normally dislike polemics. I do not object to argument and critique, and in fact I like talking to people with whom I disagree, but I want it to be a real conversation, not an exchange of talking points. Finally, I do not have the kind of thick skin that is needed for public engagement. I have been struck on a number of occasions by comments from newspaper columnists about the kind of hate mail they have received for articulating their views. My work has certainly been criticized in academic contexts, but I cannot recall ever receiving hate mail of any sort or even rude and antagonistic communications, and I am glad about that. None of this makes me well suited for most places in the public arena.

ARS: Do you have any advice for other philosophers seeking to do public-facing work?

JC: Given my previous answer, it would have to be something like do as I say, not as I do, but only if your temperament is different from mine. I do want to make clear that I am not being critical of those philosophers who seek to reach wider public audiences. On the contrary, I think such efforts are important, and I admire those who engage in that sort of work. I’m just not very good at it myself.

ARS: Though you were born in the US, you have spent the majority of your academic career in Canada. To what extent, if any, has living in Canada influenced you as a philosopher and public intellectual?

JC: Coming to Canada had a huge impact on me because Canada is so much like the United States in many ways that the differences between the two countries really stand out. Quebec and its distinct identity are one obvious example. Equally important, Indigenous peoples are much more visible here in Canada than they are in the United States. One of the things that distinguishes my views on open borders from those of some others who support open borders is that I am not just arguing from a liberal individualist perspective. I think that communities and collective identities really do matter morally. I think that is compatible with a deep commitment to open borders, but whether I am right about that or not, I have no doubt that one of the main reasons why I take context and culture so seriously is because of the experience of living in Canada.

ARS: What philosophical works have made the strongest impact on you?

JC: Reading the later Wittgenstein had a huge impact on me because it made me wary of abstract conceptual debates and made me want always to see whether there was anything of real substance underlying such debates. Like many in my generation and succeeding ones, I have been deeply influenced by Rawls, but I have also been influenced by Walzer whose theorizing is almost always directly connected to real world issues in ways that I try to emulate even when I disagree with his substantive views. Finally, political theory in political science departments tends to put a lot of weight on the history of political thought, and even though I have not written about that history, I have devoted much of my teaching to it. So I am often thinking of that tradition when I write. For various reasons, Plato, Rousseau, and Hegel are my favorites. I won’t mention how much I dislike Nietzsche because I know how popular he is.

ARS: Looking back on your career, what makes you the proudest? What, if anything, might you have done differently?

JC: Parts of the Catholic upbringing stick, even when the belief in God goes, and so I find it difficult to talk about what I am proud about. Let me try this. I am very grateful that Jerry Cohen liked my book on moral incentives and that Jerry Cohen liked my book on moral incentives and that I can re-read it without wishing to change much. Parts of the Catholic upbringing stick, even when the belief in God goes, and so I find it difficult to talk about what I am proud about. Let me try this. I am very grateful that Jerry Cohen liked my book on moral incentives and that I can re-read it without wishing to change much. I am very glad that I finally finished my book on the ethics of immigration and would have deeply regretted it if I had not managed to do so. On the other hand, I do not really regret not publishing it sooner, even though it would have
been professionally advantageous to do so, because I did finally write the book I wanted to write. Finally, what I have most wanted to do, apart from producing good work of my own, was to be a door opener rather than a gatekeeper in carrying out my professional responsibilities with respect to younger scholars. I think that I have usually managed to do that. More generally, in my engagement with others, in whatever capacity, I have tried to err on the side of generosity. The times when I have failed to do that are what I wish I had done differently.

ARS: What are your plans for after your retirement?

JC: I plan not to work as hard as I did before and to say "no" to (almost) all future review requests of any kind. But I do have a couple of writing projects in mind: a book about how to do political theory (though one that is not as prescriptive as that sounds) and a book about utopia (which is more about the questions we need to ask than the answers to those questions). We will see if either of these come to fruition. I will be happy if they do but not devastated if they do not.

ARTICLES

Elsa Cecilia Frost: Culture and Nepantla

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Recognized throughout Latin America as a brilliant historian and linguist, Elsa Cecilia Frost (1928–2005) became one of Mexico’s most celebrated philosophers of culture. What follows is an introduction to this critically overlooked Mexican philosopher via a summary consideration of two of her most significant contributions to philosophy, Las categorías de la cultura mexicana [The Categories of Mexican Culture] (her first published work, written between 1952–1957 and published in 1971), and “Acerca de Nepantla” [“On Nepantla”] (her final, major public address, delivered in November of 2004). With the first, Frost engages in a careful and deconstructive analysis of certain concepts that have been used to think about Mexican culture as culture, concepts that she ultimately finds insufficient to capture the complex hybridity (i.e., mestizaje) of Mexican cultural life. With the second, that is, her final address, Frost returns to the dynamics of Mexican culture and denies her previous assertion regarding the nature of Mexican culture as a “mestizo” culture, offering a less rigid concept in its place, the Nahua concept of “nepantla.” She argues in “Acerca de Nepantla” that modern Mexican culture is, given its cultural and historical complexity, a nepantla culture.

WHO IS ELSA CECILIA FROST?

Frost received her graduate education in philosophy in 1954 at El Colegio de Mexico and UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) under the tutelage and guidance of two of Mexico’s most significant twentieth-century philosophers, José Gaos and Edmundo O’Gorman, as well as the famed historian, Miguel Leon-Portilla. At that time, her research focused on the history and philosophy of colonial Mexico. She was especially interested in the processes of indoctrination and acculturation central to colonization itself, paying particular attention to the role of the sixteenth-century Franciscan missionaries. According to Frost, Franciscans were particularly adept at ritualizing the sublation, or simultaneous erasure and preservation, of Indigenous cultures in acts of evangelization that would eventually come to create new culture and ways of being. In post-Conquest Mexico, that is, evangelization was key to acculturation and identity formation.

Frost’s post-graduate career was dedicated to teaching and writing philosophy, obtaining an international reputation as editor and translator of texts from Mexico’s colonial period while working at the Fondo de Cultura Economica (Mexico’s state-funded, non-profit, publishing conglomerate). However, her most valuable contributions were to history and philosophy; she taught both at the Center of Historical Studies at the College of Mexico and at the Department of Philosophy and Letters at UNAM until her death in 2005.

Elsa Frost gained one of the highest academic distinctions in Latin America when in 2004 she was inaugurated into the prestigious Academia Mexicana de la Lengua [Mexican Academy of Language]. (It is her inaugural address that we discuss below, “On Nepantla”). Frost became only the sixth woman elected to the Academy and the first to occupy the Academy’s fourteenth chair. An offshoot of the Royal Academy of Spain, founded in 1713, the Mexican Academy of Language was incorporated in 1875. Since that time, only the most prominent intellectuals have been installed as chairs, including Justo Sierra, Antonio Caso, Juan Rufio, Carlos Fuentes, Luis Villoro, Miguel Leon-Portilla, and Octavio Paz, to name the most recognizable.

Esteemed for her intellectual and philosophical acuity, Frost was a voracious reader (according to her advisor, José Gaos, she read at least fifty books in the first semester of her master’s program in 1952, in five languages, and all on the nature and the philosophy of culture), a profound thinker, and unequaled in her ability to “penetrate the cultural heritage of a people to such a degree that [she] came to know its origins, its influences, its evolution, its literary, architeconic, musical, religious, academic manifestations.” Frost spoke many languages and came to translate some of the most important texts in twentieth-century philosophy, including Nicolai Hartmann’s Aesthetics, Heidegger’s Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, Michel Foucault’s Words and Things, and twenty-one other works in European philosophy.

2. CATEGORIES OF MEXICAN CULTURE (1972)

“[T]he criterion for the establishment of a Latin American person’s humanity is her capacity for culture.”

– Frost, Categorías de la cultural Mexicana

Since its publication, Frost’s Categories of Mexican Culture has served as “a classic text for [students] in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters” at UNAM. The ambitious work—written as her master’s thesis in 1954—seeks to analyze
Western "categories that up till now have been applied to Mexican culture." Mexico's unique historical situation as a space of encounters and convergences between radically different worlds (both pre-Colombian indigenous and European) make it so that its "culture" is hard to categorize. This difficulty gives rise to the temptation to homogenize or totalize the culture with rigid designations or concepts that do not clearly fit Mexican cultural reality. Western concepts such as "Hispanic," "creole," "hybrid," "imitative," etc. are deployed by a Westernized intellectual elite in an effort to bring that reality under familiar, and otherwise useful, terms. In her work, Frost considers these deployments, interrogating the cultural concepts as to their contribution to an adequate and accurate interpretation of Mexican cultural reality.

In a general sense, Categories offers a summary view of the philosophy of culture up to the mid-twentieth century. Frost reviews Oswald Spengler's "biological theory of culture," whereby cultures "are like plants, 'tied by life to the ground from which they spring'"; Max Scheler's "sociology of knowledge," whereby culture is a "constant process of renovation and innovation" that tends toward "making us all human"; Ernst Cassirer's "Neo-Kantian," "symbolic" theory of culture, whereby culture is "a result of symbolic activity"; and, finally, José Ortega y Gasset's broad and multifaceted circumstantialist philosophy of culture, whereby culture is thought as an accomplishment of vital reason, vital history, and the work of the biological subject on his/her circumstances and always for the sake of human progress.

Frost finds that these philosophies of culture have one thing in common, namely, they assume that cultural identity is constant in some specific sense; or, that cultural identity easily gives itself to these concepts. Mexican culture challenges the assumption because its cultural profile is not clear-cut; as a culture, the profile of Mexican culture is sedimented, one culture sitting atop another, layering itself through the years, making it difficult for the cultural critic to identify a precise cultural essence. Nonetheless, in a move that Western sensibility would call uncontroversial, the most reasonable assumption about Mexican culture is that it is a dependent culture or a "culture of imitation"—reasonable, that is, when the premise is that a culture will imitate the culture on which it depends (Europe in this sense). In this case, the category of "imitation" fails to capture the complexity of Mexican historical reality.

The concept of a "creole culture" most closely approximates this "new historical reality" which is Mexican culture. However, the concept of "creole," referring to a mixture and hybridity, is, ultimately, demeaning of Western culture. According to Samuel Ramos, creole culture "conserves the European feel, but modifies it—or better yet, impoverishes," since it "has nourished itself from other cultures." As Frost explains, the creole was the son of the metropolitans—Spanish or French—that were born in the colonies. . . . [However] in giving them this designation, it meant that by being born in the colony the individual's race was modified and that result was a certain degeneration, a certain impoverishment . . . [Creoles] were inept, defeated, and not very rational, in sum, inferior.

In seeking to capture the nature of Mexican culture, i.e., to see it in its historical richness, Frost notices that thinkers have been stumped by a pernicious philosophical bias for purity and essence, a prejudice that will necessarily lead to understanding Mexican culture as "inferior." She thus wants to move away views resembling Ramos's negative appraisal and simply understand what it is about "creole" culture that makes it distinctive. What she finds is that a culture which is creole has gone through a process of "transculturation," whereby the key aspect of the culture is not the original, "found," culture, but the people that come into it, changing it to fit their needs. In this process, the original culture is subjected to violence and erasure for the sake of transforming it into a culture that colonizers will find familiar, or at least, fitting. A creole culture is thus a mix or hybrid culture where an essential element of the original culture remains silent, in the background, as what was deposited or transfigured by the culture that imposes itself on it or over it. There is nothing essentially negative about "creole" culture—the negative comes from the philosophical bias underlying it.

The other major designation that has been applied specifically to Mexican culture is that of "mestizo culture." The term "mestizo" comes from the word "mixed, what results from a mixing . . . with that which is impure." The person who is a mestizo (or mestiza) is the product of an "exogenic union," but one that is particularly "between a white person and a person of color . . . an inferior race." Indigenous peoples were people of color who belonged (in the eyes of the Europeans) to an inferior race, hence in mixing with Europeans, their offspring are mestizo/as. "Correspondingly, we could give the name [mestizo] to a culture that is a product of a mixing between a superior culture (the European) and an inferior culture (aboriginal)." In Mexico, mestizos are the norm. However, the idea that Mexican culture itself is a mestizo culture does not easily follow from the mestizaje of the people. The culture itself must reveal this mix—it must reveal both the subordinating and the subordinate culture that makes it mestizo. For centuries, mestizos believed that all cultural remnants of Indigenous culture had been destroyed, thus linking their mestizaje to the destruction of the Indigenous by the Spanish. However, the Indigenous culture, rather than being destroyed, persevered with the Indigenous people themselves. Their strategy for survival was one of pretending to be invisible: "The Indian . . . decided 'to obey, but not to comply.'" That is, Indigenous people merely feigned assimilation, all the while preserving their culture behind their apparent obedience. The mix of cultures necessarily followed the apparent assimilation; however, soon the dominant culture began to take on aspects of the culture it sought to dominate due to the latter's ability to adapt and persevere.

The ability of Indigenous cultures to survive despite their subjugation reveals their strength and, also, the weakness of Spanish culture, which was itself forced to adapt to the
particularities of its conquest. In this sense, Spanish culture proves its inferiority to the ideal of a conquering culture. The mixing that results is thus one between a culture thought to be inferior and another actually inferior.

The resulting mestizo culture thus preserves elements of both cultures in its final profile. This means, however, that mestizo culture “implies a certain impurity, a certain degeneration . . . in sum, it implies an incomplete and contradictory being.” According to Frost, what happens is that both the Spanish and the Indigenous elements are silenced in the mix, revealing a new entity, a mestizo “born of the consciousness of the negative, which is the Indigenous, and the degraded, secondariness of the Spanish in relation to the European in general.”

Ultimately, the difference between “creole” and “mestizo” culture rests on the intensity of the Indigenous presence in the culture. That is, the difference rests in the degree of visibility of the negative in the resulting culture. In creole culture, the negative other is muted, silenced, and invisible in relation to that which is presumed as positive (the Spanish or European), which is affirmed and highlighted; in mestizo culture, the Indigenous other is absorbed by the Spanish, but since they are both either negative or degraded, their synthesized negation constitutes a new element, a new entity, which is neither one nor the other, but both simultaneously.

Ultimately, Frost recognizes that either concept, creole or mestizo, cannot fully capture the historical nuances of Mexican culture itself. She thus seeks a more fluid, dynamic taxonomy. Looking at the four “basic sectors of culture”—i.e., politics, as seen through the lens of post-revolutionary Mexico; religion, as seen through the lens of the anti-Christian moment of 1928; literature, as seen through the lens of the novel and the music of the Revolution; and, finally, the plastic arts, as seen through the muralist movement—she finds a uniquely distinct Mexican culture as emerging in the twentieth century, which is the century wherein, according to Frost and her generation, “Mexicans discovered Mexico.” Frost’s Mexico, however, overdetermines and overwhets the concepts “creole” or “mestizo,” demanding a new conceptualization.

Thus, we have Mexican culture as a dynamic culture—neither Indigenous nor European, but creole and mestizo. This mixture of mixtures eliminates all purity. As creole, it contributes “the Indigenous element that has been reduced to something subconscious.” or silent, and as mestizo, it adds the sense of a “persistence of an Indigenous tradition, in spite of all modifications.”

But even after their diffusion into a new synthetic relation, these two assignations, however, are totalizing in that they delimit the field. We end up with the following: “Culture is, then, the attitude before the challenge of the circumstance, but, since the circumstance is variable and human life has the ontological privilege to relocate, it is not possible to maintain that there exists an absolute culture, but that many have existed and many do exist.” In her final address, she steps away from these objectifying concepts and decides on nepantla as the appropriate category.

3. “ON NEPANTLA”
Frost’s inaugural address for the Fourteenth Chair of the Academy of the Mexican Language lends a panoramic view of Frost’s philosophical agenda. Given less than one year before her death (November 11, 2004), “On Nepantla” proposes the idea—one grounded on history and historical texts—that not one single conception of culture can capture the complex and historically nuanced constitution of Mexican cultural life. She suggests, rather, that Mexican culture is “nepantla”—it is a nepantla culture.

Before getting to that, however, Frost points out an “unease prevalent amongst intellectuals in regards the state of Mexican culture; an unease, or anxiety ("inquietud"), that begins with the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century. Philosophers who sought to figure out Mexican culture asked about its nature and definition. In line with contemporary cultural theory, the standard view of Mexican culture sought to align it with more general cultural concepts such as “Latin American,” “Iberian,” and “Hispanic,” but could not fully make Mexican culture fit the experiences that these other concepts sought to capture. Their conclusion, echoing the prominent view of Samuel Ramos, was that Mexican culture was a "culture of imitation," a verdict that to Frost "leaves this [Mexican] portion of humanity in pretty bad standing." Opposed to this standard view, Frost suggests that while Mexican culture cannot be equated with Latin American, Hispanic, or Iberian culture, it is certainly not a culture of imitation, and the struggle to grasp exactly what it is simply means that it is "something quite distinct." The problem with those early evaluations of Mexican culture was, ultimately, that they accepted the Western philosophical perspective as the authoritative perspective, as the perspective that lent validity to all philosophical pronouncements; they sought an objective ground of culture and an objective concept to grasp it, and believed that Western philosophy could supply that.

However, examining the mid-sixteenth-century chronicles written by Franciscan missionaries, who admittedly set out to produce an "objective" history of the Conquest, the colony, and their own missionary efforts, Frost concludes that the desired objectivity never stood a chance in Mexico—the Mexican experience itself made objectivity impossible. In “all of [the sixteenth-century chronicles],” Frost observes, a “characteristic passion” accompanied every account. It was as if life in Mexico could not be recounted by the evangelizers without, on the one hand, “shameless self-promotion,” and on the other, a felt need to demean those to whom they ministered, to “denigrate their adversaries [the Indigenous peoples].” However, in adopting this subjective approach, Franciscan chroniclers denied history its objectivity; the chronicles of the colonization, that is, are one-dimensional and one-sided. This means, for Frost, that what the chronicles reveal is, in fact, a more accurate representation of what Mexico meant for the conquerors—that is, these subjective chronicles constituted the first phenomenological accounts of the Mexican experience ever put on paper. The Franciscans were able to shun objectivity, moreover, because no one in Europe could verify what they pronounced as true or real. This allowed the chroniclers to submerge themselves in their experience in an intimate and biased way; however,
in this way, Frost says, the conquerors were “conquered by their conquest.”

What does it mean to say that the writers of the “last great theory of the West,” as Frost describes the narrative of colonization and world-building created by New World historiography, were conquered by their conquest? Simply, it means that they began to lose themselves in their experience. And in this “losing of oneself” there emerges a crisis of identity, a loss of belonging, a loss of memory, and a loss of attachment to an old way of being. The Spanish began to experience a similar transition to what was being experienced by the Indigenous peoples—a transition to an unknown and uncertain cultural future. By the time the Spanish friars and soldiers realized what was happening to their sense of identity, the process of nepantla had begun.

Nepantla is not unfamiliar to students of twentieth-century Latina feminism. Gloria Anzaldúa famously makes it a centerpiece of her own critical theory. She writes:

[N]epantla, a psychological, liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future. Nepantla is the space in-between, the locus and sign of transition. In nepantla we realize that realities clash, authority figures of various groups demand contradictory commitments, and we and others have failed living up to idealized goals. . . . In nepantla we hang out between shifts, trying to make rational sense of this crisis, seeking solace, support, appeasement, or some kind of intimate connection . . . we fall into chaos, fear of the unknown, and are forced to take up the task of self-definition.28

However, the appearance of the term “napantla” in the historiographical record is much older than Anzaldúa’s deployment. In the Chronicles, it goes back to the sixteenth century, in the writings of the Dominican Friar Diego Durán. Frost recounts the familiar anecdote taken from Hernán Cortés’ History of the Indies of New Spain (1581). Durán records an exchange with an Indigenous man who, after being rebuked for what Durán thought was a frivolous waste of his hard-earned money, reassures the Friar by telling him that they (the Indigenous people) cannot think or behave as he does because they are not yet bound to Durán’s social and cultural norms or individualistic economic imperatives, nor are they any longer bound to their ancient customs, which are, at that time, going through an aggressive process of erasure. Indigenous life, Durán is told abruptly, is in a state of transition (from the old to the new), in transit toward an unknown “yet,” suspended “in the middle” of a paradigm shift, moving always farther and farther from familiar ground. “Father,” the Indigenous man says, “don’t be alarmed, we are still nepantla [todavía estamos nepantla].”29

To be nepantla, Frost tells us, echoing Durán, is to be “in the middle of the road . . . not fully Christian nor fully idolaters. Without fully belonging to either world.” While Durán was angered by the Indigenous man’s response, calling it an “abominable excuse” to hold on to pagan traditions, Frost recognizes the emancipatory tone of the proclamation, one that announced a silent victory of the Indigenous people over the Spanish “fathers”: “the Indigenous man knew that he was better than Durán, who did not even know that the Spanish were also nepantla.” An interesting historical example of how the Spanish became nepantla is tied to food. On arrival, the Spanish refused to eat Indigenous foods, but as time wore on, they grew accustomed to it, so long as they could use European spices to flavor the local dishes; eventually, neither Indigenous nor Spanish foods were consumed on their own, and the combination was not a mix or a hybrid food (this would be “mestizaje”), but a food in constant process, in perpetual transition to becoming something else entirely, a new dish.

According to Frost, this points to the origins of Mexican culture’s self-consciousness as neither Indigenous (since that had been supplanted) nor Spanish (since this had done the supplanting), but as something other. This self-consciousness instigates the move to find, in the vernacular of Western thinking, the concept that would define its culture. Here we see the origins of referring to Mexican culture as either “mestizo” and “criollo.” However, these rigid concepts try to capture what is non-rigid, what is moving, in transit, always “in the middle”—an impossible task! Frost asks, “Could we not apply nepantla to culture itself?”

A nepantla culture is thus a culture that is neither here nor there, neither this nor that, but always in transition, always fluid and dynamic, uncommitted to one deterministic way of life over another or others. In contemporary culture, Mexican American, Asian American, or Philpino American cultures are all nepantla cultures. For example, Mexican American culture is conscious of itself as transitional, as always in the process of becoming “American” while never quite getting there; it is suspended in between a place of origin (Mexico) and a promised ideal (the ideal of the American way of life); and it knows itself as always moving farther and farther away from that origin (linguistically, in the practice of cultural customs, in the naming of their children, and so on). According to Frost, nepantla is perfectly suited to capture not only the individual who lacks a firm ontological ground, but a culture that can no longer affirm a definite identity. While the Indigenous man who frustrates Durán with his spry remark may seem as though he expects to, one day, eventually, be fully what Durán wants him to be (he says, “toddaviamos,“ which means that we are still being, signifying that perhaps one day they will no longer be), Frost tells us that nepantla should be understood to refer, not to mestizaje, but to a “futureless hybridity”—a mestizaje that is always in the process of becoming and has no end goal or purpose. Driving her point home, Frost tells us:

The colony was inhabited by Indians that no longer thought themselves as such and Spaniards who slowly ceased being so. Both different than their parents and, at the same time, creators of a new way of living that in the last instance is what we call culture.

In the end, it is Frost’s remarkable way of appealing to historical texts that lends her philosophical pronouncements
weight and significance. Nepantla is not only an abstract concept useful for the analysis of Mexican culture after the late sixteenth century, but a living concept that we find in the movement of culture itself, in its identity, one traced back to the historical encounter between the West and its Other. Its grounding in historical fact lends it the sort of validity we require in order to transpose the concept to our own time, and apply it to real life, flesh and bone, peoples and cultures of the twenty-first century.

4. A NOTE ON FROST’S PLACE IN MEXICAN PHILOSOPHY

When North American philosophers speak of twentieth-century Latin American Philosophy one immediately notices an obvious absence in the historiographical account: women philosophers. While those of us who teach Latin American philosophy, who write about it, and research it, are now well-equipped to pontificate at length on the philosophical contributions of Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos, Augusto Salazar Bondy, José Carlos Mariátegui, Samuel Ramos, Luis Villoro, Leopoldo Zea, and so on, we fail miserably to speak about the contributions of women to this field. Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz is a notable exception, but then we ask her to represent all Latin American women. We place blame for our failure on the lack of translations and a lack of secondary sources that would fill the void in our histories. Perhaps this is a factually adequate excuse as to why our accounts are incomplete. The real reason, however, is that, in spite of our anti-colonial tendencies, our preconception of what philosophy is continues to cloud our judgment and blinds us to those philosophical women that have been there all along—even those who did not write “philosophy” as we understand it, as our Eurocentric concept of philosophy allows. This is the case with Elsa Frost. She is thought of as a historian, although her degrees and teaching are in philosophy. A Google search on Mexican philosophy completely misses her. One obvious reason for this could be her emphasis on history; however, it is this historical starting point which distinguishes her from her male counterparts, which makes her conclusions even more illuminating because they are embedded in a true, and empirical, historical understanding.

Women are, for the most part, ignored in most standard accounts of influential twentieth-century Mexican philosophers. Frost is only one of two women included in Antonio Ibargüengoitia’s Suma Filosófica Mexicana, which is the only account, in fact, that mentions her (along with Juliana González Valenzuela).20 What Ibargüengoitia’s inclusion makes clear, however, is that Frost’s place in twentieth-century Mexican philosophy should not be overlooked: she belongs to a lineage of great Mexican thinkers that sought to highlight the value and significance of Mexican culture on a global level. In general, her contributions to philosophy should help us better understand the heterogeneity and diversity of our modern world.

5. FURTHER READING

With Categorías, Frost’s other works include Educación e ilustración en Europa (SEP, 1986); El arte de la traición o los problemas de la traducción (UNAM, 1992); Franciscanos y mundo religioso en Mexico (UNAM, 1993); Este nuevo orbe (UNAM, 1996); Testimonios del exilio, (Jus, 2000); La historia de dios en las Indias (Tusquets, 2002). In these works, Frost lends clarity and analysis to Mexican culture, philosophy, Church history, and the process of evangelization in the New World. She also treats of several historical personalities with the same critical profundity that she treats philosophical themes, including Bartolomé de las Casas and Alonso de la Veracruz.

NOTES

1. A more comprehensive discussion of her various interests in found in Patricia Escandon (ed.), De la Iglesia indiana, homenaje a Elsa Cecilia Frost (Mexico: UNAM, 2006).
9. Ibid., 17–19.
10. Ibid., 19–22.
12. Ibid., 96.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 99.
17. Ibid., 121.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 122.
21. Ibid., 126.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 7.
24. Ibid., 196.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 29.
27. All references are to the inaugural Address, “Acera de Nepantla,” published online, August 27, 2018, http://www.academia.org.mx/noticias/item/acera-de-nepantla-por-elsa-cecilia-frost.
Latinx Identity in the United States: A Pragmatist Inquiry

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In this paper I will investigate and explicate demographic names attributed by different philosophers to the community that is from Latin America and now lives in the United States: For “Hispanic,” I will turn to the watershed work in Latinx philosophy, Jorge J. E. Gracia’s Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective;1 Linda Martín Alcoff foils Gracia with a preference for using the word “Latino/a” in her work “Latino vs. Hispanic: The Politics of Ethnic Names;”2 and for “Latinx” I will look at the work of Christine Garcia, “In Defense of Latinx.”3 It will come as no surprise, given the diction I have and will implement, that I believe that “Latinx” is the best name candidate for our demographic given our current normative commitments. I will rely on the analytic pragmatist philosopher Robert Brandom’s philosophy of language found in his succinct and erudite work, “Action, Norms, and Practical Reasoning” in Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism,4 where he argues that our language indicates our normative commitments in discursive practices.

The telos of my argument is to give resources to the action of self-recognition through the process of naming. The prima facie value of naming may seem inconsequential. However, I see the action of naming more akin to Adam’s task in the Book of Genesis.5 Naming something well is a tall order. It requires us to be creative in initiating a new catalyst for connective concepts, to honor the shoulders of the communion of saints on which we stand, to respect the contingency of our tragicomic state of affairs, to have the courage to aptly represent those who have been marginalized, and by divine grace, to give a name that can stand the test of time. Or, to put it in a more philosophical way, Wittgenstein writes in the Philosophical Investigations,

_A main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have an overview of the use of our words. Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in “seeing connections.” Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate links. The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters._6

The purpose of this essay is to find the newly invented conceptual intermediate links that help build bridges and insights into the beauty of the created world around us when our past grammar and language fails to proclaim and embrace its grandeur. It begins by taking language and its implementation seriously.

Brandom’s position in “Action, Norms, and Practical Reasoning” (ANPR) follows the inherited distinction that Kant makes between sentience and sapience—the thing that distinguishes people from other animals.

> What distinguishes judgment and action from the responses of merely natural creatures is neither their relation to some special stuff nor their peculiar transparency, but rather that they [i.e. judgment and action] are what we are in a distinctive way responsible for. They express commitments of ours: commitments that we are answerable for in the sense that our entitlement to them is always potentially at issue; commitments that are rational in the sense that vindicating the corresponding entitlements is a matter of offering reasons for them.7

Brandom shows that linguistic practices are inherently normative. Using concepts is a social practice for which we are held responsible. We are held responsible by a particular community. “The overall idea is that the rationality that qualifies us as sapients (and not merely sentient) can be identified with being a player in the social, implicitly normative game of offering and assessing, producing and consuming, reasons.”8 “We are those who inhabit “the space of reasons,” and in that space we express (make explicit) what was implicit in our practice and hold one another accountable to the inferences assumed therein. It is these sorts of obligations that bind us to one another. Such are the obligations of being rational—they free us to be human and social.

Thus, any kind of reason giving is fundamentally social. So, reference is not rooted in reference; to the contrary, reference is one kind of inferential game we can play, and ultimately what counts as a good inference is bound up with a community of know-how, a community of practice. One cannot just get away with inventing rules of inference. Brandom introduces material inference, over and against the sort of “formal” rules of inference that we normally associate with analytic logical analysis. Formal rules of inference are associated with what we usually call validity. Reasoning and inference are described as valid when the form of the inference conforms to what are taken to be universal rules of logic abstracted from any particular content. This line of reasoning he ascribes to orthodox Humeans and the influential philosopher Donald Davidson.9 “We need not treat all correct inferences as correct in virtue of their form, supplying implicit or suppressed premises involving logical vocabulary as needed.”10

Material inferences are rules of inference that are bound up with the specific matter at hand. His examples of the material inferences that can be drawn from statements related to Pittsburgh and rain prove his point: “Pittsburgh is to the west of Philadelphia” to “Philadelphia is to the east of Pittsburgh,” and “It is raining” to “The streets are wet.”11 It is the contents of the concepts “west” and “east” that make the first a good inference, and the contents of the concepts raining and wetness, as well as the temporal concepts, that make the second appropriate. “Endorsing these inferences is part of grasping or mastering those concepts, quite apart from any specifically logical competence.”12
What counts as a good material inference cannot be separated from familiarity with material realities, like where Pittsburgh is and where Philadelphia is. The truth of such inferences is not the sort that can be abstractly and formally reduced to Ps and Qs in some universal syllogism. The Pittsburgh and Philadelphia case highlights how material inferences are dependent on the contingency of historical entities and a concrete know-how regarding the matters at hand. The truth of such inferences is dependent upon the contingent, historical settlement of both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Brandom’s pragmatic semantics follows the pragmatist heritage, which states that the meaning of a concept is determined by its use. Concepts are applied to cases and connected to other concepts in inferential patterns that are licensed or rejected by other concept users. The way that concepts and inferences become meaningful is through the ongoing social practices of concept application, inference, and discursive accountability.

Brandom’s account of material inference can be a helpful supplement in understanding how group identity can function. What counts as a good inference is bound up with the matter that is under discussion. The evaluation of whether to affirm one particular identity over the other is not a matter that can be settled by propositional logic. A good material inference is inextricably bound to the matter of the community of practice. The community’s social practices formulate the fruit of the community. It is the practice of the community that “makes explicit” the norms that were previously unsaid. Names for communities are discursive doxastic commitments, and it’s the community of practice that discerns what counts as a faithful name and practice.

Brandom is helpful in getting the social dimension of normative discourse right, even though he has little to say about power differentials and domination. What are the conditions in which people can have access to participate in normative discourse? Whose voice is being heard and which voices are left out of the discussion? What are the contingent historical and political factors that subjugate one community and exalt the other? Not all communities who participate in discursive practices have the same amount of power in normative deliberation. So what can be done? I recommend that we speak for ourselves following the Latinx philosopher José Medina:

[The abandoned] are taking up the burden of developing a view from elsewhere. Speaking from elsewhere can be negatively characterized as speaking from a not-yet recognized discursive context and with a not-yet recognizable voice. But it implicitly involves a struggle for recognition; and it can be positively characterized as contributing to the creation of new discursive contexts and opening up spaces for new voices that have not been heard yet. 14

The question remains: What words will we use when we speak?

Jorge J. E. Gracia has been a pioneer in the philosophical discussion of the philosophical foundations of identity and is a central figure within the controversies around race, ethnicity, and Hispanic/Latino identity. 15 Gracia’s first objective in Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective is to argue that Hispanic/Latino identity is not a set of commonly held properties. Gracia believes that all essentialist positions are deeply flawed because there does not exist a property that is contained and shared by all Hispanic/Latinos at all present and past times. 16 He develops his critique of essentialism in light of the discussion of the appropriateness of the words “Hispanic” and “Latino” as names for ethnicity. Gracia analyzes an amalgam of statistical, historical, philosophical, and political arguments against any justification for use of the labels “Hispanic” and “Latino” that appeals to common properties. The upshot of his investigation is that the identity of this group is heterogenous and dynamic. This is foundational to Garcia’s work—if there is going to be a Hispanic/Latino identity, it must begin with a non-essentialist conception of ethnic identity.

The core of Gracia’s view is that Hispanic identity should be understood historically, that is, as the identity of a historical family formed by “a unique web of changing historical relations.” 17 His view can be positioned in terms of a familial-historical position: The unity of Hispanics is not a unity of common properties, but a unity of common community, “a historical unity founded on relations.” 18 It begins with a series of the complex historical events that ties “our Hispanic family” at the knot of “the encounter” between the Iberian peninsula and the Americas in 1492. “Our family first came into being precisely because of the events which the encounter unleashed.” 19 Gracia argues that the only word that pays homage to this encounter is the word “Hispanic.” It is the only name that encapsulates our historical family because it is the only category that can unite the Iberians and Americans who have come to share an identity as a result of this historical collision.

Gracia’s familial-historical position allows for identity to have the ability to account for diversity and change as axiomatic aspects of Hispanic identity. His view depicts Hispanic identity as something fluid that is ever changing and cannot be boxed into a static location. Gracia’s depiction of Hispanic identity accents the importance of historical contingencies that have contributed to the emergence of our Hispanic identity, and it emphasizes that the future of our Hispanic family is a task for which we are responsible in its future formation. Gracia concludes, “The future is always open and can be different. We are not trapped in our identity.” 20

Gracia’s familial-historical position also underscores the non-homogeneous character of Hispanic identity. Hispanics only share “family resemblances” and their identity “is bound up with difference.” 21 His examination of ethnic people groups as historical families demonstrates that the homogeneity of a group identity is a mythology, for families are heterogeneous wholes composed of individual elements. Gracia states, “They include contradictory elements and involve mixing. Indeed, contradiction and mixing seem to be of the essence, for a living unity is impossible without contradiction and heterogeneity.” 22 This is the Hispanic family—a community that has been forged with divergent cultural characteristics from art, music,
The philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff challenges Gracia’s conception of “Hispanic” in “Latino vs. Hispanic: The Politics of Ethnic Names.” Her argument begins by claiming that the choice of ethnic names is in itself a political action, although she qualifies her position by amending, “Latinx” may not be the final destination.

Alcoff finds a middle way between a strict political constructionist view of ethnic categories (all naming is merely political moves in conflict due to power differentials) and one that allows for some non-political considerations and applies it to the use of ethnic names.

The process of choosing a name cannot be reductively political or opportunistic, as if these concerns trump any considerations of descriptive adequacy, because the political effects that a name has depends heavily on its capacity for descriptive adequacy, its ability to gel lived experience, to sound right, to make sense of things. . . . There is always more than one story that can be given that gels to some extent with the diversity of lived experience. . . . This underdetermination both calls for a political solution and makes a political solution possible in the sense that it makes a space to interject political considerations in the discussion, as one consideration whose importance will vary depending on the strength of other factors.

Alcoff’s argument has two parts. She first presents the advantages of implementing the term “Latino,” and then indicates the disadvantages of the implementation of the term “Hispanic.” Alcoff states,

The term Latino signifies and is itself marked by that moment of crystallization [i.e. 1898] in the colonial relation between, not Spain and Latin America, but the USA and Latin America . . . this historical genealogy of the term brings to the fore the idea that present-day Latinos are those peoples who have been constituted largely in and through a colonialism that has not yet left us.

There should be a preferential use for the term “Latino” rather than “Hispanic,” because the Latino has an implicit commitment in making current colonialism explicit, while “Hispanic” does not have such a commitment to present-day colonialism. This colonialism contrasts one group of people, Latinos, with another group of people, Anglo-Saxons, and by implication Latin America and the United States.

In the second part of the argument, Alcoff argues specifically against the use of the term “Hispanic.” Alcoff says that in 1965 the new immigration law in the United States ended the previous quotas on immigration from South and Central America and the Caribbean, bringing millions of people and changing forever the cultural and political face of the United States. This opens the way for the later introduction of “Hispanics” by the United States Census bureaucracy in 1970 to encompass peoples from different countries from Latin America residing in the United States. She claims that the term “Hispanic” is a cultural, rather than a national, term, and it is one that links those named by it to Spain. This is crucial for Alcoff because as a consequence of using the term “Hispanic,” this group of people have been de-nationalized, de-linked to the multinational region of the world that represents their group interests and history, in favor of a term that places the emphasis on culture and language. “Hispanic” binds the people to a past and impotent colonialism of the collision and domination between the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas of the fifteenth century and not to the urgent and blatant colonialism that is currently present in the relationship between the United States and Latin America.

Latinx has been around since 2004 but it has not caught the attention of the Latinx intelligentsia until recently. One of the best arguments for the implementation of the term Latinx is found in Christine Garcia’s “In Defense of Latinx.” For Garcia, “Latinx” is a “term meant to be used by gender fluid and gender nonconforming people, LGBT persons, cisgender men and women, and those taking a political stance that ethnicity and gender exist on a spectrum and are not dichotomous.” It goes beyond the bounds of a gender binary both in the conception of male and female but also in the Spanish’s use of the feminine and masculine: there is no need to struggle between, “a,” “o,” “a/o,” “o/a,” or even “@.” The “x” opens the imagination to conceive of an intersectional reality where people who do not fit into the false dichotomy of binary gender categories and are of Latin American descent can embrace a name like Latinx. It is a name that recognizes and embraces more members into a welcoming family. Garcia also suggests that the “x” can be in defiance of the romantic Euro-Hispanic roots and embracing more Afro-indigenous languages, which more readily implement the use of “x” in their language.

Whatever the case may be, I take her conclusion to heart: “Whether Latinx is a temporary buzzword, as some detractors claim, or the springboard for further acts of linguistic decolonization, the term is proof positive that language is alive, evolving, and is a tool and a reflection of our humanness.” “Latinx” may not be the final destination as a term to define a group of people who have a shared history, have been and still are colonized, and affirm the LGBT community, but it is a term taking the right steps towards the end of welcoming those whom we call family.

I recommend that we take our language seriously. Words not only communicate our explicit normative commitments, but also our implicit ones. “Latinx” is the best candidate that we have, given our current state of affairs and the normative commitments that our group holds in the United States. Our people from our community should know that they belong and that we are ready to accept them for who they are with open arms—just with our name. Let us embrace those who have been marginalized and implement the use of the term Latinx.
NOTES

1. This community would include those who crossed the US border and those whom the US border crossed.
6. “So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.” Genesis 2:19 (New Revised Standard Version).
8. Brandom, Articulating Reasons, 80.
9. Ibid., 81.
10. Ibid., 82–84.
11. Ibid., 84. (Emphasis added)
12. Ibid., 85.
13. Ibid., 52.
17. Ibid., 49.
18. Ibid., 50.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 190.
21. Ibid., 33.
22. Ibid., 50.
24. Ibid., 400.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 402.
27. Ibid., 403.
29. In the field of Biblical studies, see Efrain Agosto and Jacqueline Hidalgo, Latinxs, the Bible, and Migration (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); For history, see Paul Ortiz, An African and Latinx History of the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); in education, see Vasti Torres, Understanding the Latinx Experience: Developmental and Contextual Influences (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2019); for philosophy, see Robert Eli Sanchez Jr., ed., Latin American and Latinx Philosophy: A Collaborative Introduction (New York: Routledge Press, 2019); practical and systematic theology have yet to release an edited volume or monograph with Latinx in its title.
31. Ibid., 210.
32. Ibid., 211.
33. Ibid.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, proposals that aim to defend humanism, such as that of Jean-Paul Sartre in Existentialism Is a Humanism, emphasize the importance of the view that all human beings are not ends-in-themselves, but rather that they are constantly out of themselves and that it is through the constant transcendence (dépassement) and the projection of their selves beyond themselves that they can exist. Though this conception of humanism defended by Sartre is prima facia appealing, it is potentially problematic insofar as it can be interpreted, in virtue of the universalistic and egalitarian ambitions that accompany it, as inadvertently supporting and legitimizing a Western colonialist project in which Europeans aimed to project themselves over the world and shape it in accordance with their ambitions in a way that flattened differences and homogenized experiences. In light of this concern, the main goal of this paper is, parallel to the work that Kathryn T. Gines and Robert Bernasconi have done developing a critical reading of Sartre’s position on humanism (particularly, of Sartre’s engagement with Frantz Fanon’s views in “Black Orpheus”), to argue that we can find conceptual resources in the work of Mexican philosopher Emilio Uranga (1921–1988) to develop a form of humanism that partially transcends some of the problematic consequences of the universalizing and egalitarian ambitions of Sartre’s conception of humanism.

To make this argument, I offer in my paper a brief exposition and analysis of one of the most important works of Uranga, Análisis del Ser del Mexicano, which was strongly influenced by French existentialism, but also by Heidegger’s thought. I proceed in the following fashion. After presenting in Section Two of the paper a more detailed review of the conception of humanism as Sartre characterizes it in Existentialism Is a Humanism and highlighting some of the main problems and shortcomings that it exhibits in my view, I move on in Section Three of the paper to present and discuss Uranga’s proposal. In particular, I introduce first in this section the gist of his proposal, which involves offering an ontological analysis of Mexican being, or Mexicanness (lo mexicano), and pointing out that what distinguishes the ontology of Mexicanness from the ontology of Europeaness is that while Europeans view themselves as substances, Mexicans conceive of themselves as accidents. Therefore, since the being of Mexicans is accidental (and, in virtue of this, eminently contingent and fragile), Uranga then claims that this very state of affairs constitutes the basis of developing a new form of humanism to the extent that...
the realization and the embracing of this contingency and fragility leads Mexicans to adopt a certain “lucidity.” This “lucidity” of Mexicans vis-à-vis their condition is for Uranga the basis of a humanism since it is “the original model to open oneself to the human condition.” Thus, for Uranga, the state of being Mexican provides the groundwork for a new form of humanism insofar as Mexicans, because of their self-awareness of their accidental being, value each other and other human beings in virtue of their accidental and contingent characters. In Section Four, I argue that the proposal that Uranga presents concerning the development of a new form of humanism based on the notion of accident is valuable since it offers the conceptual resources needed to develop a type of humanism that is not underscored by the problems and shortcomings that afflict Sartre’s proposal. Finally, in Section Five, I offer a brief conclusion.

2. SARTRE’S HUMANISM IN EXISTENTIALISM IS A HUMANISM

Let me present briefly some of the central characteristics of Sartre’s humanism as it is presented in Existentialism Is a Humanism. After characterizing in the first part of the essay the notion of existentialism and highlighting the core features that are common to the main strands (in particular, the religious strand of Kirkegaard and Marcel and the atheist strand articulated by Heidegger and himself), Sartre proceeds in the second part of the essay (where he considers some potential objections to his view) to examine in what sense his existentialism constitutes a humanism. To do this, Sartre distinguishes two ways in which an existentialist view can be characterized as a humanism by differentiating two notions of humanism in the following passage:

Actually, the word “humanism” has two very different meanings. By “humanism” we might mean a theory that takes man as an end and as the supreme value. For example, in his story Around the World in 80 Hours Cocteau gives expression to this idea when one of his characters, flying over some mountains in an airplane, proclaims “Man is amazing!” (. . .) But there is another meaning to the word “humanism.” It is basically this: Man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized; and, on the other hand, it is in pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist. Since man is this transcendence (dépassement) and grasps objects only in relation to such transcendence, he is himself the core and focus of his transcendence.

After distinguishing these two conceptions of humanism, Sartre maintains that the existentialism that he adopts is a humanism in the second sense, and he takes such a humanism to be a good attitude since its adoption enables us to bear in mind that we are self-creating entities and that we can only fully realize our humanity by constantly striving to transcend or surpass ourselves:

This is humanism because we remind man that there is no legislator other than himself and that he must, in his abandoned state, make his own choices; and also because we show that it is not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself in the form of liberation, or of some special achievement, that man will realize himself as truly human.

Though this is prima facie a quite attractive conception of humanism, a thorough examination of Sartre’s words reveals some potential problems. Indeed, when we consider how the notion of “transcendence” might have been understood by Sartre’s European readers at the time, one possible interpretation of Sartre’s words is that the humanist drive to “transcend” is primarily or paradigmatically manifested in the Western colonial enterprise through which Europeans aimed to project themselves over the rest of the world in order to shape it in their image. Now, though Sartre would probably have rejected this interpretation of his words insofar as he sympathized deeply with anti-colonial movements and advocated on their behalf, it is important to notice that some passages in Sartre’s work involve some troublesome undertones:

And, as diverse as man’s projects may be, at least none of them seem wholly foreign to me, since each presents itself as an attempt to surpass such limitations, to postpone, deny or to come to terms with them. Consequently, every project, however individual, is of universal value. Every project—even one belonging to a Chinese, an Indian, or an African—can be understood by a European. To say it can be understood means that the European of 1945, though his situation is different, must deal with his own limitations in the same way, and so can reinvent within himself the project undertaken by the Chinese, of the Indian or the black African. There is universality in every project, inasmuch as any man is capable of understanding any human project.

This passage is problematic because, though Sartre claims that the humanism that he subscribes to is one in which “every project, however individual, is of universal value,” he also contends that “every project—even one belonging to a Chinese, an Indian or an African—can be understood by a European” and that “any man is capable of understanding any human project.” These claims are troubling in two respects. First, Sartre manifests here, in spite of his vigorous denunciation of anti-Black racism and white supremacy in other places, a trait common to many European thinkers, which is, in Charles W. Mills’s words, “the centering of the Euro and later Euro-American reference group as constitutive norm.” Indeed, as the passage suggests, some projects seem to be more remote or foreign than others vis-à-vis a particular standard, which is provided by Europeans of 1945. Second, the claim that “any man is capable of understanding any human project” is also unsettling because, given the prior context (which stresses the possibility that Europeans may reinvent themselves in the projects undertaken by others), it strongly suggests that Europeans can easily understand (and, thus, potentially take over and carry out) any other human project. This involves re-inscribing in the humanism that Sartre articulates a white epistemic normativity as a kind
of benchmark, which partially undermines the claim about the universal value of each human project. Considering this, it is then patent that the humanism advocated by Sartre is partially shaped by certain Eurocentric biases and assumptions. These biases and assumptions are also at work in Sartre’s examination of négritude in “Black Orpheus,” where he writes the following:

In fact, négritude appears as the minor moment of a dialectical progression; the theoretical and practical assertion of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of negritude, as an antithetic value, is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and these blacks who make use of it know this perfectly well; they know it aims at preparing the synthesis or realization of the human in raceless society. Thus, négritude is for destroying itself, it is a passage, and not an outcome, a means and not an ultimate end.  

Thus, in light of the fact that Sartre’s humanism is one which conceives certain anti-colonialist projects (such as the one advocated by négritude proponents such as Senghor) as “moments of negativity,” one can then appreciate that it exhibits a clear failure to understand the nature and the importance of the lived Black experience since Sartre advocates for its eventual elimination.  

Given the existence of these problems that are created by Sartre’s ignorance of the suffering of Black people (and of the practical knowledge derived from this suffering), one should then examine if other philosophical projects within the existentialist tradition are better positioned to articulate a more inclusive framework. In the next couple of sections, I turn to examine the humanism articulated by Emilio Uranga, and I argue that it provides, in some respects, a better alternative than the humanism of Sartre since it does not fall prey to the same objections.

3. URANGA’S HUMANISM IN ANÁLISIS DEL SER DEL MEXICANO

The best exposition of Uranga’s humanism is offered in his most important work, Análisis del Ser del Mexicano. In this work, Uranga’s main goal is to offer an ontological analysis of Mexican being (lo mexicano). For Uranga, this analysis should not be considered as a philosopher’s abstract intellectual exercise, but rather a key social task to accomplish to the extent that, as he stresses in the Introduction, it is aimed to ultimately transform the moral and social condition of Mexicans:

To clarify what is the mode of being of the Mexican is just a step—a necessary one—to operate subsequently a reform and a conversion. Rather than a sterile rigorous meditation about the being of the Mexican, what drives us to this type of studies is the project of operating moral, social and religious transformations on this being.  

For Uranga, the project of undertaking a moral and social transformation of the Mexican is justified by the fact that, in spite of the fact that Mexico achieved its independence in 1821 and it that underwent a civil war in the second decade of the twentieth century (i.e., the Mexican Revolution) that undid many of the colonial structures that had endured during the nineteenth century, the Mexican society of the late 1940s and early 1950s remained in various respects very dependent on foreign economic and cultural forces and internally torn apart by different competing aspirations. Thus, in order to undertake a viable project to transform Mexican society in order to address its problems and shortcomings, Uranga then proposed as a first step to analyze in detail Mexican being. And this analysis, for Uranga, had to be ontological rather than historical or sociological. The central reason to undertake this type of analysis is laid out by Uranga in the following passage:

The ontological analysis is, then, of a very particular kind. Its categories, or most general concepts, are the broadest possible designations of the kinds, types, or modes of being. It is only when we stick to these categories that the analysis is correct. If the analysis is not done in these terms, it takes the form of an image or a metaphor.

After justifying in the Introduction the need to perform an ontological analysis of the Mexican, Uranga then proceeds to put forth his proposal. To do this, he first reminds his readers that one of the crucial ontological categories discussed within the Western tradition is that of accident. In fact, to be more specific, Uranga maintains that the notion of accident has been traditionally studied in opposition or contrast with the notion of substance along the following lines: While the notion of substance has been understood as a primary or fundamental mode of being (i.e., as providing “the bedrock of reality”), the notion of accident has been understood as a mode of being that is dependent on substance (and, in light of this, as a mode of being that is secondary, fragile, or transitory). On this issue, Uranga writes this:

The accident is always projected, or projects itself from or towards the outside, and it is never exhausted in the present thing, but it constitutes itself in the horizon and the halo that surrounds things, in the out-of-focus of their presence. Pushing in this vein, the accident is primarily that which is leftover, the remainder, the excedent (super-esse). In another respect, the accident is that which is fragile and brittle, that which is equally rooted in the being and in the non-being.  

On the basis of this characterization of accident, Uranga moves on to argue that the notion of paramount importance to his project since “the accident, defined in accordance to these abovementioned notes, will help us to explain or account for the Mexican.” The reason that he gives to deploy the notion of accident as a key ontological category in the analysis of Mexican being is that, in virtue of the long history of colonization by Spaniards, Mexicans have not been traditionally seen as fully human, but rather as exhibiting humanity in a partial, incomplete, or accidental way. In virtue of this, since Spaniards traditionally considered themselves as fully and substantially human (in contrast to the original Amerindian inhabitants of Mexico
and to the different racially mixed groups that emerged during the colonial period), Uranga writes that the notion of accident is of central importance in his ontological analysis of Mexican being because the notion of “substance” is tied to an explicit attempt to devalue non-Europeans as less than human:

Every interpretation of ”man” as a substantial creature seems inhuman to us. In the origins of our history, we had to precisely endure a devaluing in virtue of our dissimilarity to the European “man.” In the same spirit, we return this qualification and disavow as “human” the construction of the European that grounds human dignity on some substance.16

Given the problematic undertones attached to the notion of substance, Uranga forcefully advocates using the notion of accident to develop an ontological analysis of Mexican being for two reasons. It not only reflects the historical conditions in which Mexicans emerged as a group, but it also mirrors core features of the human condition, which are our mortality and our contingency:

The being of man is perishable, mortal, doomed to die and to end. Being a man involves having an “obligation,” a “duty,” an ontological “imperative” to die or end. The same thing happens with the accidental being. In this case, we deal with a being that must turn himself into an accident, that must put himself in a radical situation where he does not know what to expect, marked by insecurity and unpreparedness.17

Uranga proceeds to use the notion of accident to offer an analysis of Mexican being given that the notion appears to be an appropriate tool for this task in light of the previously mentioned remarks. In particular, one of the uses that Uranga gives to it consists in articulating a different notion of humanism. Now, as we saw previously in Section Two, the humanism that Sartre develops is one that is grounded in the constant drive to transcend and that also has universalistic and egalitarian aspirations for all projects (although these are partially thwarted by the fact that Sartre seems to assume that certain projects are more transcendent than others or more foreign than others vis-à-vis a particular European standard). In stark contrast, the Mexican humanism that Uranga proposes is not grounded on the drive to be outside of oneself or transcend, but rather on the feelings brought about by the visceral realization that there are certain features (e.g., vulnerability and finitude) that are impossible to transcend:

The “feelings” of abandonment, needlessness, fragility, oscillation, and embarrassment among others, which are familiar to the Mexican as the fabric or “matter” of his being, offer a unique basis upon which humanism can be grounded. At the most extreme limit, the Mexican views himself as “accidental and anguished,” which entails that he opens himself to the human condition at its deepest level.18

In virtue of this, the humanism that Uranga proposes is one which is rooted in certain distinctive psychological features of the Mexican. These features make him, according to Uranga, open to the human condition precisely because the human condition is one which is crucially marked by mortality, finitude, and accidentality. In virtue of this, Mexican being provides a basis for a type of inclusive, compassionate humanism since it offers Mexicans a way to relate to and understand other human experiences in a way that connects with their fragility and anguish:

The Mexican understands other humans by transposing the meaning of his own life. The compassion of which he makes such a frequent use in all the expressions of his conduct . . . is the visible expression of this continuous operation through which he transfers the meaning of his own life to other things.19

Consequently, the humanism that Uranga proposes appears to be different from the one proposed by Sartre insofar as it involves, not an attempt to transcend or surpass by projecting oneself outside of oneself, but rather an attempt to humanize others by relating them to one’s condition of accidentality and anguish (zozobra). What I want to show in the next section is that, precisely because of these features, Uranga’s humanism is not subject to the same type of problems that arise in the case of Sartre’s.

4. SOME ADVANTAGES OF URANGA’S MEXICAN HUMANISM

As I mentioned above, I want now to briefly examine how Uranga’s proposal is able to escape some of the limitations or drawbacks that affect Sartre’s proposal. To do this, it is important to remember that the humanism that Sartre advocates for is one that is crucially shaped by egalitarian and universalistic aspirations in which “every project, however individual, is of universal value.” However, it is precisely because of this ambition that Sartre fails to realize that we are always situated, that our respective situatedness makes our projects incapable to be fully understood and carried out by others (and, conversely, that makes the projects of others unable to be fully understood and carried out by us) and that, consequently, the egalitarian and universalistic ambitions of his humanism threaten to flatten differences and homogenize experiences.

In contrast to Sartre, Uranga acknowledges that, even though “the openness to everything that is human, the mixing and tangling without fear or reservation seem to create between the Mexican and other men an unlimited communication wherein equality stands out as a supreme aspiration,” he also maintains that “despite this undeniable communicability, there is an insuperable limit.”20 Because of this barrier, our projects cannot be fully understood and carried out by others (and we cannot expect to fully understand and carry out the projects of others). Considering this, Uranga proposes a humanism that does not aspire to an ideal of universal equality in which any human being can understand any project, but to an ideal of “coupling” (emparejamiento), as he makes clear in the following passage:
Rather than a feeling of equality with respect to others, there is in us a feeling of “coupling” and in the nationalist one of “difference.” Not every humanism is built upon the structure that we have highlighted. Generally, one believes that humanism presupposes the affirmation of equality and that, without it, there is no possibility of humanism. But this is nothing but a prejudice.\(^{21}\)

After stressing this point, Uranga then maintains that it is possible to articulate a humanism that bypasses the egalitarian demand and substitutes it with a “coupling” that he describes in the following terms when he analyzes how Mexicans conceive the relation between life and death:

One usually thinks that the “difference” between life and death is the indispensable premise for every theory of life and death. But we have seen that this is not the case. The Mexican “couples” them highlighting their similarities until they reach “equality.” The same thing happens with humanism. The human is familiar to the Mexican because it follows him throughout life as the other pole with which it establishes a communication of meaning . . . a transference of meaning that allows him to explain his own life as human and, at the same time, the human as Mexican.\(^{22}\)

As this passage shows, Uranga’s humanism avoids the shortcomings of Sartre’s to the extent that it does not emphasize the equality of all projects (or even equality as a regulative ideal), but rather articulates an alternative based on the notion of “coupling,” which involves pairing or juxtaposing what seem to initially be entirely different phenomena (e.g., life and death) and highlighting progressively their resemblances and similarities through a process of transference of meaning until they become mixed or entangled while remaining distinct. In other terms, the humanism of Uranga is characterized by being rooted in a particular existential condition that is paradigmatically manifested in the Mexican, which he labels *neapntía*. Considering that, as Carlos Sánchez points out in his commentary of Uranga, “*Neapntía* refers to an ambivalent middle ground that is neither and both extremes”\(^ {23}\) and that “it rests in the conjunction that ties together the extremes as a logical glue,”\(^ {24}\) this mixing or entanglement of different phenomena is not equality for Uranga. Indeed, as Uranga stresses, the coupling always involves at the end of the day an insuperable barrier or difference, but it is precisely in virtue of this that it enables a transfer of meaning that makes possible connecting the experience of *zoózobra* (i.e., the Mexican particularity) to the universal (e.g., the human condition). And it also allows grasping the universal human condition (which is marked by accidentality and fragility) as reflecting a personal, Mexican experience of *zoózobra*.

5. CONCLUSION

Let me conclude. I have argued that Uranga’s conception of humanism is able to avoid some of the problems and shortcomings that Sartre’s exhibits. This is due to the fact that, though Sartre’s conception of humanism has egalitarian and universalist aspirations, it is partially shaped by certain Eurocentric biases. In contrast, insofar as the humanism defended by Uranga is rooted in “feelings” of abandonment, needlessness, and fragility (which, according to him, are constitutive of the Mexican), it allows Mexicans to open themselves to the human condition and to understand others as human while preserving a limit or difference that prevents Mexicans from being able to “equalize” or “substitute” themselves with them (and vice versa). In light of this, the notion of humanism proposed by Uranga appears to be better suited than Sartre’s to develop a more inclusive approach to all human projects that genuinely respects them and does not flatten or homogenize them as Sartre’s does in virtue of its universalistic and egalitarian aspirations. This raises a central question: Is Uranga’s humanism also better suited in the respects previously mentioned in contrast to the humanisms of other European figures such as Jaspers, Heidegger, and Beauvoir? I intend to examine this issue in future work.

NOTES

2. Kathryn T. Gines is now Kathryn Sophia Belle.
5. Various scholars such have pointed out that *Existentialism* is a *Humanism* is not the most consummate exposition of Sartre’s thought but rather a circumstantial piece that he wrote in a specific political context. In particular, see Edward Baring, “Humanist Pretensions: Catholics, Communists and Sartre’s Struggle for Existentialism in Postwar France,” *Modern Intellectual History*, no. 3 (2001): 581–609, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000247. In light of this, some readers might wonder why I focus on this book rather than on later works such as *Search for a Method* or *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The reason for this is that, while Sartre does indeed offer more developed discussions of humanism in these later works (in particular, a critical discussion of European humanism, which was built on the dehumanization of Amerindians, Africans and Asians), he does not offer an explicit critical assessment of *Existentialism* is a *Humanism* in these later works. Part of what I want to do here is to offer such an assessment using the conceptual tools developed by Uranga.
7. Ibid., 53.
8. Ibid., 42–43.

11. When Gines considers Sartre’s efforts to defend the complete eradication of race in the name of the egalitarian and universalistic ideals of his humanism, she worries about some potential serious drawbacks of Sartre’s proposal. See, in particular, Gines, “Fanon and Sartre 50 years later,” 67. “What would come of the ‘collective memory’ of black people in a society that erases race? This collective memory, a source of heritage and even resistance and empowerment, becomes endangered.”

12. On this issue, the analysis that Bernasconi offers of Sartre’s ignorance vis-à-vis Fanon is remarkable. See, in particular, Bernasconi, “On Needing not to Know,” 236–337. “If Sartre had not been white then he could not have forgotten how the black suffers in his or her body. A black person could not forget it. Sartre’s knowledge of this suffering is a memory of what he has been told, but the black person’s knowledge is like phronesis in this regard; phronesis, as Aristotle explains, is not learned nor can it be forgotten.”

13. Uranga, Análisis, 34: “Poner en claro cuál es el modo de ser del mexicano es tan solo una premisa—eso sí, necesaria—for operar a continuación una reforma y una conversión. Más que una lo larga tristeza asombrada sobre el ser del mexicano, lo que nos lleva a este tipo de estudios es el proyecto de operar transformaciones morales, sociales y religiosas con ese ser.” All translations of Uranga from the original Spanish text are mine.

14. Ibid., 34: “El análisis ontológico es, pues, de índole muy peculiar. Sus categorías, o conceptos más generales, son designaciones las más amplias de clases, tipos o modos de ser. Sólo cuando se habla ateniéndose a estas categorías el análisis es propio. Si no se hace en estos términos, todo toma el aspecto de metáfora o imagen.”

15. Ibid., 53: “El accidente está lanzado siempre, o se lanza siempre, desde o hacia un más allá, y nunca se agota en la cosa presente, sino más bien se constituye en el horizonte y halo que rodea a las cosas, en lo desafocado de su presencia. Extremando en esta dirección el accidente es lo que está de sobra, lo que está de más, el excedente (super-esse). Por otra de sus dimensiones, el accidente es lo que es frágil y quebradizo, lo que con igual originalidad es en el ser y no en él.”

16. Ibid., 45: “Toda interpretación del hombre como criatura sustancial nos parece inhuma. En los origenes de nuestra historia tuvimos que sufrir justamente una desvalorización por no asemejarnos al ‘hombre’ europeo. Con ese mismo de espíritu desvalorizábamos nuestra peculiaridad como ser, como el ‘ser de ser’, como no tener una construcción del europeo que finca en la sustancialidad a la ‘dignidad’ humana.”

17. Ibid., 45: “El ser del hombre es perecedero, mortal, está avocado a la muerte, al acabamiento. Ese ser se asume como ‘obligación’, ‘deber’, ‘imperativo’ ontológicos de morir o acabar. Lo mismo sucede con el ser del accidente. Se trata en este caso de un ser que tiene que accidentalizarse, que ponerse en la situación radical de un ‘no saber a que atenerse’, inseguridad e imprevisibilidad.”

18. Ibid., 60: “Los ‘sentimientos’ de abandono, gratuidad, fragilidad, oscilación, pena entre otros, que son familiares al mexicano como el tramado o ‘materia’ de su propio ser, ofrecen la única base en que asentar al humanismo. En su punto más extremo y radical, el mexicano se concibe ‘accidental y zozobrante’, lo que quiere decir que se abre a la condición humana en su estrato más profundo.”

19. Ibid., 60-61: “El mexicano comprende lo humano ajeno por transposición del sentido de su propia vida. La composición de que hace uso tan frecuente en todas las manifestaciones de su conducta...es la expresión visible de esta continua operación por la cual se está transfigurando el sentido de la propia vida al ajeno.”

20. Ibid., 62: “La apertura a todo lo humano, el mezclarse y revolverse sin temor y sin escrúpulo parecen crear entre el mexicano y los demás hombres una comunicación ilimitada en la que la igualdad luce como ideal supremo. Pero, a pesar de esta innegable comunicabilidad, hay un límite infranqueable.”

21. Ibid., 63: “Más bien, pues, que un sentimiento de igualdad frente a los demás hay en nosotros un sentido de ‘emparejamiento’ y en el nacionalista de ‘diferencia’. No todo humanismo se construye a partir de esa peculiar estructura que hemos puesto de relieve. Generalmente se cree que el humanismo supone la afirmación de la igualdad y que, sin ella, no hay posibilidad de humanismo. Pero esto no pasa de ser un prejuicio.”

22. Ibid., 63: “Lo mismo se piensa relativamente a la vida y la muerte que la ‘diferencia’ entre los dos fenómenos es la premisa de toda teoría sobre la vida y la muerte. Pero hemos visto que no es así. El mexicano la ‘emparejara’ extremando su semejanza hasta una ‘igualdad’. Lo mismo acontece con el humanismo. Lo humano le es familiar al mexicano porque va acompañándolo en su vida como el otro polo con que establece una comunicación de sentido...una transferencia de significado que le permite explicar su propia vida como y a la vez, lo humano como mexicano.”


24. Ibid.
stopped committing traffic errors. This, of course, is nothing compared to the hazardous life of farm workers, but it still may constitute an instance of socially undocumented identity.

Next, I want to call your attention to Reed-Sandoval's ability to see beyond the usual open borders debate. This approach has allowed her to open up new dimensions in immigration research. She proposes, for example, that in addition to race and gender, social class should also be taken as a component of the “visible identity” of migrants. As Reed-Sandoval says, “Bourdieu’s descriptive account of habitus/class embodiment demonstrates that class identity is, indeed, a ‘visible’ and ‘real’ social identity [. . .] Like racial and sex/gender identities, class is also embodied. It is the source and site of an interpretive horizon, affecting both how one sees and is seen” (99). I believe this is quite important because most discrimination against immigrants is done towards those that are perceived to be working class. As José Jorge Mendoza has pointed out, most of the same people that discriminate against poor immigrants would be very happy to have Jennifer Lopez or Selena Gomez as their neighbors. Class plays a role on what kind of migrant can cross borders without any harassment and live in the receiving countries without any great problem because they are not perceived as a threat to the way of life. Since Hispanic upper-class foreign citizens tend to be more light-skinned and bilingual, it is easier for them to be part of the melting pot in the category of people that will easily adopt the American way of life. In consequence, they are more likely to be accepted in the receiving community, regardless of their immigration status.

I move now to what I think is very perceptive of Reed-Sandoval: showing migrants not as passive or fainthearted social actors, but, on the contrary, as courageous and creative people able to navigate and resist the system. Elaborating on the day-to-day forms of resistance immigrants use to alleviate their immediate circumstances under the structural conditions that keep them oppressed, the author brings us close to the lives of migrants. Based on her ethnographic work, Reed-Sandoval documents the use of tandas as a way that migrants improve their living conditions by acquiring low-interest rate loans and building community bonds. She goes even closer—all the way to migrant bodies—in Chapter Four, with her discussion of Salma, a Mexican-national pregnant woman who legally crosses the border looking for prenatal care in El Paso, Texas. When asked the purpose of her visit to the United States, she lies and tells the immigration officer that she is going “to shop at Walmart” (24). It is important to highlight again that Salma crossed the border under a visa and that it is not illegal for pregnant women to receive prenatal care or for her son/daughter to be born in the US. Yet, she did not say so, because if the immigration officer were not a “good one,” he could have used any other excuse to prevent her from coming to El Paso for prenatal care. By giving the Walmart answer, Salma was able to receive prenatal care and give birth in El Paso.

Besides economic and obstetric oppression, another token of unfair living conditions are the derogative stereotypes that are used to portray immigrants. It seems to me that from the very beginning of the book, Reed-Sandoval shows that the fight for legality has been extensively studied, has not been successful, and, what’s more, had it been successful, it may not amount to an end to discrimination against Hispanics; for even if certain immigrants held lawful status, they still may be the recipients of unethical practices based on their physical appearance. As the author claims, “Of course, we are not reduced to the already-existing social meanings attached to the social identities we have been involuntarily ‘assigned,’ and we are free to (try to) reject these labels or redefine their significance” (71). Yet, as their bodies are trapped in a colonial structure, removing those negative stereotypes would require long and sustained efforts, such as the counter-stereotypical aim of Cheech Marin’s Chicano art collection.

Finally, I am wondering if the undocumented immigrant social identity is strong enough to group immigrants. I agree that from an outside perspective they are seen as one unit. I also agree “that to speak of social identity is often to speak in terms of self-description and very intimate, lived experience” (80). Yet, as symbolic interaction theory proposes, the identity of a person is inspired, but not completely determined, by the social interactions where a person intermingles. In Stryker’s words, the “transsituational concept of identity salience implies the at least partial independence of behavior including role-related choices, from demands of immediate situations of actions.” This is to say, when there is a conflict of commitment, the group that a person has more loyalty to is the one that is more likely to win a person’s attention. It is important to notice that commitments are dynamic; they may change according to personal circumstances such as moving to a different city, losing or acquiring a job, etc. When challenging circumstances appear, a person’s preferred identity will raise and reveal itself as the dominant identity.

I have the feeling that Reed-Sandoval’s answer would be that yes, social identity is strong enough to group them, for this identity is not chosen, but given. And she will be right. This is to say with certainty nobody would opt for a social identity that does not reflect their full potential, but, on the contrary, places them in a subordinate position. By this same rationality, a socially undocumented migrant would not choose this identity, for it brings discriminatory practices upon them. Yet, in a colonized world, such as the one we inhabit, poor, dark-skinned migrants will be placed in an unfavorable position by virtue of their physical appearance. They will be identified as undocumented, regardless of how they may perceive themselves.

In closing, by calling our attention to the bad practices that socially undocumented migrants suffer, but also to their forms of resistance, Reed-Sandoval opens the debate on migration to new and very needed dimensions, where legal status is necessary, but not sufficient, to reach immigration justice.

NOTES

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FROM THE EDITOR

Grayson Hunt
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

This year’s APA Newsletter on LGBTQ Issues in Philosophy arrives during the COVID-19 pandemic. While truly unusual to have been sheltering in place since March of this year, this is not the first (nor the second) pandemic the American Philosophical Association has seen since its beginning in 1900. Many of the pandemics in the past one hundred and twenty years have dissipated with the arrival of a cure. Others, like the AIDS and HIV pandemic, are mitigated only by public health campaigns and prevention medicines.

Lou Sullivan (1951–1991) comes to mind as I write this editor’s note. Not because he’s mentioned in a footnote in this issue, but because he was a gay transgender man and AIDS activist who lived and died during the height of the AIDS epidemic. He died from HIV-related complications in 1991. This issue feels like a beautiful way to honor our trans ancestors and to take stock of where we are today as trans philosophers.

COVID-19 has certainly changed the way we do philosophy conferences, but it has not hampered our ability to theorize and share ideas, arguments, and intellectual histories. In fact, as this issue appears online this fall, we will be hosting the third biennial and first-time virtual Trans Thinking//Thinking Trans Conference 2020. Conceived by the Trans Philosophy Project in 2016, this conference brings together trans philosophers and trans philosophies. This issue features an interview crafted from a panel that took place at the Trans Thinking//Thinking Trans Conference in 2018 at American University in Washington, DC. I hope you enjoy “Trans Philosophy: The Early Years,” by Talia Mae Bettcher, Loren Cannon, Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, and C. Jacob Hale, edited and with an introduction by Perry Zurn and Andrea Pitts.

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Dr. Grayson Hunt is the associate director of LGBTQ studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He completed his PhD in philosophy at the New School for Social Research in 2013. He specializes in transgender studies, queer theory, and continental philosophy. His work has been published in New Nietzsche Studies, The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, and Hypatia Reviews Online. He teaches Introduction to LGBTQ Studies and Transgender Feminisms at UT.

TRANS PHILOSOPHY: THE EARLY YEARS

An Interview with Talia Mae Bettcher, Loren Cannon, Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, and C. Jacob Hale

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY PERRY ZURN AND ANDREA PITTS

Trans philosophy—like everything else—has a history. The 1990s was a pivotal decade for the academic development of trans philosophy in the United States and Canada. During this period, the broader interdisciplinary field of transgender studies was beginning to emerge, and professional philosophy’s own contributions to transgender studies were starting to take shape as well. In what follows, we hear from Talia Mae Bettcher, Loren Cannon, Miqqi Alicia Gilbert, and Jacob Hale, four trans philosophers whose writings and activism helped provide the contours of what is now becoming a robust and thriving area of study within academic philosophy.

Trans philosophy, as Bettcher notes below, is more than simply the study of trans phenomena within philosophy. Rather, as Bettcher states, “trans philosophy is, in part, the political sensibility, the vantage point, and the methodology.” Bettcher here echoes Susan Stryker’s framing of the distinctiveness of the broader field of transgender studies. Stryker writes that, unlike other areas of analysis such as psychiatry, sexology, and endocrinology in which experiences of gender variance and gender nonconformity have been studied from the largely detached, third-person perspectives of cisgender researchers, transgender studies “considers the embodied experience of the speaking subject” as necessary for examining the content and methods of the field. As Amy Marvin recently offered in a piece on the history of trans philosophy, “[b]efore the development of trans philosophy by trans people, philosophical writing largely treated them as an afterthought or footnote.” Marvin makes clear that while cisgender feminist philosophers and others had perhaps considered trans phenomena prior to and during the 1990s, many had not considered how their own embodiment and positionality would impact the epistemic, affective, normative, and phenomenal content being produced (and reproduced) within their writings. It is, thus, not until the 1990s that philosophers such as Jacob Hale, Miqqi Gilbert, Sandy Stone, and cisgender feminist
We struggle to decide the safest geographical safety. For those of us lucky enough not to give up our careers in order to maintain a semblance of trans, nonbinary, and Two Spirit people, under a variety of names, identities, and descriptions, outside the professional valences of academic philosophy in the US and Canadian academies has been largely constituted by white researchers and educators.

With this context in mind, we note that while the participation of trans philosophers in the profession of philosophy may have emerged only a brief three decades ago, the history of philosophical work conducted by and for trans, nonbinary, and Two Spirit people exceeds this scope and framing. In this regard, we offer this interview as a moment in the history of trans philosophy, but we do not foreclose the historiographical scope of a great deal more philosophical work conducted by and for trans, nonbinary, and Two Spirit people, under a variety of names, identities, and descriptions, outside the professional valences of academic philosophy in the US and Canada.

In their remarks presented here, Bettcher, Cannon, Gilbert, and Hale reflect on the intimate weave of their lives as trans people and trans philosophers, meditating on the challenges as well as the satisfactions of trans life in and beyond the academy. In doing so, they testify to the continuous struggle against trans exclusory structures in their cities and universities, as well as to the importance of trans friendships, community, and activism. Highly instructive for our present moment, they ultimately root the promise of trans philosophy in the radical contours of early trans culture and community.

In many ways, the challenges faced by trans philosophers in the nineties remain with us today. It all amounts to a kind of “homelessness,” to use Cannon’s word. As in the academy more broadly, trans, nonbinary, and Two Spirit people in philosophy today continue to grapple with the insidious effects of transphobia. We struggle to decide the safest timing of transition, given the power structures in which we find ourselves, and wonder when (not if) we will have to give up our careers in order to maintain a semblance of geographical safety. For those of us lucky enough not to be pushed out of the academy in grade school, college, or graduate school, we are overrepresented among the ranks of adjunct and term faculty compared to our otherwise underrepresented trans tenure-line counterparts. The widespread isolation we experience, moreover, is only exacerbated when we are tokenized, where trotting us out on Facebook, college photo ops, or conference programs takes the place of real trans inclusive change in policy and curriculum. What is more, philosophy in particular has an unusually trenchant problem of supporting transphobic publications, organizations, and mentors, which insist upon belittling our persons without reading and respecting our work. The pain of these moments is only exacerbated when it is feminists and feminist philosophy that fail to be transformed in dialogue with trans theory.

In dealing with these challenges, Bettcher, Cannon, Gilbert, and Hale provide a wealth of advice not only for trans academic survival, but also trans flourishing. They emphasize persistence, being true to oneself, choosing one’s battles, and the constant possibility of reinvention. But they also insist that these things are best done in community. They repeatedly testify to the importance of developing interpersonal friendships and deepening those lines of communication, whether by phone or email, magazines or social media, in play spaces or in the streets. And they enjoin us to really find conditions and companions that are productive for “thinking things through,” as Hale puts it. This involves pursuing work that honors our values and intellectual interests, whether that addresses trans issues or not. And it involves developing philosophical touchstones that help us thrive (for Bettcher, for example, that is María Lugones). In an environment in which philosophical critiques of transgender identity are rising, moreover, they encourage us to critically negotiate the distractions of the profession, the pressures of respectability, and to write from the heart.

Perhaps most salient in an academic world where the successful scholar is touted as a singular mind, and trans and anti-trans philosophy alike are largely done in abstraction from trans communities, Bettcher, Cannon, Gilbert, and Hale insist upon the importance of lived experience in relation. They root critical reflection itself in the world beyond the academy. Each in their own way identifies activism, community engagement, and public philosophy as integral to the flourishing of trans philosophy and themselves as trans philosophers. From early in their philosophical careers to this day, they trade the Cartesian armchair for their local trans communities (in their cities and on their campuses), international trans outreach initiatives, LGBT and AIDS activism, and union organizing. Interweaving logic and metaphysics with history and cultural studies, and publishing widely across academic and non-academic venues (e.g., Miqiqi Speakt!), they demonstrate that trans philosophers are always a counterpublic in the academy. Honoring that reality involves accountable theorizing, for which cis and trans people alike have to “do the homework,” as Bettcher puts it, and show up to the pain and the power of trans life.

More generally, the interview below invites us to consider what we hope to learn from our histories and our ancestors,
how we might appreciate the labor and toil of those who have come before us, and how we may learn to build communities that allow us to become the kinds of ancestors we want to be. The discussion below also encourages us, as we find firmer ground in professional philosophy, to not lose the border-work, the liminal thinking, and the peripheral embodiments that make up the beauty of trans life and trans futurity. In this, we hope the following conversation helps enable us, as philosophers, to further commit to long-term projects within our programs, departments, universities, professional organizations, and local communities that mobilize trans, nonbinary, and Two Spirit people, including fostering the mentoring and solidarity networks desperately needed for Two Spirit philosophers and trans and nonbinary philosophers of color. Lastly, in seeking to preserve the plurality and complexity of trans experience, we hope that the future of trans philosophy will include more knowledge and citational affirmation of scholars beyond the disciplinary confines of Canadian and US academic philosophy, and that through shared resources and dialogue, we may work toward broader transnational coalitions that honor the lives of all trans, nonbinary, Two Spirit, and gender expansive peoples.

* * *

**What has your experience as a trans philosopher been like? What have been some of the challenges? And in what ways have you seen trans politics and professional philosophy change over the last few decades?**

Miqqi Alicia Gilbert: I am, as of January 1, 2018, professor emeritus at York University in Toronto. I’ve been there a long time. And I’ve been trans for a very long time. I should say at the outset that I’m a crossdresser. I’m not transsexual. And that’s been a big factor in my life.

We were all talking last night. 1995 was an incredibly important year for me. It was the year of the first International Congress on Gender, Crossdressing, and Sex Issues. I went there, and I met a ton of people, including Jake [Hale] and we became fast friends. That same year, the then president of York University created a “Task Force on Heterosexism and Homosexuality.” The idea was that the university should become more open and more accessible and more welcoming to people who were sexually and gender diverse. I read the mandate and I said, “Gosh, that’s very nice. But there’s no mention of trans people at all.” So, I wrote a memo. Now, of course, anyone in academia knows that if you write a memo, what happens, right? Sure enough, I got a memo back saying, “Gee, thank you so much. We’re so interested. Perhaps you can help us.”

So, I went and spoke to the committee. Their initial sessions with people were in-camera and everyone was very, very, very careful that everything was discreet and private. I went there and I spoke to them with a few tears in my eyes, I must say, about how difficult it is for trans people in the university setting. How, for example, a transitioning male to female is at work all day (we used to have a really big night school program), comes to campus, has to shave. Where do you go? Right? Do you go to the men’s room, wearing women’s clothes, or the women’s room and stand there shaving? It doesn’t work, right? Well, that and of course other things.

I’m very pleased to say that they added twelve recommendations to their report, including gender-diverse washrooms. Right now, at York University, all wheelchair-accessible washrooms (located between the gang [multi-stall] washrooms) now have the trans symbol on them. I’m also pleased to say that the initiative was brought first to the Students with Disabilities organization, because of course that was one concern: “Are we taking their space?” They were unanimously in favor of it. So that was how I came out and I came out very publicly. I came to believe that my having tenure, which meant that I could not be fired for having or doing something unpopular, was a double-edged sword. If I was doing or believing something unpopular, it was incumbent upon me to stand up. So, I came out, and I came out first to my Gender and Sexuality class on femme identity and expression.

And it was a cake walk. I had no issues whatsoever. My university embraced me. Since then, I have been in every newspaper in Canada, and I have been on every radio show in North America. You want to find a crossdresser who’s willing to go public, it’s very hard, very hard. You want to interview a transsexual, just go, “Oh,” and they’ll swamp you, “Me, me.” But crossdressers, most are still closeted. I think if anything, coming out helped my career. So, there you go, you never know what’s going to happen.

Loren Cannon: I’m honored to be on this panel with these folks. When I first came out as trans (and while I was getting my PhD), I was looking to these people as my elders, so to speak, and really showing me the way forward. I say “elders” here even though we aren’t too far apart in age, but I came to both philosophy and gender transition fairly late in life.

I work as a lecturer at Humboldt State University (HSU), part of the California State University system in far northern California. I’ve been there since 2006, when I graduated with my PhD in philosophy from Arizona State University. I came to philosophy fairly late, in that I first had a career in mathematics. I have a bachelor’s and master’s in theoretical mathematics, and I taught mathematics at a community college for almost ten years (and enjoyed it). It was lovely. At about thirty-six, I took a class for free through the community college; that class was Philosophy 101. At the time, I had a stack of applications on my desk for PhD programs in theoretical mathematics. It only took that one class, Intro to Philosophy, and I took that stack and I put it in the round file. I thought, “No, I think I’d rather do this.” I was bitten. So, I spent the next six years taking philosophy classes, while I continued to teach mathematics and eventually resigned from my position to attend graduate school full time. I was about forty when I got done with the PhD in philosophy and I got the position in Northern California. At the time, my interest was in ethics and my dissertation was on aspects of collective responsibility.

During my doctoral work, it became obvious to me that I wasn’t going to be able to continue on unless I transitioned.
For me, the question of timing became a big deal. Like, how am I supposed to do this? I felt like there was a ticking clock. Should I transition right before I get my PhD, so at least the name is correct? (I didn’t realize one could just change one’s name afterwards and have that reflected on the diploma.) There were so many things I didn’t know. An alternate plan to consider was whether to try to get a job and then transition. What’s the best way to go? Basically, my decision was based mostly on just my inability to continue on as I was. Prudential ideas aside, now was the time.

I reached out to Jacob [Hale] via email. I think he was the first person I’d ever talked to who had a similar background in terms of being transmasculine and also in philosophy. Right after my graduation with my doctorate, I responded to a national search for an environmental ethicist at HSU. I was thrilled to get the job and hoped that I could set myself up well for the tenure-line position my department hoped to have available the next year. As it has turned out, my department has requested a tenure-line job for our department for every year I have been here—now over a decade. Additionally, there have been efforts to have my position converted to tenure-line, but there have been roadblocks to this effort as well. Still, I enjoy a high degree of stability for a lecturer because I work in the California State University system and the faculty union, California Faculty Association, is quite strong. I did go on the job market a little bit, picking and choosing. I experienced so many microaggressions in those interviews. So often, I felt like the bridesmaid, never the bride. That is, I’d get the interview and feel like somebody was putting a check mark like, “Well, we interviewed one of those.”

I remain at Humboldt State and it is a situation that, although angstful and frustrating (my workload is high, my pay relatively low, and my position precarious), it is tremendously fulfilling. I have a place at the university that is very well-respected. I work with trans students on issues of trans inclusion on campus, have coordinated with other activists and the Transgender Law Center to get a trans clinic for folks in our small rural area. I have been able to develop a “Trans Lives and Theory” course that is unique in the CSU system. I’m also working closely with CFA, the faculty union. As a union representative, I advocate for the employment rights of our faculty members. So, I guess the good news is that I have a well-respected place on campus, perhaps despite my lack of tenure-line position, which is still very frustrating for me.

I didn’t intend to do any work in trans-related philosophy when I got my PhD. But I noticed that there were a lot of people doing philosophical work in trans-related subjects and so many of those folks were cisgender people. And I thought, “Wait a minute, what are y’all talking about?” And I asked myself, “Do I have a responsibility to step up and be thinking about these things?” Certainly, I don’t think that only trans or GNC folks can philosophize about gender, but also believe that lived experience is valuable, especially when discussing topics related to marginalization and social justice. I have done some research and publication in trans-related topics in philosophy and I am grateful for this privilege. I am grateful, too, for the work of my fellow panelists who have been so inspiring. I am presently interested in looking at what I see as a trans-directed oppression since the Marriage Equality Act of 2015.

Talia Bettcher: ‘95 was an important year for me too. That was the year I transitioned midway through my PhD program at UCLA. I came out in the summer. I had been “presenting as a man” on campus and “living as a woman” at home. I was terrified of coming out. I thought I would lose everything that had seemed to hold out any promise of success for me. I couldn’t wrap my head around what it would be to come out as trans. Meanwhile, I was working on [Ludwig] Wittgenstein’s views on the first person with Rogers Albritton. It was a very intense time. Apparently, I didn’t see how my personal issues around transition and philosophical views about the self were so intertwined. And I was coming undone, truthfully. I was “losing it.”

I met Jake [Hale] around that time—we both came out that year. I don’t think I could have done it without his support. Anyway, I wrote a letter to the chair of the department, Barbara Herman, and met with her during the summer. I sent out a mass email to faculty and grad students just before the fall quarter began. And I transitioned. For the most part, the department was supportive (there were some painful exceptions). I shifted to early modern philosophy because I needed some distance from the material.

It was also an exciting time, the late ‘90s. Jake and I became close friends. He was doing some early writings in trans philosophy and I was fortunate to be in on his internal conversations. He was very much an informal mentor to me. The kind of stuff he was doing wasn’t done at Dodd Hall, of course. It wasn’t mainstream UCLA philosophy.

Around this time, I also got involved politically. With another trans woman who worked on campus, I advocated for the newly opened LGB center on campus to include the ‘T.’ I trained as a mentor in the center’s peer mentoring program. I also got a part-time job working on the Los Angeles Transgender Health Study. This involved working with the trans women who provided HIV harm reduction outreach to other trans women. It was then that I started to get even more connected to the community.

The first job I had was a one-year visiting position at University of Victoria. It was an extremely tough year. I was disconnected from any trans community and my status as trans was kind of an open secret among the faculty. The whole thing was very draining and isolating, and it made the terror of my first teaching gig as assistant professor all the worse. That year I received two offers—one from University of Toronto and one from Cal State LA. I accepted the latter because, after my experience in Victoria, I didn’t want to take the chance of being disconnected from community and also because I was already out to the faculty at Cal State LA, having already taught a few courses for them when I was a grad student at UCLA.

At first, I pursued my career in early modern philosophy. However, around the time [Gwen] Araujo was murdered, I got far more involved in the community and helped plan the vigil for her. We also did stuff like demonstrating outside the LA Times. It changed me. I mean, it’s stuff that I’d thought
about philosophically, but it was put to the test in real life. And it hit me: “What am I doing? I’m writing about Berkeley because why?” There are a lot of other people who can do that. I don’t know a lot of people in a position to do trans philosophy. I thought, “I’m a smart girl. I’ve got a PhD. I bet I can start thinking through this stuff.” So I did.

I started publishing and it was very liberating. I went through a period where I felt like I was the only one around, and I just acted that way. In some respects, it was lonely. However, it also allowed me a lot of latitude. Instead of following the constraints of a pre-existing literature, I could simply pursue whatever interested me, what I felt was important. I was lucky that it got published! It was only recently, a couple years ago, when I looked around and thought, “Holy crap, there’s a whole generation of trans and genderqueer scholars ready to rock the profession.” How amazing. For me, that’s what’s changed the most. Trans philosophy is now a “thing.”

I recently stepped down after six years of chairing the philosophy department at Cal State LA. That was long enough. And I’ve been working really hard on finishing my book. I see all of the articles I’ve written as portraits, leading me to this idea I’ve had in my head that I just wish I could finally get out. It’s about transphobia, it’s about gender dysphoria (or, as I call it, transgender discontent), and it’s about personhood in a very general way. The book’s called Intimacy, Illusion and Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy. The process has allowed me to look back on everything I’ve been through—the changes in community and the changes in the profession. It’s really remarkable how much has happened.

Jake Hale: 1995 was a big year for me too, but I’m going to start a bit earlier. I had a very traditional upbringing in philosophy. I finished my PhD at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1988. I was working in standard analytical philosophy, at the intersection of metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophy of science. I was very passionate about it at the time. After bouncing around Texas A&M University for a couple years, and back to North Carolina for a year because I couldn’t stand College Station, I was very lucky to land the only job for which I was qualified in Los Angeles: California State University Northridge, in 1991.

At that point, I had developed a little bit of an interest in feminist philosophy. But other than that, I was still doing the traditional mainstream analytic stuff and that’s what I was hired to do. Los Angeles is an entirely different environment, at least it was in 1991, compared to College Station, Texas, or Chapel Hill, North Carolina. LA had a very visible gay and lesbian community (which was all underground in Chapel Hill when I was there, and I wasn’t part of it). This was the time of ACT UP/LA and Queer Nation. All around the state we were protesting Governor Pete Wilson’s veto of AB 101, which was an equal rights law.11 In Los Angeles, we protested for seventeen nights in a row. Even San Francisco didn’t protest as much as we did in LA. We were confronted with the LAPD and the county sheriff mounted on horseback. It was a very radicalizing time for me—scary, but very radicalizing. It propelled me into being much more involved in queer life. At that time, queer life was really blossoming. There was this whole range of possibilities that, to me, just seemed entirely new and younger folks, especially in Queer Nation, were really exploring it. It was through personal exploration that my philosophical interests shifted.

For a while, I did retain the more traditional interests, but then I got interested in reading all of this stuff about gender. What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a man? Starting with feminist stuff, oh my goodness, starting with Janice Raymond, but then also reading community-based literature. There was the early FTM Newsletter published in San Francisco,12 the radical trans zine GenderTrash came out of Toronto,13 TNT from San Francisco,14 and TransSisters,15 which was a publication put out by Davina Anne Gabriel in Kansas City. And, finally, it dawned on me that yes, it was possible for me to transition, for me to be a man, and for that not to be the most oppressive, god awful thing in the world. There were models for how to do this, and, even if the models of possibility were not right in front of my face, I could make it up as I went along. That was really the most liberating thought of all, “I can make it up as I go along.” And I still have to hold onto that thought often. If things, in one way or another, just don’t seem right, I can make it up as I go along.

So I started making it up as I went along, including when it came to publishing, because my work had to be recognizably philosophical not only to me, but to my very mainstream colleagues who would make a decision about my tenure. Miqqi was the only person I knew who was trans and who had a faculty position in philosophy. Sandy Stone had a faculty position in the R-TV16 program at the University of Texas, Austin, and was doing really important trans theoretical work. She was probably my main influence theoretically. I occasionally would have a chance to talk with her about things. Not often. She was extremely busy with student mentoring and advising. Susan Stryker, although trained as a historian, does important theoretical work, and I became somewhat friendly with her and could talk things over with her. I could talk with Talia. And gee, that was about it. To be honest, I was making it up as I went along.

I transitioned the same year I applied for tenure and it worked out. Like Loren said, what do you do? Trying to think to yourself prudentially, there are arguments for all kinds of different timings. I just reached a point where I said, “No, I can’t go on like this anymore. I’m not going to go on like this anymore. It’s just not livable.” But also, I thought, “Gee, wouldn’t it be just terrible of me, morally terrible, to go through a tenure process, receive tenure, and then go tell my colleagues, ‘You know what? There’s something really important I didn’t trust you enough to tell you.”’ No, I wasn’t going to do that to them, or to myself. That would have set me up for a career of distrust within the department. I had to strategize about how to do this. I submitted my first trans-related publication under my former name to Hypatia; the fact that Hypatia is a philosophy journal was important for my tenure file. By the time it was published, I had the name changed. It didn’t come out under my dead name, thank goodness.17
But after that, I started publishing in interdisciplinary journals and anthologies and things of that sort. I don’t think it would’ve been possible to publish anything that had important, substantial trans content written from a trans perspective in any of the philosophy journals, other than perhaps Hypatia. Maybe I’m wrong and I just didn’t have the guts to try, I don’t know. I certainly didn’t see any such things. There was certainly, as Loren mentioned, some very bad work being done by people who weren’t trans, but then there was also promising work done by people who weren’t trans. And I found that my judgments weren’t always right about who to engage. But sometimes it did work out, I would really engage with the person and the person would really engage with me, and it would end up being mutually beneficial. I grew and learned a lot from this mutual engagement, just as much as the people with whom I was engaging.

I got pretty involved in community work, culture building, that sort of thing in Los Angeles, and also pretty involved in working with students on campus. I helped found a student-run Queer Student Center that has now evolved into a professionally staffed permanent Pride Center. But after a certain point, sometime in the early 2000s, I just lost the passion for doing academic research. Well, that’s not entirely true. I got involved in doing historical research, but I went down this long path and learned all sorts of stuff I think is fascinating. But I don’t have any training as a historian that would allow me to figure out how to frame a historical argument that would make this of interest to anybody but myself. So that ended up being a dead end. I also lost the passion for the community-based work. Over the years, it seems to me there has developed a great deal more horizontal hostility. There’s very little hostility directed toward the forces that are really oppressing us, compared to what we direct toward ourselves. And the degree to which folks are getting just torn apart is disheartening to me. I don’t know what to do about it other than just go live my life doing other things.

That’s kind of where I am at this point. I will say that ‘93, ‘94, about in that era, when I first started looking at these topics in intellectual and theoretical ways, it was inconceivable that there would be this many people in a room, who were actively engaged in one way or another in trans philosophy. I mean, maybe not surprising that such a thing could happen twenty-five years later, but at that time we could get maybe three or four of us in a room, but that would be three or four of us from across North America, everybody from North America that we knew of, and that would be that. So this is remarkable. It’s a thing of beauty. It warms my heart to see it.

Miqqi Alicia Gilbert: When I began teaching Introduction to Gender and Sexuality—this was maybe in 1985 or so—I’d say, “How many of you know someone who is homosexual?” Of the two hundred students, about a third would raise their hand. The years went on and it finally reached the point where every hand went up. I also started asking, “How many of you know someone who’s transgender?” Two hands would go up at the beginning. Now, every hand goes up. Everyone knows someone who is transgender, whether a friend or a relative, and that’s a huge change. Most people are now familiar with the term “trans.” Apropos of which, they then tell me, “Oh, you’re not trans.” I say, “I’m not?” “You’re a crossdresser, that’s not transgender.” “Yes, it is,” I say. “I am transgender, not transsexual. There’s a difference.”

Who has been instrumental, inspirational, or useful in thinking and theorizing both your experience and trans studies, more generally? What kind of support have you drawn from mentors, colleagues, et cetera?

Talia Bettcher: For me, I have to say I really do have a mentor and a teacher in Jake. His work very much influenced mine and I feel like his work is my starting point. The philosophy of María Lugones (Jake got me hooked on her) has been absolutely crucial in my work. Much of the other stuff I learned because I thought that I had to master it in order to engage with it. However, it didn’t ever speak to me. And if I’m going to do trans philosophy, I want to do a philosophy that speaks to me, otherwise I have no interest in doing it. What’s the point of going down this road? There’s something so intimate about Lugones’ work and the philosophical depth of it is mind-blowing. I’ve always had this running dialogue with her work. I should also mention trans community itself. For example, there’s a close connection between “Full Frontal Morality” and my work on policy recommendations for LAPD interactions with trans folk. I can’t overstate how important it was for me to learn by doing, by engaging with so many other trans and nonbinary folk. I’ve learned from so many of these folks that I wouldn’t know where to begin listing them all.

Loren Cannon: Jake [Hale] and Talia [Mae Bettcher] are the folks that I look to most, as I met them early in my career. I met Miqqi [Alicia Gilbert] quite a bit later at a panel about trans issues at an APA conference. It has been difficult to work on my own publications while teaching five classes per semester, so being less well known, I sometimes simply insinuated myself into panel discussions. When I saw there was a panel of trans people and they didn’t know me, I just called them up and said, “Can I help with the panel?” And then they would be kind of embarrassed because, at the time, there were only, like, four of us in the country. I think I did that for this particular APA conference, and was able to meet Miqqi—how great! I believe I moderated or commented on the panel discussion.

Early in my career, I was active with organizations that focused on feminist ethics. I presented a couple of times at such conferences during that period and participated on listservs. I was very new to philosophy and just beginning gender transition, and the anti-trans sentiments there, expressed by only a few, hit me pretty hard. I had thought that feminist ethics was going to be a kind of philosophical home for me, and when that turned out less well than I thought, I did feel somewhat (professionally) homeless. The fact that I was (and am) living in a very rural, oddly remote part of the country that’s hard to get in and out of, had very little money to travel to conferences, and had little time to write, led me to feel isolated. I had the thought, “Well, now what do I do?” That’s one of the reasons, again, as Jake was saying, it’s so wonderful to see so many faces here.
Miqqi Alicia Gilbert: One of the people who had a very big impact on me after I came out was Deirdre McCloskey. I ended up (for my sins) being head of the program committee and then director for about eight years. And I’ve just stepped back, but I’m the only one who knows how to run the online registration. I’m constantly getting phone calls and, “How do I do this?” A lot of the writing I have done has been for the popular press. I had a quarterly column in Transgender Tapestry, which was sort of like the transgender Vogue. It was an excellent magazine, and a lot of work. A lot of people put their heart and soul into it. My column, Miqqi Speak, was quite popular. I tried to educate crossdressers that gender is a lot more than just about the clothes, that being a woman is something different than fishtail stockings. That was my mission. You can find those columns on my Academia page, where you can find just about anything I’ve ever written.

Jake Hale: I remember using several of those columns of Miqqi’s over and over again in teaching. They were very effective with my students. I can’t really answer the question about contemporary, or much more recent, philosophical influences because I haven’t been that active. I can tell you, though, that I’m a dilettante. I just grab a little here, a little there in terms of what works for me and whether it comes out as something coherent or not, I’ll let others be the judge. But in terms of the traditional influences, [Ludwig] Wittgenstein, [W. V. O.] Quine, [Michel] Foucault, and Paul Feyerabend were all tremendously influential in my thinking, and continue to remain so in trans studies.

I think, though, for me, engagement with community-based thinkers was very bit as important. In fact, it was absolutely crucial. And we did have, in the ’90s, a tremendous blossoming of early transgender culture with Les Feinberg’s early work and with Kate Bornstein’s Gender Outlaw coming out. I had quite a number of conversations with Kate, whether in person or on the telephone, thinking things through. She would challenge me in various ways, and I would challenge her in various ways, and we’d bristle, and it was all good. And the ‘zines that I mentioned earlier were full of people trying to find new ways of being and engaging with each other that were interesting and productive.

But they were also engaging in debates that went back at least to the ’70s in feminist circles about the involvement of trans women in feminist formations of one variety or another. And about the ways in which it was appropriate (if at all) for men, trans or otherwise, to be involved in cultural production. And then there was also a lot of the stuff about the boundaries of gender categories that came up in leather and BDSM communities and play spaces. Those conversations tended to be louder and more visible if they had to do with women’s play spaces, but all the same things were going on, going back to really the 1990s if not earlier, in men’s BDSM play spaces too. And yes, people would get upset, but those were often very quiet, closed-door conversations, not really visible, not really out there, but tremendously productive for thinking things through.

I found what was going on outside of academia just as important as anything inside of academia. I don’t know if that would still be the case. The conversations take place in very different ways now, in very different mediums. You used to have, yes, AOL chat rooms. You used to have, yes, AOL boards where you could post stuff and you’d have email listservs and things of that sort. But other than that, most of the communication was talking on the telephone (which I hate doing because I’m phone phobic), writing letters, or getting together and hashing things out over coffee, or over drinks, or something in person, one-on-one or in very, very small groups.

I think that facilitated more in-depth conversation, but also more personal contact than certainly seems to me to be the case with blog-based communication, let alone Facebook where you’ve got this tiny little box you’re trying to type this stuff in. You don’t have much room. It doesn’t tend to enable the depth of reflection, or the kind of personal connection, that allows you to develop a lot of empathy, even with this other person who is maybe pissing you off like crazy, right? But still, if they’re right there in front of your face, and you’re making contact with them, there may be more of an ability to actually both grow and learn in some fashion. I see a lot of online communication now, particularly on Facebook, let alone Twitter (with even fewer characters), as essentially not terribly constructive or productive. It tends to be, I think, counterproductive, more often than not. I mean, I use Facebook like crazy. I’m on it probably more than anybody else in the room. I’m on it all the time. I just try not to get in arguments on it, and I tend not to talk much about philosophy or community-based topics on it. I guess this is my little plea for trying to see that the other person you’re disagreeing with might actually be a human being, and maybe there’s some way to interact with them offline.

Do you have any advice for young trans philosophers?

Miqqi Alicia Gilbert: Remember that you have to be yourself, which means that just because you’re trans, it doesn’t mean that you must do trans philosophy. I remember when feminist philosophy was just in a baby stroller and the assumption was that any woman philosopher was doing feminist philosophy. And it became quite restrictive. I think it’s the same thing with us. I mean, most of the philosophical work I have done has not been trans-centered. My area of work is Argumentation Theory and most of my scholarly writing is in that area. I think it’s important that you don’t feel that you’re locked into some track and that you can...
do what interests you, which is not to say, of course, that trans philosophy wouldn’t. I would also say this: Use your instincts when it comes to trusting people. A lot more people than you might imagine could care less what your birth sex was. Some will, always will make it their business, but many, many others won’t. So, we have to be careful not to be self-terrifying all the time, to coin a phrase.

Talia Bettcher: I think we live in an interesting time right now for trans philosophy and in some ways a hopeful time. Unfortunately, it’s also a highly distracting time. This is to piggyback on Jake’s comments about social media. I find it interesting that trans philosophy only comes to the public eye when some non-trans philosopher does or says something ridiculous. And here’s the thing. In the end, it doesn’t matter what Brian Leiter says. You want to do trans philosophy? Do trans philosophy. Now is our opportunity, so let’s not get distracted. But let’s do work that matters, rather than dancing to somebody else’s boring tune. That’s the first piece of advice I would give.

I would also say, and this is connected: Pick your battles and play the long game. The world isn’t remotely close to how it ought to be. It’s not even in the same galaxy. Thinking about this can be really upsetting. But if you address this fact all the time, fight every single battle, you’re going to be exhausted. Sometimes you have to hide your time for the sake of a long-term goal. So if you’re going through a PhD program, and it’s tough in some ways, if it’s something you can handle for a while, you can just say, “You know what? This is for a limited time-period. I’m going to get my letters and then I’m going to find a way to do what I want.” I would say this is true not only for individual trans or nonbinary philosophers, but also trans philosophy as a field of inquiry and as a philosophical project.

Loren Cannon: When I finished my PhD, I decided I’d give philosophy five years and if I didn’t have a tenure-track job in five years, then I was going to leave the profession. Now it’s twelve years later, and I’m still here. We have to recognize not only the challenges for trans philosophy, and trans philosophers and many other philosophers with combinations of marginalized identities, but we also have to see the big picture regarding higher education in this country. When we have 60 percent to 70 percent of the people teaching our classes on non-tenure lines, we have to notice that—and respond. We have to recognize that the norm of graduating, getting a tenure-track job, getting tenure, and then living happily ever after, that’s simply not happening for most of us, particularly those of us who may be trying to get appointments in departments that are transphobic. Or in a department that’s racist. Or in a department that’s sexist. What’s happening nationally is relevant to all of us, and I think that we have to keep that in mind. I’ve been working a lot with our faculty union, which I think is very important. A lot of what’s happening politically in our country is also about a disempowerment of workers. I think we need to recognize all that we have in common with workers across the country and realize that the ivory tower has the same issues as does the factory floor. I also think that the two-tiered system of tenure-line and contingent faculty is basically unjust and that the negative effects of precariousness exist on the individual, campus, state, and national level. It is time for philosophy in particular and the humanities in general to do more than offer tips for philosophers to get non-academic jobs, but to transform the system into something that doesn’t treat nearly 70 percent of us as disposable labor. I guess much of that doesn’t sound like advice—but it distills down to “know what you are getting into.”

Secondly, my advice is to persist. Whatever you want to do, just keep doing it. If your position is not perfect, if your location is not perfect, if your dissertation committee is not perfect, if your tenure review committee is not perfect, just keep going. Keep persisting. Whatever the combination of your identity and experience and professional interest . . . whatever mix that is, just keep going and don’t give up . . . at least for as long as you are learning and teaching and engaging your sense of intellectual curiosity. Know that philosophy needs you. If you find yourself with the security of tenure, advocate for those who have neither job security nor academic freedom. Remember that this system is far less meritocratic than most would have us believe. If you have the energy, regardless of your academic position, try to aid in transforming our discipline into what we know it can be. Then, if you get tired of academic philosophy—leave it and feed your soul elsewhere. No judgment. Such a choice doesn’t mean you have failed—far from it. For myself, despite the precarious and workload, I have found a place of meaningful and thought-provoking work. I am glad I am still here.

Jake Hale: Loren may be able to give you more stats than I because I’m just a rank and file union member, not a union rep (same union, though). But yes, higher education has changed tremendously since I came into it. So much more of the teaching load is on non-tenure-line faculty and so where’d all the dollars go? They went into what I call the managerial class. All these middle managers (I don’t even call them administrators anymore) making big salaries, with incomprehensible job titles. It’s a very different environment than when I started and, honestly, I don’t know that I would choose, if I were about thirty years old right now, to go into the kind of environment that higher education is now.

Or, if that’s your dream, go for it, persist, persist, persist. But also, don’t be afraid to reinvent yourself, whatever that might mean. It may mean getting away from academia and doing something else entirely. Or it may mean, as it did in my case, transitioning. Also in my case, I said, “Well, I don’t want to do research anymore and I’m very involved in things in my personal life.” It could mean all kinds of things, but there has to be a certain kind of underlying self-confidence that you can land on your feet somehow or another, even if you don’t have a clue how. Loren said he was going to quit after five years even though he didn’t know what he’d do. He didn’t quit. I quit my first tenure-track job after two years. I intended to stay for at least three and come back on the job market, knowing I wouldn’t be happy in the place where that first job was, or in that particular university, given the degree of incredible abuse there was in that environment.
But I couldn’t take it, and I got on the phone to my dissertation director and said, “Hey, can I come back to North Carolina and visit for a year?” They were kind and helped me do that. I went back on the job market and only applied to nine places. First time I went on the job market, I applied to eighty-five or ninety jobs. Second time, I only applied for jobs that were geographically located in cities in which I had reason to believe I could be happy. And it went okay, all things considered. So, in addition to persistence, don’t be afraid to reinvent yourselves all along the way, whatever that might turn out to mean.

**What is the distinction between doing trans philosophy and doing philosophy as a trans person?**

Miqqi Alicia Gilbert: Everything that I do is influenced and colored by my trans nature, just as I strive that my man-self and woman-self not be separate but be integrated and that each one learns from the other. For example, in argumentation theory, I’m a radical. I write a lot about non-logical modes of communication. It’s not very popular with a lot of people, but that’s what I see. I see that the way that real people argue, real people communicate, includes emotional information and intuitive information and physical information. When I first started putting this out there, I was pilloried. It was like, “What are you talking about?” Now that I’m older, it’s been out there longer, more people are paying attention to it and doing it. I look upon that as in no small part being a function of my woman-self because my woman-self says, “Logic’s great, but there’s a lot more to life than being logical. There’s being understanding, there’s being intuitive, there’s being physical.” So, yes, I don’t think that the sort of straight philosophical work I do is separate in that sense.

**What is trans philosophy to you and what makes it trans philosophy and not some other kind of philosophy?**

Talia Bettcher: I do think it’s open, what trans philosophy is, and that’s perhaps what’s exciting about it.²⁹ I think that we’re at this moment, culturally, where it’s on the radar. No doubt, it’s many different things. For me, trans philosophy is a lot about trying to make sense of my life. Living in this world. And, obviously, being trans and dealing with the consequences of being trans is part of that. Living a life that is socially connected with others, people in my life, whom I love, who are my friends. There’s a lot of history there, a lot of people, there’s a lot of violence and death and pain. So part of it is about making sense of all that, and as Jake was pointing out, making sense of that in conversations with other people in the community who are also thinking about it. For me, my trans philosophy comes from that place.

I like to talk about the “What the Fuck?” questions. I see these as profoundly existential. When I say, “What the fuck is going on? What the fuck just happened? Why did this person just decide to ask me whether or not I had the surgery?” You know, my jaw is on the floor. What the fuck? So let’s try to figure out what’s going on. I do see trans philosophy as coming from that place and I think that it’s different than saying, “I want to look at trans as an issue.” This is simply a more specific version of Susan Stryker’s distinction between the study of trans phenomenon and trans studies.³⁰ While one can certainly investigate trans phenomena from a philosophical perspective, that doesn’t make it trans philosophy. What makes it trans philosophy is, in part, the political sensibility, the vantage point, and the methodology.

A lot of us know what it’s like to be theorized objects. We know what it’s like to have people write about us. So when we’re thinking about trans philosophy, we’re also thinking through our relation to theory itself. It’s all part of the same package. I’m not saying that only trans people can do trans philosophy. On the contrary, I think it’s important that those who are non-trans also do it. It requires doing the homework, though.

Jake Hale: I would say using philosophical resources specific to lived trans experiences and various issues that arise from lived trans experiences in particular social, political, and cultural contexts. That’s a mouthful and that said, I don’t care that much about disciplinary boundaries, so philosophical resources versus historical, versus sociological, versus whatever, I end up not caring very much at a certain point. That’s the Quinean in me, more than anything, I guess. There would be paradigms for each, but then they would overlap in various ways.

That lived trans experience is part of what is, for me, very important. But I would underscore what Talia said, that it is not only people who have their own lived experiences as trans who can think through lived trans experiences and be intimately familiar with them. There are some people who are not trans themselves who do, as far as I’m concerned, much more interesting and important trans studies work than has been done by some scholars who are, themselves, trans. That’s kind of a contentious, fraught area but, yeah, the homework has to be done. There has to be intimate engagement with lived trans experiences for the work to be valuable.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The editors of this interview wish to thank the 2018 Thinking Trans // Trans Thinking conference attendees for their camaraderie during the panel and their questions during Q&A, as well as the anonymous transcriber for their labor.

**NOTES**

1. This panel, organized by Perry Zurn and Andrea Pitts and moderated by Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, was recorded at the Thinking Trans // Trans Thinking Conference held at American University, Washington DC, in October 2018. The panel was then edited and revised for publication.


CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA Newsletter on LGBTQ Issues in Philosophy invites members to submit papers, book reviews, and professional notes for publication in the fall 2021 edition. Submissions can address issues in the areas of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and gender, and sexuality studies, as well as issues of concern for LGBTQ people in the profession. The newsletter 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.

DEADLINE

The deadline for submission of manuscripts for the fall edition is May 1, 2021.

FORMAT

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

CONTACT

Submit all manuscripts electronically (MS Word), and direct inquiries to Grayson Hunt, Editor, APA Newsletter on LGBTQ Issues in Philosophy, graysonhunt@austin.utexas.edu.
I have the happy task of introducing the fall 2020 edition of the newsletter, writing in mid-summer 2020, a time fraught and tragic, yet with some grounds for hope.

In the US, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has hit Native American reservations and communities of color particularly hard, while strains on protective equipment supplies and hospital systems nationwide have stripped away even the pretense of adequacy in healthcare. Likewise with food security: due to the pandemic, the percentage of all US households reporting food insecurity has more than doubled, to nearly 23 percent, compared to 11 percent two years ago, surpassing levels during the recession of 2008. The US government has had to admit that undocumented workers are “essential” to the food system, while shoppers are seeing grocery stockers and delivery drivers as heroes along with healthcare workers. Meanwhile, safety protocols in meatpacking plants—staffed largely by people of color—remain inadequate. The Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting claims that “As of July 2, there have been at least 26,500 reported positive cases tied to meatpacking facilities in at least 254 plants in 33 states, and at least 95 reported worker deaths at 39 plants in 24 states,” while noting that these numbers are almost certainly an undercount. At the same time, the pressures to keep plants open—and to export meat—lay bare the implications of the global consolidation of the meat industry. Worldwide, pandemic-related increases in poverty and unemployment have accelerated deforestation—increasing the chances of transmission of emerging diseases. Both domestically and globally, the pandemic has exacerbated both social inequities and governmental moves to authoritarianism.

In the US, a combination of posturing, pandering, and indecision has contributed to a new surge of infections while the worldwide death toll as of this writing was over 558,000.

Yet also a glimpse of cause for hope: in a charged US context, with inequalities laid so bare, the latest round of all-too-predictable instances of police brutality and extrajudicial execution of unarmed Black people sparked mass protests that spread to over 1,700 places across the US and over 120 countries on every continent except Antarctica. What seems different this time is the extent of white participation. A broader swath of the US population is engaging in deeper critique of law enforcement, interrogation of historical memory and monuments, and education about the daily strains of living in a racist culture. Despite also-predictable moments of backlash, perhaps we’re finally approaching a fuller scale de-legitimation of white supremacy as the default social order. The APA Committee on Native American and Indigenous Philosophers joins a growing tide of groups and organizations declaring formally their solidarity with Black Lives Matter; our statement is published in this newsletter.

The US courts are an arena for some other positive developments. One is the decision by the US District Court for the District of Columbia in favor of the tribes fighting the Dakota Access Pipeline, vacating the US Army Corps of Engineers’ Lake Oahe easement and requiring that all oil flowing through the pipeline by removed by August 5, 2020. A second is the US Supreme Court ruling upholding the treaty rights of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and reaffirming that most of eastern Oklahoma continues to be part of the Muscogee reservation. While the decision has no effect on private land ownership within reservation boundaries, it has important implications for prosecution of some criminal and civil cases. Both these decisions are steps in the direction of justice and substantive respect for sovereignty.

Although the articles featured in this edition of the newsletter were generated before these recent events, there are important topical resonances. First, with respect to the relationship between Native American and Black issues and philosophies, it is fitting that the newsletter starts with work by Pedro Lebrón Ortiz (17, Instituto de Estudios Críticos). Lebrón Ortiz critiques Cherokee philosopher Brian Burkhart’s reading of Frantz Fanon as a racialized critique of the default social order. The APA Committee on Native American and Indigenous Philosophers joins a growing tide of groups and organizations declaring formally their solidarity with Black Lives Matter; our statement is published in this newsletter.

The newsletter also features two sets of articles that connect to the committee’s ongoing aim to provide resources for teaching Native American and Indigenous philosophy in light of the inevitable institutional constraints. The first set is of three essays composed by students in the
Master of Arts in Philosophy program at the University of Windsor. These are responses to a single lecture on Native American philosophy that was part of a course on nature. I daresay that in many colleges and universities, students’ main exposure to Native American philosophy will come in the context of a relatively brief discussion about how Native philosophy “applies” to other topics such as nature or the environment. Given that constraint, how does one make clear the differences animating Native American perspectives?

The second set includes two essays by undergraduate students from Spelman College, along with the syllabus for the course in Native American philosophy in which they generated their work. As instructor Shay Welch notes, much of the students’ work through the semester was oral—in keeping with time-honored Native American philosophical practice. In the context of teaching Native American philosophy, how does one present and practice Indigenous methodologies while also supporting students’ practicing the skills they’ll need for graduate study? To neglect either would do the students a disservice.

We invite other instructors to share their syllabi and thoughts on appropriate assignment design; if you have students whose work you believe exemplifies something promising or interesting about doing Native American philosophy, please invite them to submit their work for consideration for publication. Work should be thoroughly proofread with references adhering to Chicago Manual of Style endnote-bibliography style. Further submission guidelines appear below.

NOTES


COMMITTEE CHAIRS’ REMARKS
From the Outgoing Chair

Lori Underwood
CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY

We have had an exciting year of activities. I would like to reflect back on our activities and accomplishments and enthusiastically welcome our incoming chair, Andrea Sullivan-Clarke. During the spring, I met with the APA board to review the work of our committee, which happens every few years. I introduced our committee’s desire to develop a mentoring program for Native American and Indigenous graduate students in the profession. The board was supportive and will provide resources as our planning evolves. The board praised our newsletter and APA session contributions.

Our committee continues to contribute actively to the profession. This marked the first year our Land Acknowledgement statement was included in APA Divisional session materials. At the Eastern Division meeting, we sponsored a session entitled, “Land Acknowledgment: Traditions, Relations, and Land Ontology.” Brian Burkhart, who also presented, “On the Meaning of Land in Land Acknowledgment,” chaired the session. Andrea Sullivan-Clarke presented “Relations and How Allies Acknowledge Land.” There were additional sessions planned for the other divisional meetings, but COVID-19 prevented those from occurring.

It has been my sincere pleasure to serve as chair of this committee for the past three years. I have enjoyed getting to know and working with the remarkable philosophers who work on this committee. I have enjoyed our many projects and contributions. We may be few, but our perspective is important. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this work. I look forward to continuing to serve under Andrea’s capable leadership.


STATEMENT OF SOLIDARITY

The Committee on Native American and Indigenous Philosophers stands in solidarity with the Black community, and in particular our colleagues in the American Philosophical Association. We bear witness to the ongoing violence and brutality that arises from the racism inherent in a colonial nation. Although the settler-colonial system seeks to pit our communities against each other, we acknowledge the need for anti-racist support in thought and action. We recognize that our nations cannot be truly sovereign unless Black Lives Matter. To that end, we will, as individuals, speak out against racism in our communities, and collectively, we seek to develop a relationship with our colleagues by hosting a combined session for each division conference through 2023. Together, we can bring about reconciliation and justice for all of us.

Black Lives Matter.

ARTICLES

Reconstructing Locality through Marronage

Pedro Lebrón Ortiz
17, INSTITUTO DE ESTUDIOS CRÍTICOS

This text intends on putting what may be called a philosophy of marronage\(^1\) in conversation with Indigenous thought, particularly by engaging with the thought of Cherokee Nation philosopher Brian Burkhart from his essay “Locality is a Metaphysical Fact.”\(^2\) While the topic is treated in detail in Burkhart’s *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land* (2019), my engagement with that specific text will be reserved for a separate project. What is of interest to me here is Burkhart’s elaboration of the concept of *locality*, which refers to an “ontological kinship with the land”\(^3\) that serves as a bulwark against the sedimentation of the *coloniality of being* in the ontology of the Indigenous subject. I would like to add some nuance to it from the positionality of a subject whose ontological kinship with the land was severed through the kidnapping and enslavement of the ancestors from the African continent. In the process, my intent is to offer an alternate reading of Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) which may allow Fanonian thought to be reconciled with North Native American Indigenous thought, which has typically rejected Fanon’s rejection of a return to ancestral ways. This alternate reading of Fanon shows that a reconnection with ancestral ways, and reconstruction of locality, constitutes only part of the liberation project for Afro-diasporic subjects.

In this essay, I focus on three elements. First, after briefly defining my conception of a philosophy of marronage and reviewing Burkhart’s concept of locality for context, I explore the relationship an Afro-diasporic subject has to the land by arguing that they are *dis*-located subjects. In the following section, I will explore Fanon’s thoughts regarding violence and death as they relate to the struggle for decolonization by addressing Burkhart’s critique of Fanon. In the final section, I elaborate on the elements of what I have termed *analectical marronage*, which refers...
to flight from the world of European modernity to another world. The term “world,” when italicized, refers to an ontological totality through which a singular or collective subject interprets the ontic. For example, the world of the Aztecs is different from the world of the Cherokee, which in turn is different from the world of the Puerto Rican. In this regard, analectical marronage constitutes a resistance to the coloniality of being. I suggest that through spatial flight, a subject can forge an alternate relationship to the land than that imposed by the logics of Euromodernity/coloniality. As such, it constitutes a recovery or refashioning of the ancestral ontological kinship with the land. In other words, I explore the relationship an Afro-diasporic subject has to the land by arguing that they are dis-located subjects and therefore an ontological kinship with the land must be refigured, potentially through what Paul Dill Barea and other activists in Puerto Rico have called autogestión radical, or radical autonomous organizing.

It is important to note that Puerto Rico, a colony of the Spanish Empire from 1508 to 1898 and a colony of the United States from 1898 until today, was one of the first loci of the transatlantic slave trade. Puerto Rico witnessed a rapid influx of kidnapped and enslaved African bodies after the decimation of its Indigenous population in the early sixteenth century. Nevertheless, eugenistic discourses of “improving the race,” combined with a downplay if not complete disavowal of African heritage to reproduce national ideologies of mestizaje, not only silence systemic racism within the Puerto Rican archipelago but also inhibit the identification of Puerto Ricans as Afro-diasporic subjects. I situate my thoughts on a potential philosophy of marronage within the Caribbean context as a product of the Afro-diasporic experience and intellectual production. Inasmuch as a philosophy of marronage takes seriously the maroon experience in Abya Yala, it must seriously engage Indigenous thought. This essay is an attempt to start that engagement.

TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF MARRONAGE
Prior to entering the crux of this article, a definition of my conception of a philosophy of marronage and its concepts would be useful. What I seek to achieve in thinking through a philosophy of marronage is a conceptual framework for understanding social and political praxis without subscribing to the myth that colonization, and more crucially, the coloniality of being, was a totalizing endeavor. The coloniality of being refers to the internalization of the subontological difference. Stated differently, it refers to a “complication in ego development attendant the confusion of second- for first-order consciousness,” which refers to the way in which the racialized/colonized subject develops a sense of Self through the eyes of the imperial subject and is relegated to the realm of subhumanity. Or as LaRose T. Parris stated in her discussion of Fanonian thought, “The colonized subject’s awareness of Being is therefore distilled from the oppressive material conditions of Western domination that shape the individual’s psyche and ontology.”

If the question that emerges as a product of the sedimentation of the coloniality of being is “why go on?”—a question that illuminates the condition of the damned of the Earth—and we buy into the myth of the coloniality of being as ubiquitous, then there is no possibility for struggle against the colonial logics of European modernity. All would be lost.

My conception of a philosophy of marronage draws on Latin American liberation philosophy, particularly Enrique Dussel’s conception of exteriority, which was inspired by Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to argue against this apparent ubiquity. If G. W. F. Hegel understood exteriority as that which is distinct from the totality [of European modernity], while still situated within that totality, and which must be annihilated or assimilated to achieve a harmonious unity through a dialectical movement, Dussel understood exteriority as being left outside the totality. While Arturo Escobar argues that “in no way should this exteriority be thought about as a pure outside, untouched by the modern,” that it “does not entail an ontological outside,” but that “it refers to an outside that is precisely constituted as difference by a hegemonic discourse,” my conception of a philosophy of marronage provides a different interpretation by taking seriously the lived experiences of Indigenous and Afro-descendant subjects who established maroon communities across the so-called New World. In this way, I agree with Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s critique when he states that “for Dussel [in his Philosophy of Liberation] the Other is a concrete human subject in a position of subordination,” which confesses “the ‘beyond Being’ with the non-Being.” Maroon subjects, whether of African or Indigenous ancestry, and Indigenous subjects more broadly continually affirm(ing) their “beyond Being.”

Nevertheless, it would be naïve to believe that marronage as flight from the plantation—Euromodern world par excellence—was and is sufficient to stop the totalizing force of European modernity. Therefore, on the one hand, marronage refers to flight from the world of Euromodernity and its colonial logics as a means to resist the coloniality of being. I refer to this as analectical marronage, which constitutes one of the two axes of my thinking on a philosophy of marronage. Maroons established communities and organized them by drawing on ancestral epistemologies and ontologies, albeit adapted to the material circumstances thrust upon them. Nevertheless, this did not stop the imperial project from encroaching on maroon and Indigenous lands.

On the other hand, to prevent further land encroachment and colonization, a fracture of colonial logics, which can be interpreted as another manifestation of marronage, is required and constitutes the second axis of my thinking on a philosophy of marronage: sociogenic marronage. Elaborated by Neil Roberts in his text Freedom as Marronage, sociogenic marronage refers to permanent institutional change as a manifestation of flight from the oppressive forces of European modernity. As Roberts put it, “sociogenic marronage allows us finally to understand how revolutions are themselves moments of flight that usher in new orders and refashion society’s foundations.” The case of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution, which serves as Roberts’s conceptual point of departure, has shown that traditional maroon communities such as Le Maniel did not transform the foundations of European modernity, evidently, because they never sought to. Instead,
maroon communities affirmed their transontological difference away from the Euromodern world, physically and ontologically, constantly fending off attacks from the colonizers. Rather, the Haitian Revolution was a product of what Leslie Manigat called a “mutation of marronage,” which was the product of a “critical threshold” through which flight from colonial society mutated into a desire to extirpate colonial logics from the hegemonic order. The Haitian experience shows that struggle must occur in two different dimensions which complement and depend on each other. Struggle must occur within and without the world of European modernity. Analctical marronage, then, in addition to a resistance to the coloniality of being, also serves a pedagogical role in that it provides an answer to the question “why go on?” which manifests in the psyche of the subject who has internalized the coloniality of being: “because another world is possible; it stands before me.”

This struggle on two fronts is highlighted by Agustín Lao-Montes’s critique of the figure of Caliban as a metaphor for Afro-diasporic subjects. The figure of Caliban “was developed as a conceptual character in Caribbean critiques of occidentalist discourse, racist reason, and imperial power.” As Paget Henry conceives it, Caliban’s reason “could be formulated as a consciousness of existence as being the racialization and colonization of Africans and our way of life within the framework of Euro-Caribbean plantation societies.” In short, Caliban became a concept-metaphor through which Afro-diasporic subjects tried to understand their sense of Being within the world of European modernity by employing the language and concepts of the Euromodern world. According to Lao-Montes,

there is a valuable critical edge in Caliban as concept-metaphor, but it is also problematic. To speak from the standpoint of the reason of Caliban is somehow to assume the language and the naming given by the European colonizer. On the other hand, it becomes a postcolonial strategy of resistance and critique by appropriating and re-signifying the colonizer’s categories of discourse.

Put differently, the figure of Caliban, as I interpret it, also assumes the ubiquity of the colonial enterprise since it renders Afro-diasporic thought as completely dependent on European discourse. When circumscribed to this logic, an Afro-diasporic sense of Self can only ever emerge as an appendage of European modernity.

Without an affirmation of the transontological, no liberation project is possible for racialized/colonized subjects which are forced to navigate the physical spaces which permeate the ethos of the Euromodern world. Nevertheless, a complete fracture of that ethos is also necessary. It is this dynamic that I believe Fanon experienced with his relationship to the Négritude movement, which many have interpreted as a repudiation of a return to tradition or ancestral ways. After initially adopting Négritude “to the point of [. . .] working for Aimé Césaire’s election to the mayorship of Fort-de-France on the Communist ticket,” Fanon would become disillusioned because of Jean-Paul Sartre’s treatment of the movement in “Black Orpheus.”

According to Lewis R. Gordon, in Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon had accused Sartre of guiding in a Trojan Horse to [B]lack semiotic and psychic resistance by pointing out in “Black Orpheus” that Négritude was an antiracist racism that was revolutionizing black consciousness as a negative moment of a dialectic in which the “universal” proletariat of Marxism would emerge through a cross-racial coalition of black, brown, and white workers.

Put differently, Sartre had robbed Black subjects immersed in the Négritude movement of their attempt to affirm their transontological Being by subsuming them within a dialectical movement in a Hegelian sense described above. Or as Gordon poetically put it, “what Sartre didn’t understand was that he was in effect counseling the death of blackness through eventual absorption into the light of whiteness.” The “bitter taste of disenchantment” that Sartre left is what then drove Fanon to argue that “Legitimacy [. . .] emerges [. . .] from active engagement in struggles for social transformation and building institutions and ideas that nourish and liberate the formerly colonized.”

Therefore, I argue that Fanon understood that in a world indelibly marked by the experience of colonization, first-order consciousness was not possible for the racialized/colonized subject without a radical transformation of hegemonic institutions to prevent the totalizing impulse of the Euromodern world. A mere return to ancestral modes of life is not possible under the constant threat of European modernity; liberation requires a radical transformation of hegemonic institutions to extirpate its colonial drive in addition to an affirmation of the transontological.

AFRO-DIASPORIC SUBJECTS AS DIS-LOCATED SUBJECTS

Burkhart critiques what he interprets as Fanon’s requirement of violence in the struggle for decolonization through what I understand to be a canonical interpretation of Fanon’s treatment of the Hegelian dialectic. “Unlike Hegel’s master/slave story,” Burkhart tells us, “colonizer and colonized are not locked in a life-or-death struggle.” Because decolonization tends to be circumscribed to the Hegelian dialectic, “being set free by the master here means nothing to the [enslaved].” This led scholars to believe that for Fanon, decolonization necessarily requires physical violence. Burkhart subscribes to this reading when he states, “for Fanon, it is through struggle and conflict, which he understands as often necessarily violent, that colonized peoples can shrug off the coloniality of their being.” Thus the common interpretation is that for Fanon, decolonization requires recognition which is achieved in a physically violent struggle against the colonizer.

In contrast to this reading of Fanon whereby decolonization, or rather, the unsettling of the coloniality of being requires a violent struggle for recognition, Burkhart proposes that for the Indigenous subject, the coloniality of being does not quite sediment in the subject’s ontology. This is to say, the Indigenous subject’s “being is never colonized to the point in which we do not experience the alienation of coloniality
that Fanon thinks often requires a life-or-death struggle with the colonizer to achieve." This is due to the fact that for the Indigenous subject, “being is itself, in the context of Indigeneity, an originary and continual manifestation of the land.”

While Burkhart identifies European locality as a “des-locализed, universalized system of culture, values, meaning, being and so forth,” he does not include Afro-diasporic subjects in his theorization of locality. This explains why Burkhart critiques Fanon when he states that it was just as hard, it seems, for Frantz Fanon to see the remainder of being that existed and exists still for colonized people as part of our being that is in the land, which is our locality. Thus, Fanon saw little hope for Indigenous liberation that could come from outside of the Manichean circle of colonizer and colonized. The struggle was for him always within this circle rather than something that, as Indigenous liberation strategies show, can arise from our Indigenous being in the land or our locality.

I defend Fanon against this critique by reminding the reader of Fanon’s positionality as an Afro-diasporic subject whose locality was ruptured through the kidnapping and enslavement of the ancestors. Therefore, one cannot deduce that it was hard for Fanon to see that “remainder of being,” but rather that Fanon was cognizant of his position within European modernity. In this regard, the experience of the Middle Passage is central. For Michael E. Sawyer, “the Middle Passage is just that, a passage or transition to a world where the coercive nature of society is so complete that the enslaved can be restrained without the use of physical bonds or, more carefully, restrained differently.” What I am interested in here is the way in which Sawyer sees the Middle Passage as the vehicle through which the subjectivity of the African subject is transfigured. The African becomes “The Negro” in the so-called New World. The African is forcefully moved from the world of the Yoruba or the world of the Asante, for example, to the world of European modernity, fracturing their originary subjectivity in the process. Put differently, the sovereign subject which constitutes the African subject in their homeland has a locality akin to that which Burkhart attributes to the Indigenous from across the Atlantic, but it becomes severed through the Middle Passage.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade in general, and the Middle Passage specifically, necessitated the erasure of Black sovereignty to enact the level of violence essential to the institution and practice of African enslavement. This led to the creation of “The Negro.” In this regard, Ronald Judy stated that

[F]o be black is to be Negro. Given that such a concept is not empirical, these judgments cannot be deduced on sensible grounds; rather, they are completely transcendental, i.e., metaphysical. That is to say, the phenomenal appearance of blackness does not achieve the significance of stupidity until it is subsumed under a concept, and for Kant that concept is The Negro, which is the a priori principle of stupidity.

Similarly, LaRose T. Parris stated that “the African’s recreation into the ahistorical, bestial Negro slave became central to Western slavery’s ideological and economic survival.” Following Sawyer and Parris, I suggest that the experience of the Middle Passage, inasmuch as it produced a transfiguration of the African’s subjectivity, also severed the ontological kinship to the land. As such, the Afro-diasporic subject is a dis-located or dis-localized subject. Therefore, while “the colonization of [Indigenous] subjectivity and of land is never complete. Neither can be fully colonized because of their locality,” the situation is quite different for Afro-diasporic subjects although both were subjected to catastrophic levels of physical and epistemic violence.

To circle back to the question of the applicability of Hegelian dialectics to colonial contexts, it is worth revisiting a key statement from Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks. “There is a zone of non-being,” Fanon says. “In most cases, the [B]lack subject cannot take advantage of the descent into a veritable hell.” Nelson Maldonado-Torres interprets this as the relegation of the colonized subject outside, or underneath, the zones of being and non-being. “This is so, Maldonado-Torres says, because the colonized subject is already living in a hell in which his existence, and not his authenticity (in the phenomenological sense), is at stake.” Following Maldonado-Torres, it would be difficult to argue that Fanon believed that decolonization requires a physically violent struggle for recognition. Certainly, Fanon thought decolonization was a violent process, but he did not refer strictly to physical violence nor was it recognition, in the Hegelian sense, that he sought.

As Lewis R. Gordon constantly reminds us, Fanon was a psychiatrist who treated both French and Algerian patients during the Revolution, and thus saw the psychiatric effects of war and violence on both parties firsthand—and deplored it. Because decolonization implies a shift, or, rather, a fracture of the intersubjectivities brought about by the metaphysical catastrophe which created a “profound scission in the concept of humanity, serving as foundation for a system that will no longer be structured in terms of intra-human differences,” it is read as violence by the hegemonic order. Gordon states the following:

The criteria that would constitute suitable means for the settlers, for the colonial government, would be the absence of challenges to it. This is because such a system does not see itself as unjustified and unjust, which means its overt would be, from its perspective, unjust, unwarranted, a violation of decency and order—in a word, violent. [. . .] Decolonial violence is simply what is manifested in, as [Fanon] put it, "the replacement of one ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men.” This is why, for example, the protests in Puerto Rico during the summer of 2019 were met with physical repression on behalf of the State, although the protests consisted of yoga, dancing, and other activities typically read as "peaceful."
The topic of decolonial violence in Fanonian thought is worth elaborating further.

**FACING DEATH: TOWARDS THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPOSSIBILITY**

Fanon closes *Black Skin, White Masks* with a beautifully posed question: “Superiority? Inferiority? Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?” In Maldonado-Torres’s reading, Fanon is arguing for the formation of a decolonial attitude “against the devastating effects of metaphysical catastrophe.” As such, following Maldonado-Torres, I suggest that Fanon is arguing against the Euromodern ethos which is predicated on hierarchization, rationalization, dehumanization, and the imperative of transparency. This last concept, the imperative of transparency, consists in the colonial impulse to rationalize that which falls outside one’s world by placing it in a lower category. Said differently, it is the collapsing of the transontological difference into the subontological difference.

In other words, world-world relationships are mediated by what Édouard Glissant referred to as “opacity.” The European imperative of transparency driven by principles of the Enlightenment, exemplified in the phrase *sapere aude*, necessitated the transfiguration of the figure which lies beyond the world of Europe such that it could be known to or understood by Europe. Glissant tells us that

[If we examine the process of “understanding” people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.]

This reduction is one of the many ways the metaphysical catastrophe constitutes a violent process. “I admit you to existence,” Glissant says, “within my system. I create you afresh.” “I create you afresh” implies first the destruction of the Other in their alterity prior to a reconstruction within the Euromodern imaginary. This process is what Audre Lorde referred to when she asserted that “if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.” It implies the destruction of the sovereign Yoruba subjectivity, for example, and the creation of “The Negro.”

What Fanon referred to as the “replacement of one ‘species’ of mankind by another” was a reconfiguration of (inter)subjectivities which eliminate the subontological difference. As such, I disagree with Burkhart’s circumscriptio of Fanon’s thought to “the Manichean circle of colonizer and colonized.” Fanon’s desire to eliminate the Manicheanism which constitutes European modernity is implied in the questions “Inferiority? Superiority?” which immediately preceded his urging to simply “touch the other, feel the other, discover each other.” In other words, Fanon sought to eliminate colonial logics with its tendency towards hierarchization, classification, and categorization in terms of subhuman/human differences. This would necessitate a fracturing of the Euromodern world, which is read as violence by the colonizers. This is different from Burkhart’s reading, which posits that “Fanon cannot see the scope of the possibilities of decolonial resistance that can exist outside and transcend the life-or-death struggle between colonizer and the colonized,” which establishes that “The colonized are good. The colonizers are evil.”

If Fanon believed this to be true, how does his assertion that “I am French [. . .] I take a personal interest in the destiny of France, the French nation, and its values” make sense? In this statement, I argue that Fanon is cognizant of his positionality as an Afro-diasporic subject within the broader history of France, which may be understood as an articulation of DuBoisian double-consciousness. In addition, Fanon understood the importance, but also the limitations, of mere transontological affirmation.

Following Sawyer, I argue that the “life-or-death” struggle Fanon was alluding to was not one in the physical sense necessarily, but rather that Fanon was suggesting that the “metamorphosis of subjectivity” which constitutes decolonization, at least for the Afro-diasporic subject, implies a type of death. “In a fierce struggle,” Fanon states, “I am willing to feel the shudder of death, the irreversible extinction, but also the possibility of impossibility.” I read Fanon as stating that he is willing to move from the stable subjectivity of subhumanity, through liminal *Being*, into the stable position of the human proper. This requires the subhuman subject to “first become a transitional being,” which is a type of extinction inasmuch as one ceases to *Be*, in order to reach the realm of humanity. As such, Fanon’s project is to fracture “the notion of whiteness as ontological [. . .] human-ness” which produces an “abnormal psychological state” in the Afro-diasporic subject inasmuch as they have internalized and assimilated the coloniality of being. This would allow the subject previously constituted as subhuman, subjected to a permanent state of violence and war, to limit death to the realm of mere possibility. This is an allusion to Heidegger, who stated that “death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that possibility which is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped [unuberholbare]. As such, death is something *distinctively* impending.” For the racialized/colonized subject, death is not “distinctively impending,” but rather it is a guarantee.

In short, Fanon was not necessarily referring to physical violence as a means of altering one’s subjectivity, but rather that the process itself is read as violence by the colonial order. Part of the project of altering one’s subjectivity through the fracturing of Euromodern subjectivity may require for the Afro-diasporic subject to recover or reconstruct its locality in the sense that Burkhart refers to. It is here that I see a connection with analectical marronage.

**ANALECTICAL MARRONAGE AND RADICAL AUTONOMOUS ORGANIZING**

How can a subject who has lost their locality through the various technologies of coercion imposed during slavery, which still persist today albeit in different form, reconstruct
their ontological kinship to the land and in doing so create a bulwark against the coloniality of being, as it functions for Indigenous ontologies, preventing it from seeping back into the ontology of those who have altered their subjectivity? I argue that what I have termed analectical marronage and its potential relationship to radical autonomous organizing may offer a solution.

To reiterate, analectical marronage refers to flight from the Euromodern world through the process of affirming a distinct world. Put differently, it is flight from the subjectivity which Euromodernity seeks to impose by means of affirming one’s own transontological subjectivity. The term is a direct reference to Enrique Dussel’s concept the analectical moment, which refers to the affirmation of exteriority from exteriority itself. In other words, it refers to the negation of negation through a primary affirmation. The enslaved does not simply negate slavery which negates their Being, but rather the enslaved negates slavery which negates their Being by way of an affirmation of their humanness. Said differently, the Yoruba, for example, does not simply reject the conception of “The Negro” thrust upon them, but rather does so by affirming their Being as Yoruba.

If the plantation society is taken to represent the spatial manifestation of the Euromodern world par excellence, marronage, as experienced historically, is not merely physical flight but also ontological flight. It is a process by which the enslaved subject resists “The Negro” subjectivity through an affirmation of their autochthonous subjectivity. In this regard, analectical marronage may be interpreted as serving a pedagogical role which ushers in Roberts’s notion of sociogenic marronage. As such, sociogenic marronage is a struggle for liberation which occurs within the Euromodern world through a frontal attack on it through decolonial institutional reconfigurations, while analectical marronage is a multidimensional flight from the Euromodern world. The concept of analectical marronage, as I have elaborated it, answers George Ciccariello-Maher’s critique of sociogenic marronage when he poses the question “from slavery to what world?” Ciccariello-Maher’s statement that “the active process of marooning, of leaving this world for another entirely,” in my reading, alludes to Dussel’s analectical moment in the context of the plantation society, which I have termed analectical marronage. One of the axes of analectical marronage is what I have termed analectical praxis.

Analectical praxis refers to praxis which falls outside the world of European modernity, its institutions, and its logics. Historically, maroons fled the plantation to forge a society ordered by logics recovered from ancestral African memories fractured during the Middle Passage and Indigenous memories which survived genocide and epistemicide. No recourse was made to hegemonic institutions, nor were processes, laws, or legal channels followed to carry out their activities. Analectical praxis refers to social and political acts that are outside the structures and logics of the current order. As Adam Bledsoe stated, “maroon communities worked to disrupt the geographies of slavery while simultaneously underwriting the geographies of the early Americas and creating territories of Black humanity.” The “creating territories of Black humanity” through flight from the plantation may be indicative of analectical marronage in general, and analectical praxis specifically. I am thinking of analectical praxis in potential relation to the notion of radical autonomous organizing advanced by Paul Dill Barea.

Radical autonomous organization, according to Dill Barea, rests on the premise of “not asking for permission, of exercising the power that exists in our communal environments to collectively change our social realities and implement initiatives that meet our needs by way of our collective strengths.” Radical autonomous organizing refers to the organic formation of collectives and work groups which operate outside Euromodern institutionality, including nonprofit organizations, to carry out community-based activities such as distributing food to the impoverished. Funding is typically provided through crowdfunding and community solidarity. This is a concept employed primarily within agroecological militant circles in Puerto Rico to describe their political praxis. As such, there is an undeniable relationship between this mode of Being and the land which I suggest relates to the notion of locality. It implies a return to a relationship with the land that is not predicated on the extractivist impulses and the imperative of transparency which constitute colonial logics. Inasmuch as small independent farmers organize themselves around the principle of food sovereignty, radical autonomous organization implies a rejection of the supply chains of the “agrobusiness [. . .] whose only concern is excessive profit.” In my view, this allows for the development of a relationship to the land which approximates the relationship Indigenous subjects have with the land. Therefore, I read radical autonomous organization potentially as a manifestation of marronage that permits the reconstruction of locality in the sense elaborated by Burkhart. In addition, radical autonomous organizing, inasmuch as it is conceived as a means to reconstruct locality, may also be predicated on a reconnection to ancestral modes of Being and understandings of the land, such as a reconnection with conceptions of “nature” as the Pachamama, through a rejection of Cartesian dualism which locates “man” as an entity apart from and independent from “nature.” Radical autonomous organizing, as a potential expression of analectical praxis, may be understood as a practical component of analectical marronage, which implies an affirmation of an Other world. For the Afro-diasporic subject, this would require a reconnection to autochthonous African and Native American ways of understanding their place in the cosmos, albeit fragmented and adapted to current material realities. Damné subjectivity transforms into an Indigenized subjectivity through the process of flight and a reconnection with the land, affirming an Other world in the process. This explains why certain agroecological movements in Puerto Rico have adopted the figure of the maroon as a concept-metaphor such as La Colmyna Cimarrona (the Maroon Beehive) and Brigada Cimarrona (Maroon Brigade).

Dill Barea also makes what I read as a critical distinction in the discourse related to autonomous organization in the context of Puerto Rico. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the archipelago on September 20, 2017, the term autogestión became a catchphrase.
To talk about autonomously organized projects became trendy. Nevertheless, acting outside the grasp of State institutions does not constitute the analectical praxis which I conceive as allowing for the possibility of the recovery of locality. The European pirates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, acted outside European political institutions but did not embody analectical marronage; they did not conceive piracy as flight from Euromodernity itself. This is evidenced by the seamless integration of European pirates and buccaneers into the multiple enterprises of nascent capitalism. In this sense it is quite easy to conceive autonomously organized projects which reify, rather than reject, colonial logics. The term radical autonomous organization, for Dill Barea, is a way to distinguish this conception such that “it cannot be usurped by neoliberalism, since in that context the term ‘radical’ would never be used.”26 I read Dill Barea’s conception of radical autonomous organization as having parallels with Abdias do Nascimento’s conception of quilombismo, which denotes the “erection of a society [. . .] whose intrinsic nature makes economic or racial exploitation impossible.”27 It is well known that maroons of African descent often established communities in solidarity with Indigenous subjects, and in some occasions, poor white subjects. Therefore, it is easy to see how quilombos or palenques were spaces constituted by transontological, rather than subontological, differences. Inasmuch as radical autonomous organizing excises the colonial logics constitutive of European modernity, it may represent a political praxis that constitutes an ontological fracture of Euromodernity ways of Being and a reconnection with ancestral ways. Therefore, it permits the Afro-diasporic subject to recover or reconstruct locality.

In closing, analectical praxis, which may be expressed as radical autonomous organization, represents a reconceptualization of spatiality mediated by analectical marronage. Flight from the plantation, inasmuch as it represented flight from the Euromodern world, also implies flight from the colonial relationship to the land oriented by practices of extraction and “development.” In reference to the Rio dos Macacos, Tororó, and Ilha de Maré communities in what is referred to today as Brazil, Bledsoe states that “autonomy for these communities means cultivating territories that remain separated from the labor exploitation and direct, fatal violence in urban Bahia. In order to maintain this separation, the communities cultivate life-support systems for themselves.”28 This relates to bell hooks’s notion of marginality,29 which implies an ontological positionality which translates to a mode of relating to the Self, the Other, and the land. Analectical praxis excises the Euromodern logic of imperiality, which denotes “the idea of an Empire of the human race over nature”30 and is mediated by the Euromodern imperative of transparency, thus enabling the reestablishment of locality in the diaspora. In this sense, these types of agroecological projects may express what Adriana Garriga-López called “ecological marronage,” which is predicated on

[empowering poor communities to use scientific and technical knowledge through citizen science, valorizing black and indigenous knowledges about land and farming, and buttressing autonomy for women, girls, and gender-nonconforming people through the reclamation of small farming and egalitarian water management practices is more than an important feminist, trans/queer, and decolonial agenda.]31

While I do not believe that for the Afro-diasporic subject, locality in itself plays a fundamental role in unsettling the coloniality of being, what is certain is that it becomes a cornerstone in the prevention of the reinstatement of coloniality. In other words, reestablishing the ontological kinship with the land severed during the Middle Passage can serve as a bulwark against the Euromodern world. As such, it is a crucial step in any decolonial project.

Finally, I suggest that Indigenous philosophy and Africana/Caribbean philosophy are each undermined by often excluding each other’s historical experiences within the Euromodern world. Inasmuch as Indigenous subjects, whether Maori, North and South American, or Hawaiian, were spared the experience of the Middle Passage, affirming their transontological difference may or may not be as complicated as it is for Afro-diasporic subjects. Nevertheless, it seems that one cannot fully grasp the effects of Euromodernity/coloniality unless the Afro-diasporic experience is taken seriously and brought into conversation with Indigenous thought to paint a complete picture. On the other hand, Indigenous philosophical thought, whether African, North American, or South American, serves a crucial pedagogical role for Afro-diasporic subjects, as analectical marronage does to bring about sociogenic marronage, inasmuch as they provide alternative modes of relating to the cosmos that are distinct from European modernity. As such, Indigenous philosophies require engagement beyond relegation to footnotes within Afro-Caribbean thought. As evinced in the palenques, quilombos, and maroon towns, Black liberation and Indigenous liberation are forever intertwined.

NOTES

20. Ibid., 130.
21. Ibid., 57.
22. Ibid., 56, 126.
24. Ibid., 4.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 6.
29. Ibid., 6.
32. Parris, Being Apart, 2.
34. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, xii. My emphasis.
35. Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality," 14. Sawyer offers a reading of Fanon’s zone of non-being as a “transitory position of metamorphosis of subjectivity” (p. 173). A detailed analysis with this conception will be bracketed for the sake of the present article.
38. See Lebrón Ortiz, “Si es cuestión de morir.”
39. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 206.
41. See Maldonado-Torres, "Sobre la colonialidad del ser," 147.
42. Glissant, Poetics, 189–90.
43. Ibid., 190.
44. Lorde, "Learning from the 60s."
45. Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 1.
47. Ibid., 4.
48. Ibid., 5.
49. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 179.
50. Sawyer, An Africana Philosophy of Temporality, 173.
51. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 193.
52. Sawyer, An Africana Philosophy of Temporality, 178.

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Philosophical Association conference in January 2020 being its first appearance.

Generally speaking, the motivations for creating these statements vary. The intention behind them may be to inform those in attendance, or perhaps call attention to the contemporary existence of Indigenous people—a notable goal given that the history of settler-colonialism has often erased the existence of Indigenous people from social memory. Other motivations include seeking to heighten the public’s awareness of the past wrongs arising from the social-political policies of cultural eradication and physical removal of Indigenous people from their ancestral lands. Or it may be to honor Indigenous people; although this motivation is less apparent than the previous ones. Finally, land acknowledgment statements may also serve to remind non-Indigenous people of their colonial settler privilege; even today non-Indigenous people incur benefits from the historical land grabs initiated in the past.

While the motivations may differ, the adoption and creation of land acknowledgment statements by non-Indigenous entities seem to originate from a locus of social awareness and the intention to correct past wrongs. As such, it is plausible to describe land acknowledgment statements as a performative utterance or speech act as put forth by J. L. Austin. According to Austin, speech acts are “perfectly straightforward utterances” that when spoken are “doing something rather than merely saying something.” For example, I can christen a ship, make a promise, or even marry someone by uttering a particular phrase under the right circumstances. In a similar way, land acknowledgment statements are performative; through the speaker these statements acknowledge the intent to reconcile and create a relationship with Indigenous communities. These statements are not only speech acts, but it also appears that they result from the work of decolonial allies because the speaker acknowledges their own privilege and responsibility with respect to the current state of affairs in Indian Country.

In this paper, I discuss the drafting of land acknowledgment statements and present some of the worries associated with their creation. Worries about these as performative utterances highlight a fundamental, yet meaningful, inconsistency between the motivations behind the drafting of land acknowledgment statements and the actual practice. In “Performative Utterances,” Austin cautions that speech acts “suffer from certain disabilities of their own.” Referred to as “infelicities” by Austin, speech acts can fail to obtain; the words fail to accomplish the act that the speaker intends. I propose that the inconsistency between the motivations and the actual practice of land acknowledgment statements is worrisome and may cause these statements to misfire—that is, the intended state of affairs may not obtain. Potential allies must attend to these worries, not only because they impact the practice of land acknowledgment statements, but also because these concerns would prevent them from being decolonial allies to Indigenous people. If these statements misfire, then they are merely words and do not accomplish the intended task—just as my saying “I do” in an elevator of strangers does not approximate a wedding vow.
The popularity of land acknowledgement statements is on the increase. In Canada, the non-Indigenous practice commenced after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its final report in 2015, which contained ninety-four calls to action. While “no level of [Canadian] government has mandated the practice,” essayist and cultural commentator Stephen Marche notes, the creation of such statements “is spreading of its own accord. There is no single acknowledgment. There are many acknowledgments, depending on where you are in the country.” 7 In spite of the differences in verbiage and format, Marche points out the one thing land acknowledgement statements share: the drafting of them “forces individuals and institutions to ask a basic, nightmarish question: Whose land are we on?” 8

The drafting of land acknowledgement statements can be a teaching moment. Those tasked with developing them are prompted to do some research and perhaps even learn how to pronounce the names of the people recognized in those statements. In crafting a land acknowledgement statement, individuals may learn about treaties such as the Robinson Huron Treaty, as well as which nations are named as participants to those negotiations (in this particular case the parties are twenty one nations of the Anishinabek and The Crown-1850). 9 Not all Indigenous land, however, was acquired in such a manner. For example, Marche notes that although the Toronto Purchase was negotiated between the Mississaugas and the British Crown (occurring in 1787, and exchanging 250,000 acres of land for two thousand gun flints, two dozen brass kettles, ten dozen mirrors, two dozen laced hats, a bale of flannel, and ninety-six gallons of rum and later, in 1805 an additional ten schillings to signify purchase), the land in question at the time of said negotiations, however, was also contested amongst the Anishnaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat. 10 Thus, even when there is documentation (in this case, a treaty), it does not necessarily follow that the Indigenous nations listed on the documents are the only ones with a relationship to the land. The issue of unceded lands (lands that were never part of negotiations and were just taken) also poses a difficult challenge to the creation of land acknowledgement statements. In a litigious society, government institutions may balk at acknowledging that the land was stolen, and as we shall see, the worry of opening up oneself to a lawsuit is evident in the wording of some of the constructions.

While the drafting of land acknowledgement statements poses challenges, there are other worries that are connected with their implementation. Perhaps the most pressing worry is that the statement becomes rote, that it becomes a pro forma act devoid of any intent. In these cases, the land acknowledgment is something to begin the meeting, the conference, or the address; it amounts to nothing beyond the mere repetition of words before the “real content” gets underway. This seems analogous to the problem of opening a conference with a Native elder providing a prayer or blessing, but not actually having any Native scholars on the program. Thus, decolonial allies, those who seek to stand in an invested relation to Indigenous people, should attend to the worry that the statement becomes a token performance. 11 For example, decolonial allies might ask whether the performance of a land acknowledgment statement indicates an institution also has decolonized classrooms/pedagogies, equitable representation in its boardrooms, Native sovereignty as part of its workings, or a host of other actions that demonstrate a meaningful commitment to Indigenous people and their communities.

It is not only repetition that diminishes the impact of land acknowledgment statements; critics claim the language is also problematic. According to Marche, land acknowledgment statements are comprised of “purifying language”—wording that seems to whitewash the unjust treatment of Indigenous people. 12 For example, the following is the script for a land acknowledgment statement read at the functions of a school district in Toronto:

> I would like to acknowledge that this school is situated upon traditional territories. The territories include the Wendat, Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nations, and the Métis Nation. The treaty that was signed for this particular parcel of land is collectively referred to as the Toronto Purchase and applies to lands east of Brown’s Line to Woodbine Avenue and north towards Newmarket. I also recognize the enduring presence of Aboriginal peoples on this land. 13

Among other venues, this particular statement is read at the beginning of the academic day in the schools of the district. The participants are the faculty and students. When this is said in the morning, what is the school actually acknowledging? Is it merely that the school is located where it is located? Earlier in my paper, I included the details of the Toronto Purchase (which is mentioned in this statement) and when I read those details, I imagine that most individuals would find the exchange unjust. Thus, it appears that the statement is as Marche describes; it fails to capture critical details about the interactions between the Indigenous nations referenced and the colonial settlers. The wording of the statement seems to reify a lack of culpability. Marche notes that “the passive constructions, the useless adverbs, the Latinate jargon” of many of the land acknowledgment statements fail to capture what we think of when we use the term “acknowledgment.” 14 Even when the statement acknowledges “the continued presence of Indigenous peoples on the land,” it seems to be “a pure afterthought.” 15 If the above statement is intended to initiate reconciliation by acknowledging the unjust treatment of the affected Indigenous communities, it fails. The misfire results from the acknowledgment failing to acknowledge anything beyond a colonial version of Canadian history.

Consider another example from the University of Windsor:

> The University of Windsor sits on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, which includes the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomie. We respect the longstanding relationships with First Nations people in this place in the 100-mile Windsor-Essex peninsula and the straits—les détroits—of Detroit. 16
This statement is read prior to the conduction of university business and functions. It is optional whether it appears in the signature line of faculty e-mails, and it occasionally appears on course syllabi. This statement differs from the previous example: it is written in the active voice. However, the events leading up to how the university came to be situated on the traditional territories and the types of longstanding relationships (they could be supportive or oppressive) are not transparent. In this case, the statement also appears to misfire; it lacks the context to acknowledge harm and introduce reconciliation.

Let’s consider one from an American source, Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana.

We want to acknowledge that we gather as Goshen College on the traditional land of the Potawatomi and Miami Peoples past and present, and honor with gratitude the land itself and the people who have stewarded it throughout the generations. This calls us to commit to continuing to learn how to be better stewards of the land we inhabit as well.¹⁷

Unlike the previous examples, this statement was drafted more recently and is not written using the passive voice. In spite of these differences, it shares a common feature of the previous examples: key information is omitted from the acknowledgment. For example, the statement neglects to mention that the Potawatomi and Miami Peoples were subject to the Indian Removal Act of 1830. According to this law, all Native American nations living east of the Mississippi River must be removed from their homelands by the United States government. In fact, the 1838 removal of the Potawatomi is known as the Trail of Death, given the loss of life on the journey. The statement above, as written, neglects to mention any Indian removal policies or the profound, negative impacts (death, separation from the land, and the division of people) to those communities.

This is not the only worry associated with this particular acknowledgment statement. If the Potawatomi and Miami people were removed from what is now Goshen, Indiana, then it seems that this particular statement, which acknowledges the instrumental value of the Indigenous people (as stewards), also acknowledges the contributions of colonial settlers who made their home on these traditional lands! Even more egregious is that it may also include corporations, like Johnson Controls, Inc. and TOCON Holdings, LLC, both known for releasing trichloroethylene (TCE), a carcinogen into the air and groundwater of Goshen, IN, since 1937.¹⁸ Like the previous statements, this one misfires as well. The language does not adequately capture the treatment of the Potawatomi and Miami Peoples, and it acknowledges the “contributions” of other, less noble “stewards.”¹⁹

Marche states that an unspoken belief underwrites the land acknowledgment statements: “if we repeat [this] truth often enough, publicly enough, to children who are young enough, it will lead us [Canadians] to reconciliation.”²⁰ I am not convinced that the truths spoken in these statements are the types of acknowledgment that approximate a path toward reconciliation, and given the above example, it may perpetuate the whitewashing of the historical treatment of Indigenous people of North America.

In his discussion of speech acts, Austin makes no mention that an utterance must be repeated in order for the action to obtain. In fact, speech acts are often singular statements that accomplish the speaker’s intention if spoken given the proper context. (Recall, christening a ship, or getting married.) Admittedly, my sample size of statements is small. Yet, if these statements are any indication of an individual’s, institution’s, or organization’s commitment to reconciliation, then there is cause for concern, as it appears these statements have misfired. It is all the more troubling when these statements are drafted by allies because decolonial allies seek reconciliation with Indigenous people. In these cases, however, their words fail them, and more importantly, those words also fail the communities they seek to support. In order to troubleshoot the misfire of land acknowledgment statements, we must examine the context or practice associated with them.

Overall, the statements as written avoid an admission of duty/obligation that grounds the act of acknowledgment. Trudy Govier describes acknowledgment as “knowledge with a kind of avowal which amounts to a spelling out or marking of what we know. A person who acknowledges something admits or allows that that something is attached in some way to himself or herself.”²¹ For example, by acknowledging that I have treated someone poorly, then I recognize my responsibility for my actions. In the case of land acknowledgment statements, the speaker must recognize their connection with the colonial treatment of Indigenous people. Simply put, to acknowledge means to be aware of colonialism and how we each benefit from it.²²

Acknowledgment, according to Govier, stands in stark contrast to self-deception. “When we deceive ourselves, we turn our attention away from unwelcome information and fail to attend to it.”²³ For example, if I have treated someone poorly, I must actively ignore what I did. As Govier notes, we can only ignore something when we have some awareness of it.²⁴ Self-deception is not easy to do, but the undertaking is made easier when it is the “result of collusion or complicity among people.”²⁵ It is less difficult to distance oneself from one’s responsibility when the community shares the motivation “to ignore certain unpleasant things that we would rather not acknowledge.”²⁶

Land acknowledgment statements appear to fall victim to this sort of emotional and epistemic distancing. By repeating a sterilized script of acknowledgment, individuals who benefit from colonial settler privilege adopt the appearance of being socially aware without needing to take further steps to correct historical wrongs—or even address the contemporary consequences of colonialism. It is especially difficult to accept the land acknowledgment statements as a serious step toward reconciliation when the current actions of the government, corporations, and/or the non-Indigenous public are not consistent with the intent.

As support, Marche cites the case of Muskrat Falls as a reason for doubting the sincerity of the Canadian government’s
efforts of reconciliation. In the fall of 2016, “leaders of the Inuit, Nunatsiavut and the NunatuKavut near Muskrat Falls went on a hunger strike to protest the construction of a hydroelectric dam on their traditional territories.”\(^27\) The manner of the dam’s construction resulted in an increase of mercury levels in the water, adversely affecting the food supply of those communities (fish and seal). The government did not consult the communities prior to construction, nor was there uptake of the community’s requests for the removal of tainted soil prior to the flooding of land. Yet, these communities bore the brunt of the negative effects of the federal project. Marche focuses on the inconsistency between cases like Muskrat Falls (and other policies enacted without consultation) and the use of land acknowledgment statements, noting “[Canadians] want desperately to atone for a crime while [we’re] still in the middle of committing it.”\(^28\)

The case of Muskrat Falls is not unique. While in my first year at the University of Windsor, Indigenous groups and their supporters marched in solidarity for the Wet’suwet’en People in British Columbia, who challenged the construction of an oil pipeline on their land. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) cordoned off the area, preventing the press from entering and reporting on the RCMP’s militarized raid.\(^29\) On December 24, 2019, The Guardian reported on “an RCMP strategy document which said that ‘lethal overwatch’ would be required during the 7 January raid.”\(^30\) According to the report, “the term ‘lethal overwatch’ specifically refers to an officer who is ‘prepared to use lethal force.’”\(^31\) In addition, “a transcription dated 7 January, stamped with the name of Tactical Team Commander Sgt Kevin Bracewell, states that arrests would be necessary for ‘sterilizing [the] site’ and includes instructions to other officers to ‘use as much violence toward the gate as you want.’”\(^32\) Truly, it is hard to see the land acknowledgment statements as a move toward reconciliation when a group vested with authority by the national government hides their abuse of power on Indigenous land.

Hayden King, an Anishnaabe writer and educator, reveals additional worries when interviewed about his experience drafting a land acknowledgment statement for Ryerson University. King notes that at the time, “there was sort of a rush to catch up, and a lot of pressure [was] put on the Indigenous community at Ryerson to come up with a territorial acknowledgement.”\(^33\) The need for a quick response resulted in a statement that, according to King, failed to anticipate “the growth of acknowledgement in Ontario or the politics that would accompany it.”\(^34\) Beyond these issues, there is a further worry—that the statements are written “by and large for non-Native people.”\(^35\)

Reading a script places very few demands upon the reader and audience. King expresses his concern that a script “effectively excuses them and offers them an alibi for doing the hard work of learning about their neighbors and learning about the treaties of the territory and learning about those nations that should have jurisdiction.”\(^36\) Instead of an opportunity to research and embark on a relation with Indigenous people, a scripted acknowledgment statement gives the impression that crucial work has been done. (And the task is made all the easier if phonetic pronunciations of the tribal names are provided.) Scripts do not lend themselves to speech acts. They do not generate the context needed—the intention that is bound up in the performance. Working from a script, the speaker need not think, but they get credit for it as if they had.

An interesting point that struck me about King’s interview is that he states the responsibility for crafting the land acknowledgment statement was given to the Indigenous community at the university. This is analogous to the task given to the Committee on Native American and Indigenous Philosophers by the APA Board of Officers. While it may be permissible, and even encouraged, to consult Indigenous people concerning drafted statements, delegating the task of drafting a land acknowledgment statement shifts the burden of work to the shoulders of those who do not necessarily need to learn the lessons associated with settler colonial privilege.

What makes this practice particularly troubling mirrors a situation that Audre Lorde points out in Sister Outsider.\(^37\) Lorde states, “Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressor’s mistakes.”\(^38\) As Lorde continues to explain, “Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to [their] humanity.”\(^39\) In such cases, teaching becomes an additional burden, as “there is a constant drain of energy” on the part of the teachers.\(^40\) Individuals and communities that are in the margins of society have other, more pressing issues that require their attention. We have seen only a couple of examples: Muskrat Falls and the Wet’suwet’en People in British Columbia. To place the additional burden of educating those who benefit from settler colonial privilege is not a step toward reconciliation. Groups and institutions that claim to critically reflect on the demands of social justice should know better. Universities and the American Philosophical Association are comprised of researchers—who better to conduct the initial draft of a land acknowledgment statement? The worries expressed by Marche and King (that acknowledgment statements may become rote or that they signify a checked box in the conscience of individuals with settler colonial privilege) acquire a more serious nature when Indigenous people draft statements at the request of non-Indigenous institutions. In these cases, the epistemic labor for non-Indigenous people stops at the creation of the statement. What should be taking place, if we bear in mind the various motives for their creation and what it means to acknowledge something, is the transformation of the social consciousness as regards settler colonial privilege. This is when the land acknowledgment statement as a speech act accomplishes its goal.

The land acknowledgment statement of the APA differs from the previous examples in a very positive way: it is written using the active voice to acknowledge the historical and contemporary mistreatment of Indigenous people. The APA statement reads as follows:

The American Philosophical Association acknowledges and pays respect to the indigenous
people upon whose ancestral lands this conference is being held. We recognize that the rights of native and indigenous people and nations have been and continue to be denied and violated, and we honor with gratitude the land itself and the people who have stewarded it throughout the generations.41

This construction, however, poses a unique worry because it is not connected with a particular community or more importantly, the land (what Brian Burkhart refers to as locality). Other statements, like the examples above, address the historical presence of Indigenous people belonging to a particular place, and this is a feature of Indigenous protocols that we may not want to omit, especially if we are seeking reconciliation.12

Reconciliation calls for the acknowledgment of specific offenses done to particular groups. To acknowledge an individual's part in settler colonialism, they need to know the details of how they benefit and whom they have harmed. Decolonial allies need to be concerned with context as well because they are entering into a relationship and that is with a particular community. The worry is that by opting for an all-purpose statement the epistemic labor needed to transform social consciousness has been preempted by losing its particularity. In short, the statement effectively lumps all Indigenous people together. Wherever we hold our conference, we do not need to know the details of particular oppressions. But this seems to go against what Govier said about acknowledging—when I acknowledge harming someone, I acknowledge harming a particular someone. When the statement is too broad, victimhood is diluted and the way of coming to know how to make amends is prevented. Thus, the speech act misfires.

So, how might the practice of land acknowledgment statements be improved? Although this topic exceeds the scope of this particular paper, I have a couple of suggestions for improving the practice of land acknowledgment statements.

In “A User’s Guide to White Privilege,” Cynthia Kaufman suggests ways in which society can enlighten themselves about white privilege without posing a burden. First, she suggests individuals “inform themselves [. . . ] Take initiative, read a lot. Read novels by people of color, read sociological, political, and historical works that take racism seriously.”43 To those seeking to respectfully acknowledge Indigenous people, I suggest you do your research, but be selective with respect to authors. As Vine Deloria, Jr. notes, academics, especially non-Indigenous ones, view Native Americans as a phenomenon and their communities as an opportunity to support their latest theories.44 Today, I encourage you to do a little research and learn out about the Indigenous people of the area—in both historic and contemporary contexts. Do this to draft your own statement. Identify your privilege and come to know how this affects the Indigenous people you seek to support.

If you attend a function where a land acknowledgment statement is being read, ask for more information. Kaufman advises individuals to “be ready to see ideas that are widely accepted as false”45 in order to understand your privilege. To that end, I suggest looking beyond the text of land acknowledgment statements to learn what is not said in the text. The mention of particular treaties and the acknowledgment of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities should prompt one to seek out the details. In other words, if a university acknowledges that it is situated on traditional lands, ask “Whose land?” and under what circumstances did it change hands? Settler colonial history has a way of making Indigenous communities invisible. Don’t limit yourself to researching only the historical details that are often glossed over in a land acknowledgment statement. Take your research one step further and ask where those communities are today and what are the issues they are currently facing.

Land acknowledgment statements are based on the protocols used by Indigenous communities, and yet in the contemporary context, many of the statements used by non-Indigenous institutions are speech acts that fail. If the goal is reconciliation, then the context of these statements must change in order for these statements to function successfully. Decolonial allies should be aware of these worries and ensure that this practice is not merely appropriated in order to alleviate settler colonial guilt.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank the Committee on Native American and Indigenous Philosophers for allowing me to present this paper in their session at the 2020 Eastern Division meeting. I received wonderful feedback during that session. In addition, I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments, which greatly improved the draft. Lastly, I thank my students in the Philosophy of Language course (Winter 2019) at University of Windsor for allowing me to pitch this idea to them during our section on speech acts.

NOTES

1. The term “decolonial ally” refers to an individual whose actions are described by Lynn Gehl. See Gehl, “A Colonized Ally Meets a Decolonized Ally: This Is What They Learn.”
2. Austin, W. F. Philosophy of Language (of) J. L. Austin.
3. Ibid., 237.
4. I use the term “Indian Country” to denote not only the geographical spaces related to the American Indians and First Nations people, but also the political spaces and issues that affect them.
5. Austin, Philosophical Papers (of) J. L. Austin, 237.
6. Ibid.
7. Stephen Marche, “Canada’s Impossible Acknowledgement.”
8. Ibid.
10. Marche, “Canada’s Impossible Acknowledgement.”
11. I do not intend to confuse the reader; there is no reference to type-token.
12. Marche, “Canada’s Impossible Acknowledgement.”
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
Preliminary Remarks on the Graduate Submissions

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The following papers are the result of a Graduate Seminar at the University of Windsor, Winter 2020. The professor who oversaw the course, Dr. Jeff Noonan, selected the topic, “Nature.” The Department Seminar is structured so that six weeks of the term are lecture-based with the alternate weeks being the peer review of student papers. There were eight MA students in this course, and I was invited to lecture on Indigenous understandings of nature.

For the first session, I provided an introduction to First Nations philosophy, which included creation stories from nations philosophy, which included creation stories from the colonization of the Indigenous nations of Ontario given that is where I live and work. I must also note that this is only one example of how I benefit from colonialism.


Ibid., 74.

Ibid., 75.

Ibid., 75.

See also CBC News, October 27, 2016. URL provided in References section.

Stephen Marche, “Canada’s Impossible Acknowledgement.”

Andrew Nikiforuk, “When Indigenous Assert Rights, Canada Sends Militarized Police.”

Will Parrish and Jaskiran Dhillon, “Exclusive: Canada Police Prepared to Shoot Indigenous Activists, Documents Show.”

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Hayden King, “I Regret It”: Hayden King on Writing Ryerson University’s Territorial Acknowledgement | CBC Radio.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.

Ibid., 114.

Ibid., 115.

Ibid.


I believe there is the additional worry of creating a general, all-purpose statement that is suitable for all conference venues. It lacks particularity. And as we have seen, the Indigenous people of North America have had diverse experiences in the face of settler colonialism. This statement would hinder, if not prevent, the development of relations with Indigenous communities.


Vine Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto, 78-100.


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the Yuchi, Ute, and the Haudenosaunee communities. I invited the students to look for the different areas of philosophy (epistemology, metaphysics, and values) in the creation stories, focusing on human and nonhuman relations. I introduced the Indigenous view of nature by assigning approximately fifty pages of reading that covered excerpts from Winona LaDuke’s All Our Relations and her article titled “The People Belong to the Land.” I ended the first class with the question intended to motivate their papers. The following is the prompt for this assignment.

In an April 2019 interview for Macleans, environmentalist and author Bill McKibben states,

> Indigenous people are at the absolute forefront of the [environmental] fight in North America, and around the world. There are two reasons for that, I think: one is, in many places, we relocated or relegated the people who were here first to places we thought were not valuable, and as it turns out in the 21st century, those places often are atop large deposits of carbon or they’re straddling the routes you’d need to run a pipeline to get it out. So, they have real tactical importance—but also extraordinary moral significance.

Based on today’s discussion of Indigenous philosophy and nature, is McKibben’s appraisal of the role for Indigenous people in the fight against climate change accurate? Why/Why not?

As an Indigenous philosopher, I wanted the students to try to see the issue from an Indigenous perspective. To complete the assignment, they needed to understand McKibben’s remarks, but also note if he went too far—for example, we might ask whether non-Indigenous people think Indigenous communities are merely instrumental in the fight for the environment. (After personal discussions with the students prior to writing their papers, I suggested works by Kyle Whyte, Daniel Wildcat, and Audre Lorde, as appropriate.) Of the eight students, two from the course used their papers to complete one of the requirements of the MA degree (to present and defend a publishable paper).

The papers below are the result of one lecture, several readings, and numerous meetings (which, I believe, is one of the pleasures of teaching). For these authors, it is their first attempt at publishing their work in a reviewed venue. It is exciting to see First Nations philosophy have a place in a core course.

NOTES
have real tactical importance—but also extraordinary moral significance.¹

In deconstructing this statement, it would seem that the point McKibben wants to make about the role of Indigenous communities is that they are in a unique position to fight for the environmentalist cause. This is a direct result of the land they live on, as this land is situated in locations such that nonenvironmentalists cannot achieve their goal without interacting with Indigenous peoples (be it from wanting to use said land to build a pipeline, a factory, or so forth). McKibben therefore argues for the tactical importance of these communities. On this point, there can be no dispute. It is a matter of fact that there is a significant threat posed to Indigenous communities through the efforts of nonenvironmentalists to promote their own economic self-interest. Furthermore, it is also true that there is a sense in which Indigenous ownership of the land allows them a strategic power over it insofar as they can choose to deny access, making further development cumbersome.²

Yet the more subtle claim seems to be that the Indigenous communities are somehow uniquely qualified to articulate a moral response to environmental issues, which based on the context of McKibben’s initial statement, appears to be derived from the same principle of land ownership. Naturally, in reflecting on this ownership, one is reminded of the painful history behind its acquisition and how such violations of sovereignty and identity should never have occurred in the first place. In McKibben’s view, then, part of the Indigenous contribution to the environmental movement is emergent from the moral significance of those Indigenous communities who live and work on the land that private interests want to utilize without regard for environmental concerns, the violation of said land being a cause for moral indignation. The argument for the unique moral significance of Indigenous contributions to the environmental movement thus stems from the fact that Indigenous communities do indeed own the land; similar to how Indigenous ownership of the land introduces a potential roadblock for anti-environmentalist movements, McKibben’s view would charge that this same ownership highlights the very real moral concerns of the environmental project as seen through the Indigenous struggle for land and recognition.

By extension, then, McKibben appears tacitly to admit to the centrality of land ownership (insofar as there is a question regarding land access) and its proper usage (that it should be utilized in accordance with the wishes of the community who lives on it and not merely in accordance with exterior private interests). Moreover, in identifying that Indigenous communities face the very real problem of potential invasions of sovereignty on their land, their place within the movement is one “at the forefront” insofar as they deal with these concerns daily. Thus, McKibben assumes that the concerns of the Indigenous community are of the utmost importance because they reveal the practical necessity of fighting anti-environmentalist efforts and are thereby emblematic of the environmental movement as a whole; the relevancy of Indigenous concerns to the environmental cause is seen as commensurate with those difficulties that Western minds appreciate; issues of ownership, of land use, and so forth. The accuracy of McKibben’s statement depends on Indigenous communities operating under these principles in their fight against anti-environmentalists. Therefore, it will be by analyzing the Indigenous view of property and conservation that McKibben’s statement will be understood as justified or unjustified.

Towards obtaining a view of Indigenous ideas of land, property, and the environment,³ Winona LaDuke provides her reader a cursory look at how best to conceptualize the land, stating that the perspective of her people (the Anishinaabeg) relates the entirety of their way of life, from language to cultural teachings, to the land that they inhabit. But this is not because the land is simply there to be used as a resource, with other cultural considerations simply emerging from the way in which the land is utilized by a particular people; rather, in an inversion of the traditional Western view of land “belonging to people,” LaDuke states how “the people belong to the land.”⁴ As LaDuke explains, this is because the various aspects of Indigenous cultural identity all hinge on the relationship of the people to the land and how both land and people depend on each other in order to meet their respective needs. Moving beyond the idea that land is simply there to manipulate so as to provide the individual with the necessities they need to live, the Indigenous paradigm relates the activity and way of life of the community to the land that they inhabit, which in turn is reflected in the peoples’ language and cultural practices. In demonstration of this, LaDuke points to the Anishinaabeg way of traditionally harvesting birch trees for the construction of canoes. Within such an activity, it was acknowledged that the trees, as distinct entities that existed beyond their usefulness, provided for the material basis of their canoes. In comparison with the relatively new practice of preferring plastic canoes, the traditional use of birch was reflective of a relationship that the Anishinaabeg had with the land, wherein nature was not regarded as something alien that exists for personal use, but rather that which provided for a way of being in the world.⁵ Each thing that existed in the world existed in a relationship with each other, such that they were to be regarded as relatives, whose usage by another was the result of a gift to whomever was using them.

Rather than be a static manipulatable thing, then, the land actively teaches people how to exist, and delineates a certain way of acting that allows for human flourishing. But, more importantly, it does so in a manner that allows for the flourishing of other things within nature. While such an attitude can be seen as embodied through the subsistence practices of various communities, it is no more clearly demonstrated than in traditional creation stories, particularly in the story of the Skywoman as told by Robin Wall Kimmerer.⁶ Having fallen to an ocean-covered earth and finding no place that she could rest, it is only through the kindness of the animals that she is able to find a home upon the earth. Through detailing how the land provided for the first human beings just like how it continues to provide for them now,⁷ Kimmerer’s use of this story is meant to illustrate the sense of responsibility that is implied in man’s relationship with the world. For providing mankind with so much, it is fitting that the land should in turn be given a gift⁸ and be treated with respect and in such a way
that promotes both the well-being of mankind and those animals, plants, and things whom Kimmerrer refers to as the “older siblings” of creation. In the Skywoman story, the titular character repays this kindness by dancing, and by cultivating the plant life that she introduces to earth for the benefit of herself and the animals of the world. Today, efforts are focused on restoring the relationship between man and the relatives around him, such that flourishing once again becomes mutual.9

Following the Western paradigm as outlined by LaDuke, the use of the earth has become distorted to the point that those considered relatives (e.g., sturgeon and buffalo) are disappearing, necessitating efforts that “restore and strengthen”10 a relationship with them. Comparing this with the Western idea of conservation, it can be seen that there is a stark contrast between the two. In the Western idea, conservation is defined in relation to other human beings and in defiance of the overall attitude to “use land how we best see fit”; in saying that a particular type of land deserves to be conserved, we tacitly state that the land has been set aside from its primary function of serving the whim of the person who would otherwise hold the deed. The attitude of conservation is one that contrasts with the typical idea towards land (in that it can become property) yet remains defined by such an idea. Restoration, however, involves an abandonment of such a project of mastery in order to foster a mutual relationship between the world and people. Restoration is impossible without heeding the stories of the land, which here means that efforts must be attuned to the responsibility that mankind owes the earth. As Kimmerrer notes, Skywoman was providing teachers for the world to tell mankind how to live11 in her act of planting the first seeds. Extrapolating from this, there must be a recognition that mankind does not occupy a position of authoritative power in relation to the world, but that each thing in existence is dependent on others for its survival. There is an ethical obligation in a way that differs from prevailing Western notions of what has moral status, in that both man and the world must cooperate to achieve flourishing, and it is only by acting in accordance with the responsibility owed to the land that such flourishing can be achieved.

In contrast to the Western tendency to associate conservation efforts with the desire not to obtain mastery over a particular area of land, then, environmental concerns of Indigenous communities are focused on the project of restoration, that is to say, Indigenous communities are interested in strengthening the relationship between the community and land. Because the land and what it provides are regarded as gifts for the benefit of all, ownership of said land for the purposes of either preservation or exploitation is an alien concept for Indigenous concerns regarding the environment. In illustrating this essential difference, Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi) demonstrates how any forthcoming discussion on environmentalism must not be simply about selectively saving or conserving a particular species, but in settling on what aspects of nature should be focused on given the immense challenges of environmental issues. Such a discussion would naturally be focused on both the social relationships that Indigenous people have with said aspects12 and the overall sense of dependence that man has on the environment.13 As much can be seen in how his own community is attempting to restore the populations of Nmê (lake sturgeon) and Manoomin (wild rice) and cultivate the health of the nibi (water, in this case referring to the waters of the Great Lakes region). By focusing on these particular parts of nature and attempting to restore them in relation to the Indigenous stories that highlight both their historical and contemporary importance, attention is drawn to Indigenous perspectives such that it is possible to articulate the aforementioned dependence and, moreover, build upon these perspectives in cultivating a sense of responsibility and collective maintenance among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.14 The efforts of indigenous communities towards this end are thus not directed towards the same goals of conservation or environmentalism that are found in Western ideas of these terms, but in articulating a different sort of paradigm that is in some respects antithetical to the traditional Western one.

Having now demonstrated that Indigenous ideas of land and relationships towards it are particular to said communities, a return to McKibben’s initial claim reveals that his assessment is wholly inadequate. While it is undoubtedly true that Indigenous communities possess a strategic position insofar as their voices are seen as relevant within particular environmental disputes in virtue of being recognized as legally owning the land they live on, the moral significance that McKibben assigns these communities does not adhere, as it is based on ideas of property and conservation that Indigenous communities do not share. Indeed, rather than proceeding from a view of land as in need of some extrinsically given purpose, Indigenous concerns about environmental issues centralize the necessity of acting in accordance with the land inasmuch as the land and other nonhuman relatives can help teach the best way to achieve mutual flourishing. Thus, because of the radical differences between such a view and the prevailing Western paradigm, McKibben’s attempts to encapsulate Indigenous environmental efforts within this dominant Western model are ultimately unjustified.

NOTES
2. The relative nature of this comment must be stressed. While it is without question that various Indigenous communities possess this strategic power due to their ownership of the land as understood through the Western paradigm, it is also true that this power is severely hampered by the repeated violations of sovereignty as perpetuated by various interests. Thus, the qualification of “relative” power, that is, relative to the very real possibility of another encroachment on Indigenous sovereignty, the success of which is undetermined.
3. This account is by no means meant to be an exhaustive look at how each Indigenous community regards land. Nor is it meant to be describing a pan-Indigenous approach, or even to suggest that such a view is possible. Rather, it is meant to highlight some relevant similarities between the stances of a select few Indigenous peoples.
7. Ibid., 1–5.
McKibben argues that location and being at the brunt of the effects of environmental changes puts Indigenous people at the forefront, I argue for two other reasons for the importance of Indigenous philosophy to issues on climate change. One, the Indigenous worldview of interdependency and respect for all life needs to be considered as a pragmatic as well as sacred claim. Secondly, protection and flourishing are crucial actions to preserve Indigenous rights and culture.

In his April 2019 interview response, McKibben argues that the geographic location (atop large deposits of waste or on the best routes to clean it) and history behind how Indigenous people came to be situated legitimizes the role they play in addressing the issue of climate change. In other words, Indigenous people feel the direct effects of climate change and, due to this, should be at the forefront of the debate. This for him means that environmental issues have moral significance to most Indigenous people solely because of their geographical location.

An example of the detrimental effects of climate change on Indigenous people is found in Winona LaDuke’s book Our Relations, where she discusses some of the negative effects that industrialization has had on Indigenous people. She highlights how environmental struggles have been part of the history of Indigenous people. Huge amounts of land were lost to flooding resulting from the establishment of industrial facilities like dams. Native lands were lost and people were displaced, all in a bid to promote industrialization and globalization. Beyond this, great amounts of pollution generated by industrial companies have had telling effects on the ways of life of Indigenous people. An example of such is the high rate of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination at Akwesasne. It is estimated that 25 percent of all North American industry is located near Akwesasne settlements, putting them at the receiving end of lethal and extensive pollutions. PCBs, which science has shown to be extremely poisonous, ended up in the surrounding water, soil, and air of these settlements. The land became contaminated to the detriment of Mohawk farmers. The water was equally affected, which meant that fish was no longer safe to eat. Beyond drastically altering their traditional ways of life, the pollutions left them with sicknesses that can be passed on to future generations. This example seems to capture the tactical aspect of McKibben’s argument. The location of Indigenous communities is of tactical as well as instrumental value to the issue of climate change. For who is best suited to address the issue if not those directly affected by it?

However, not to reject McKibben’s argument or belittle the importance of the role location plays in legitimizing the voice of Indigenous people on issues of environmental changes and pollution, Indigenous philosophy is also of importance to issues of climate change. To understand this, we turn to the teachings of Indigenous people concerning the relationship that should exist between humans and nature. These teachings are found embedded in the language of the people and passed down in the form of stories—stories which serve as ethical prescriptions for all aspects of life, be it respectful hunting, family life, ceremonies, etc. For instance, the Ute creation story and that of the Skywoman, even though not entirely similar, serve to pass along this instance, the Ute creation story and that of the Skywoman, both of which serve to pass along this teaching. The mistake and consequent punishment of the Coyote in the Ute creation story points towards discipline and curtailling curiosity, especially when we do not fully understand the phenomena in question. The story of Skywoman relays the story of how the world as we know it came to be. It begins with a pregnant woman’s drop from an island in the sky inhabited by sky people. She drops through a hole created by an uprooted tree and continues her descent for what seems like an eternity, until she gets closer to the earth. Animals who already inhabit the earth watch her descent and congregate in order to help her. A flock of birds catches her and gently guides her down to the back of the Great Turtle. The back of the Great Turtle has also been prepared by water animals like otters and beavers with sand from the ocean’s bottom, and this continues to increase in size until the earth is formed. The Turtle’s back becomes Skywoman’s home, and with the fruits she brings along with the help of the animals, she makes a life for herself and becomes mother of Haudenosaunee life, as we know it today. The story of Skywoman exemplifies the symbiotic relationship that should exist between humans and nature.

References


and other life forms (both animate and inanimate). Things we get from nature and other life forms are considered gifts and not entitlements. Nature is not a hierarchy with humans at the summit; rather, humans should acquire wisdom from other creatures who are considered more knowledgeable than humans. 7

Robin Wall Kimmerer points to how creation stories and cosmologies are a source of a people’s identity and orientation about the world. It shapes them even when they are not aware of it. 8 Here, Kimmerer stresses the effects that certain cosmologies have on the environment. The Skywoman who sees the world as a garden to be taken care of is contrasted with Eve who considers herself on exile and journeying to her real home. The effects on the environment of cosmologies of alienation have been gruesome, leading us to where we are today. 9

Through adopting some of the teachings of Indigenous philosophy, we might be able to change some of the behavior that comes with the dominant cosmologies, and perhaps change the parasitic relationship between humans and the environment or other life forms. This adoption could also play a restorative function, that is, help us retrace our steps and correct ills that have been done to the environment.

In an article titled “The People Belong to the Land,” LaDuke reviews some of these teachings and contrasts them with the Western paradigm. For her, the adoption of the Western globalization model and neglect of the Indigenous teachings is responsible for the ills of the environment which we see today. The Western paradigm regards land as a commodity to be shared and exploited. The Indigenous paradigm, on the other hand, sees humans as sharing a relationship with the land. The term nishinabe akin, which means “the land to which our people belong,” shows a connection with the land, and duties that come with that relation. The term dinawaymaaganinaadog, which means “all our relatives,” also shows a relationship between humans and all other life forms. The understanding, acceptance, and respect of this relation with the land leads to a more symbiotic relationship with the land, as opposed to the parasitic relationship that has been shown to result from adopting the Western paradigm.

This brings me to my second point. In adopting the Western paradigm of globalization, certain aspects of Indigenous philosophy are lost. For instance, food, which is considered sacred and a source of wisdom, is commodified by globalization. Varieties of crops that are unique and central to Indigenous cultures 10 are genetically modified for larger markets, causing strains on the original variety (as seen, for example, in the case of wild rice). Trees are sapped beyond measure and no attention is paid to how this affects consequent productions or future generations. 11 This goes against the right of a people to define and determine their food, and decide how to produce or take care of it, otherwise known as food sovereignty. To capture what is engrained in this right, let us consider the seven pillars of food sovereignty. The first six pillars were developed at a forum for food sovereignty in Mali, while the seventh was added by members of the Indigenous circle during the People’s Food policy. The pillars of food sovereignty are as follows:

1. To focus on food for people, that is, put people’s need for food at the center of policies developed instead of seeing it as a commodity.

2. To build on knowledge and skills of the past and equally develop technologies that promote local food production.

3. To work with nature, that is, reject approaches to food that undermine nature.

4. Value food providers.

5. To localize food systems, that is, reduce the distance between food producers and consumers.

6. To put control locally, that is, place control in the hands of local food providers and reject the privatization of nature resources.

7. Food is sacred, that is, see food as a gift and reject any approach that modifies the natural state of food. 12

From the foregoing discussion on the seven pillars of food sovereignty, 13 we come to see how adhering to the Western paradigm of globalization infringes upon the rights of people to healthfully and culturally appropriate food. Considering these strains, varieties that are culturally significant and sacred to Indigenous people are wiped out. This is another reason why I think Indigenous people should be at the forefront of the environmental fight. For not only is it a struggle to preserve the environment but also a struggle to preserve a way of life and autonomy. 14 As LaDuke puts it, “environmental justice work that links the intricate culture of the people to the water, the turtles, the animal relatives . . . .” 15 It can be inferred that any environmental changes that detrimentally affect life forms equally affect the Indigenous cultures which are linked to them. However, this struggle will not be one imposed upon Indigenous people in the form of a top-to-bottom approach, 16 but rather one that is internally generated and solely based on what Indigenous people consider to be important and the reasons why they consider it important.

In brief, I have argued that even though McKibben’s argument for the tactical and moral significance of the location of Indigenous people in the environment fight may be correct, I also think that, more importantly, the inherent right of a culture to self-protect and flourish outweighs any instrumental considerations.

NOTES

1. The link to the article is found in the list of references.

2. Winona LaDuke, All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life.

3. Having to change from the traditional meals consisting of eating fish to eating foreign spaghetti which led to an increase in diabetes.
6. This can be likened to the approach humans have taken in dealing with the environment, which has ultimately led to the environmental issues we are experiencing today.
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Ibid.
10. And reserved solely for subsistence farming.
12. This list of the pillars of food sovereignty was adapted from Food Secure Canada (FSC).
15. LaDuke, *All Our Relations*, 12.
16. Not a struggle that is imposed because of their location or how it affects the environment in general.

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Indigenous Critiques of Western Conceptions of Nature: Exploring the Value of Indigenous Knowledge in Relation to Climate Change

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UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

Indigenous people from Australia, New Zealand, Africa, as well as North and South America have had their land stolen and colonized by European settlers since the late 1400s. For hundreds of years governments have not only committed genocide against native peoples, but have allowed their lands to be abused, violated, and damaged to a catastrophic extent. We are now recognizing the degree of our negligence and see that we are in the middle of a global climate crisis that has the potential to eradicate the conditions necessary for human life on the planet. Today, many Indigenous groups have been trying to protect the land, rivers, and people from cataclysmic environmental damage created by irresponsible companies that have yet to be held accountable for their destructive practices. In an article titled “Idle No More Rises to Defend Ancestral Lands—and the Planet,” environmentalist Bill McKibben claims that Indigenous people are on the front lines in the battle against climate change. Yet he fails to acknowledge that it is unfair that this responsibility should rest on Indigenous people’s shoulders. Nor does he fully explain how Indigenous people are involved in the fight against climate change.

However, McKibben’s recognition of the vital role Indigenous people play in climate activism is accurate for two reasons: 1) Indigenous knowledge and practices have been shown to recover or safeguard biodiversity that has been threatened by climate change; and 2) their spiritual teachings express a mutually beneficial relationship with the environment—an approach societies can adapt to and promote when creating climate resilience. In this paper, I reveal the tensions in McKibben’s claims in light of Audre Lorde and contemporary Indigenous thinkers who offer an instructive method of understanding the importance of marginalized knowledge and traditional values. Failing to think critically about Indigenous people and the knowledge they have practiced for generations will result in losing resilient characteristics that are critical for our society to adopt if we are to survive and recover from climate change.

McKibben details how Canadian Indigenous activists have organized mass protests against Stephen Harper’s minacious Bill C-45 that would allow environmental safeguarding practices to be forgotten when mining in the tar sands—practices and limitations the Indigenous people knew were instrumental in protecting our surrounding lakes and rivers from becoming contaminated with carcinogens. Since then, all Indigenous tribes in Canada have refused the Canadian government permission to mine their land. According to McKibben, “[These tribes] are legally and morally, all that stand in the way of Canada’s total exploitation of its vast energy and mineral resources, including the tar sands, the world’s second largest pool of carbon.” The physical location of most Indigenous people’s land and the political power that accompanies their placement is a critical component to their role in climate activism.

An example of the critical role of Indigenous peoples’ locations and their particular knowledge of their environment can be seen in Australia. The knowledge that the various Australian Aboriginal groups possess on how to best take care of their territory and the deep concerns raised in 2019 about the changes they noticed in their environment were entirely ignored by the Australian Liberal government. “Aboriginal people have generations of knowledge about managing the landscape of Australia,” Budawang Elder Noel Butler from the Yuin Nation in New South Wales explains. Aboriginal people practiced “cool burns,” essentially controlled low-intensity fires that balance the various plants and trees growing in a specific region. Sometimes referred to as “cultural burns,” these fires are smaller, cooler, slower moving, and closer to the ground than the managed wildfires the Australian government has been practicing since the end of WWII. Cultural fires burn slow enough, and in such a controlled fashion, that the majority of animals have the opportunity...
to seek refuge from the flames. The wildfires in Australia can be seen as a result of climate change, but also as a devastating example of how Indigenous knowledge has been ignored and replaced by Western mismanagement.

The United Nations published an article in September 2019 detailing just how critical Indigenous people’s geographical placement is when considering the protection of the environment. Displaced tribes and native people now find themselves situated on biodiverse land that must be maintained in order to preserve a healthy biosphere. Because of their geographic positions, Indigenous people are now safeguarding 80 percent of the world’s remaining biodiversity. “Although Indigenous people constitute less than 5% of the world’s population,” they are responsible for preserving our world’s most precious resources, thereby playing a key role in climate protection.

How, then, as McKibben claims, does the geographical location of Indigenous people, as well as their traditional knowledge or belief system, build climate resilience? Climate resilience has been defined as the capacity for a social-economic system to absorb environment fluctuations caused by climate change while maintaining function. A system that can adapt, reorganize, and invent new technologies that promote desirable outcomes while maintaining the sustainability of the ecosystem leaves society better prepared for future environmental changes. This is the only viable social-economic system that climate scientists have suggested as the solution to reversing the damage already created by excessive carbon emissions.

Indigenous people have suffered under capitalist colonial values in countries across the world. I agree with McKibben’s claim that contemporary Indigenous people find themselves once again at the forefront of a battle, yet I want to acknowledge that this is a battle they did not ask for nor deserve. American philosopher Audre Lorde explores in *Sister Outsider* how people of color or minorities are expected to be patient cultural ambassadors who provide white people the tools to think critically about race or the unique problems people of color face. This role as “oppressor educator” demands that the person be charitable when engaging in conversations with groups of people who may have done little thinking about racism.

“There is a constant drain of energy” on the part of the people who may have done little thinking about racism. McKibben is also correct to gesture towards the consequences for the quality of McKibben's arguments, adversarial. These negative stereotypes can have harmful effects on McKibben's work to bring attention to the excellent work done by Indigenous activists in North America, but lacks Lorde's critical awareness of the burden this responsibility bears. McKibben uses this activism in his work to point to when talking about hope for social change, but does so without philosophical critical reflection. He almost suggests that the crisis is being handled by Indigenous groups, allowing the reader to relax and feel as if the problem will be taken care of. He could mention that this moral duty should not be considered an “Indigenous people’s problem” and that the Western world needs a shift in paradigmatic thinking. He also fails to include Indigenous people and their activism from anywhere outside North America—a blind spot in his research. He claims that Indigenous people are at the forefront of a global crisis, but does not discuss Indigenous organizing throughout other continents.

Additionally, despite McKibben’s good intentions, I find the phrasing of his point—“Indigenous people are at the forefront of this battle”—to be problematic for other reasons. Stereotypical images of Indigenous people as warriors may be conjured in the backs of his readers’ minds. Metaphorical language like this can be found in multiple articles of McKibben’s and presents this pervasive false image of Indigenous people as antagonistic, hostile, or adversarial. These negative stereotypes can have harmful consequences for the quality of McKibben’s arguments, diminish McKibben’s good intentions, and can also result in perpetuating damaging stereotypical images.

However, McKibben is correct to identify the value Indigenous knowledge can provide when attempting to recover biodiversity that has been threatened by climate change. McKibben is also correct to gesture towards the emphasis Indigenous cultures place on the responsibility of people to be mindful of their relationship with the land. Indigenous knowledge paired with a new attitude focused on how to take care of our environment is an approach societies can adapt to and promote when rebuilding communities. Indigenous knowledge and traditional values can become the foundational principles our society utilizes to combat climate change and formulate climate resilience.

Most Indigenous societies have already been functioning in a social-economic system that promotes sustainability and deep respect for our environment. This connection
that emphasizes taking care of the land while facilitating a mutually beneficial relationship with the environment is a tool society ought to practice going forward. For example, scholar-activist Kyle Powys Whyte (Neshnabé Potawatomi) writes on how deep the connection shared between Indigenous teachings and the environment runs. He details how many Indigenous people have taken a position against environmental destruction and have condemned climate destabilization, especially extinctions, as morally unacceptable. Indigenous communities across North America are no longer able to relate to their once-local plants and animals that are significant to their religion, culture, heritage, language, or ancestral knowledge because environmentally damaging conditions have either gravely endangered their populations or have exterminated them entirely.

Furthermore, as Indigenous scholar Robin Kimmerer describes in her chapter, "Counsel of Pecans," the American government's "divide and conquer" method used on her ancestors was antithetical to their traditional custom of togetherness and community. As discussed in "Counsel of Pecans," President Andrew Jackson was responsible for the tragic Trail of Tears beginning in the 1830s, the forced relocation of 100,000 Indigenous people from their ancestral land in the southern states to land that was deemed "undesirable" on the west bank of the Mississippi river. This mass migration approved and enforced by both federal and state law displaced entire communities over the course of twenty years (1830–1850). Tribes such as the Choctaw, Seminoles, Creek, Chickasaw, and Cherokee living in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee were forced to march across state lines to their newly designated "Indian Territory." Kimmerer writes, "Indian Removal policies wrenched many Native peoples from our homelands. It separated us from our traditional knowledge and lifeways, the bones of our ancestors, our sustaining plants” with disastrous implications for these communities.

The American government's motivation behind forcibly removing hundreds of thousands of people from their land was twofold: 1) white colonizers wanted to eradicate "Indians" who refused to accept a European or "white" lifestyle, and 2) European settlers wanted Indigenous land for cotton and tobacco farming. The "Indian Problem," as articulated by George Washington, was not resolved through integrating Natives into settler lifestyles. Washington predicted that the Indigenous people would abandon their culture, knowledge, languages, and societies once they were forced into white colonies. His goal was to "civilize" the Natives through Christianity or through the adoption of Anglo-European economic practices such as the individual ownership of land and property. However, many tribes refused to accept their colonizers' impositions and chose to remain independent from the United States.

The sovereign land the Indigenous people belong to was highly sought after by white settlers looking to establish plantations dedicated to mono-agriculture. Settlers knew the southern states were characterized by their ideal growing conditions for high-value crops such as cotton, tobacco, indigo, and sugar cane. State government officials (often aspiring plantation owners) petitioned the federal courts to forcibly remove the Indigenous people from this highly valuable land until eventually Jackson signed into law the Indian Removal Act in 1830.

This great displacement caused irreparable damage to American Indigenous culture and knowledge after the colonization of their ancestral land, and similar narratives can be heard from Indigenous peoples across the world. As stressed by Kimmerer, a deep connection and symbiotic relationship with nature is often found in Indigenous spiritual belief systems; particular environmental knowledge is generated from observing and listening to patterns in nature, and this knowledge is passed down and practiced throughout generations. Familiar knowledge of an environment cannot be shared or practiced by the next generation if the Indigenous people are transplanted to a foreign land. "So much was scattered and left along that trail [Trail of Tears];" knowledge and familiar traditions were lost when the Indigenous were forced off their homelands. As Kimmerer notes, not only were thousands of lives lost once her people were removed from their land, but invaluable teachings, oral stories, customs, and environmental knowledge were lost as well. Furthermore, these teachings can be unique and distinct to each particular tribe, depending on its traditional locality. Kimmerer retells the Native creation story of Skywoman; the relationship shared between Skywoman (a woman who brings seeds from the heavens to feed the animals, who then courageously save her from drowning) is a tale meant to illustrate how integrated our lives and the environment around us truly are. Skywoman teaches us the origin of the people and our interconnectedness with nature. This teaching belongs to a set of what Kimmerer characterizes as "Original Instructions" that aids in the development of one's moral compass that can help us better understand our positions historically and morally. Kimmerer reflects upon this teaching and finds herself asking, "Skywoman seems to look me in the eye and ask, in return for this gift of the world on Turtle's back, what will I give in return?" This teaching provides a framework for understanding just how polluting rivers, burning forests, and damaging our entire ecosystem, as we have been doing throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is an immoral and shameful response to the gift Skywoman granted us.

In a similar vein, the Anishinaabe's specific method of crafting canoes from birch-bark is now a dwindling, nearly forgotten art due to the recent decline of birch trees in the Minnesota area. Indigenous scholar and activist Winona LaDuke believes the birch trees are disappearing because the Indigenous people have "neglected [forgotten, or lost their] teachings" due to mass displacement and have been unable to manage the birch tree population. With their traditional knowledge lost, the tree population suffers.

Many Indigenous people have dedicated themselves to preserving or salvaging what remains of these sacred plants and animals. For instance, the Anishinaabe people have become the leaders in the conservation of North American wild rice. The Nibi (water) and Manoomin Symposium invites "tribal rice harvesters in the Great Lakes, Indigenous scholars, paddy rice growers, representatives
from mining companies, state agencies, and university researchers interested in studying genetic modification of rice together with the goal of conserving this precious resource for generations. Again, recognizing one's moral duty to act as a custodian for our lands introduces a change of paradigmatic thinking.

Some may argue that Indigenous knowledge or traditional values “has no place at the table,” so to speak, when discussing technologies that may reverse the aftermath of rising temperatures. Why should contemporary scientific institutions consider ancient knowledge when engineering modern cities built to withstand the effects of climate change? Scientists in the West like to think of their knowledge as “un-mediated” or “as pure fact,” while they claim to take a God’s-eye-perspective on their experiments. Can knowledge only be generated in a very narrow way? Is there only one kind of science we can use to truly understand the world?

These traditions reject anyone whom they deem incapable of taking up an epistemological position from a “nowhere” view point of subjectivity. Donna Haraway and Lorraine Code among other contemporary epistemologists believe that this concept of objectivity has the potential to disproportionately marginalize minorities in that only men own the currency of objectivity. Particularly, Code criticizes traditional scientific knowledge production and wants to incorporate diverse demographics and geographic locations in contemporary knowledge production by utilizing a feminist approach to epistemology such as Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge. Situated knowledge rejects the idea that the sciences which attempt to naturalize knowledge are neutral, objective, and geographically or demographically universal. Instead, this detached neutrality carries within itself the seeds of oppression and obliteration.

When knowledge does not take the usual form academia has taught us to accept, it is rejected on the grounds that the standpoint has nothing to offer. If knowledge is not communicable through statistics, scientific reports, or academic papers, but instead is shared through oration, it is regarded as anecdotal folklore, no matter what information is being shared.

Why does the majority of the population refuse to trust the work of Indigenous scholars, researchers, and scientists, who may present their work in alternative ways? As Lorde points out, oppressors are quick to consult minorities on topics of race, but do not trust their knowledge on other topics as legitimate. As more researchers challenge the traditional definition of science, we must genuinely and critically consider Indigenous knowledge as science if we are to make change during this global crisis. Traditional knowledge often values a more nuanced, contextual, and holistic view of reality from observation, experience, and thought—not just “sterile” lab experimentation.

As well, we have seen Indigenous knowledge save endangered rice, fish, and plants when taken seriously and applied in appropriate ways by Indigenous people. In 2006, there was a catastrophic burn in a Warddeken Indigenous protected area in the Northern Territory of Australia. Forty percent of the valley burned, when less than half of the land scorched by fire actually required treatment. Six years later, Indigenous rangers from Warddeken Land Management, supported by Bush Heritage Australia, were finally permitted the ability to treat their land with their own traditional practices, including the application of cultural burning. That year only 23 percent of protected land had been burned, with 19 percent of controlled burns taking place during the coolest (and best) time of the year.

In spite of the birch tree deforestation and land displacement, the White Earth Land Recovery initiative lead by LaDuke has rebuilt the community’s own viable economy while repairing their ecosystem. They have kept their traditional knowledge alive and have been able to sustain themselves with regenerative agriculture programs developed on their reservation in North Minnesota. Nearly all of the creatures that originate from this land, minus the Buffalo, have either been fully returned or are on their way. LaDuke states that this is “a pretty good testament” and sign of the resilience of an ecosystem when Indigenous knowledge of the land has been practiced.

In conclusion, McKibben’s claim that Indigenous people play both a tactical and moral role in climate change is accurate, but his claims need to be considerate of what Lorde tells us. It would be a mistake to assume that climate activism is the sole responsibility of Indigenous groups, as it would be egregious to assume all people of color should play the role of race educator. Yet when Indigenous people voice their knowledge about endangered biodiversity, their voices may not be recognized as credible. Not only do many Indigenous people identify as protectors of the environment, but they have developed principles which can help societies rethink their connection with nature. By discrediting “the wealth of knowledge in all its different forms, treating it as worthless because it doesn’t look like what we expect, we are merely perpetuating a colonial tradition of treating people not like ourselves as less than human. And that might cost us more than we expect.” Failing to practice and implement Indigenous knowledge will result in losing the only chance at climate resilience our global community has if we are to survive and recover from climate change.

NOTES

1. Bill McKibben, “Idle No More Rises to Defend Ancestral Lands—and the Planet.”
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Jens Korff, “Cool Burns: Key to Aboriginal Fire Management.”
5. Ibid.
6. “Values of Indigenous Peoples Can Be a Key Component of Climate Resilience.”
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 9.

23. Ibid., 8.


28. Ibid., 227.

29. Chi Luu, "What We Lose When We Lose Indigenous Knowledge.


33. Chi Luu, "What We Lose When We Lose Indigenous Knowledge.

REFERENCES


Preliminary Remarks on the Undergraduate Submissions and Course Syllabus

Shay Welch

SPELMAN COLLEGE

In fall 2019, I taught my advanced course in Native American philosophy at Spelman College. Spelman College is an all-women’s historically black college (HBCU). Because I require most of the core philosophy assignments in this class to be delivered through creative performances—in accordance with methods of a Native paradigm of performative epistemology, rather than with methods of a Western paradigm of written epistemology (see syllabus) I have my students write a research, conference-style paper at the end of the semester. This is the only course in which I have the students work all semester on one long paper. The reason why I allow them to write a paper for the semester is that this is their only interaction with Native American philosophy. The students (very reasonably) struggle greatly with the creative construction and presentation of philosophical claims and, over time, have convinced me to allow them to write at least one paper so that they are able to do a core assignment that is in accordance with their training in the Western academic style. The students are required to construct their own research topics as a result of the readings.

There are a few requirements for their paper. First, they must write within a Native philosophical paradigm; while the papers are written within a Western, analytic style, which allows them to write consistently with all of their other courses and to fall within the rubrics for the major’s student learning outcomes, they must write using only Native analyses of philosophical concepts such as personhood, agency, relations, etc., and they must constrain their arguments to be in accordance with all foundational Native philosophical principles. Second, they must use Native studies/feminism/philosophy/theory sources almost exclusively. Third, they must treat the philosophical material as a current working philosophical framework that can be applied to our lived experience, just like the other theories covered in our Western philosophy courses. And finally, they must construct a personalized...
research topic that connects with them in light of the conceptual issues raised in the readings. The students do research on their own throughout the semester and regularly check in with me to adjust and tweak their research topics as they do more research.

I selected the following two papers from this class as well suited to, and interesting for, submission to the newsletter at an undergraduate level. I also think these two papers highlight the meaningful thematic intersections that can arise between Native and Indigenous philosophy and Black feminist philosophy. While the students here do not explicitly engage Black feminist philosophy since they are required to draw from Native research, they have extensive personal and theoretical familiarity with the analyses and principles of these frameworks through courses within the philosophy major and women’s studies program. My suggestion to students for how to engage philosophical material in an original way is for them to question how the material can be applied to, or will change when applied to, the Black woman’s experience. I believe that the themes the students chose reflect their perspectives regarding how Native philosophy is relevant to their lived experience.

The purpose of including undergraduate papers in the newsletter is to provide examples of how Native and Indigenous philosophy can be taught and undertaken by students in their philosophical training. This course is open to all students and can satisfy the general humanities requirement, but given its advanced level, this course is undertaken mostly by philosophy majors and minors and will satisfy one of the following core requirements: metaphysics, epistemology, non-Western philosophy.

Syllabus

Native American Philosophy
PHI 325
( Abbreviated)

Required Texts:


Catalogue Description:

The purpose of this course is to orient ourselves with a philosophy that asks the same sorts of questions that Western philosophy has posed but that approaches these questions from a different worldview articulated through a set of alternative concepts and values. Questions such as “What is there?” “What do we know?” and “What is good?” are reexamined from the Native framework of values.

Course Description:

This course will be taught in a manner similar to Introduction to Philosophy. The purpose of this course is to orient ourselves with a philosophy that asks the same sorts of questions that Western philosophy has posed but that approaches these questions from a different worldview articulated through a set of alternative concepts and values. Questions such as “What is there?” “What do we know?” and “What is good?” will be reexamined from the Native framework of values. We will begin the course with The Dance of Person & Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy by Thomas M. Norton-Smith. This book will show how the Native philosophical framework differs from the Western framework and explain why and how Native philosophy is a legitimate philosophical perspective. Then we will read anthologies and monographs, which will introduce you to specific ways of addressing the basic questions of philosophy. The purpose of this course is to introduce you to unique value systems to show that they are 1) legitimate and philosophically complex and 2) crucial conceptual tools to add to our own knapsacks of philosophical skills, which will give you more concepts with which to work and will broaden your comprehension of and respect for differing perspectives more generally.

Design: There is no lecturing in this class; all classroom discussion derives from the student’s ability to develop and lead discussion.

Class Expectations:

Final Paper: 25% of the final grade

Paper requirement: You will be working towards a 12-page, conference-quality paper.

Bibliography and paper outlines are required and are part of the overall grade.

Annotated bibliography must contain 20 well-chosen pieces (book chapters or articles) and the final paper must contain 12 of these in addition to your in-course materials.

Oral Presentations: 25% total

There will be three creative, performative presentations that present your philosophical ideas and responses to the material read. These presentations are broadly oral in honor of the Native American Communicative and Intellectual style. These presentations will be a blend of proper philosophical analysis content presented with an attempt at narrative/storytelling, which includes song, dance, games, play, poetry, spoken word, and metaphorical/cosmological storytelling. The presentations should be about 10 minutes in length. You must be very prepared for these presentations. About half of the score will derive from presentation preparedness.
Procedural Knowing to Facilitate Healing after Collective Trauma

Spencer Nabors
SPELMAN COLLEGE

In this paper, I argue that after collective trauma, communities can learn procedural knowledges in order for healing to take place. Healing is an experience that is often called for after trauma. While trauma can be experienced individually, it is often the case that trauma is communal and experienced by a whole group. I argue that collective trauma actually pushes communities to learn or create ways of knowing that can facilitate collective healing. While healing through procedural knowing may not occur in the same way for every individual, it is a collective process due to the ways in which procedural knowledges are communal.

A Western analysis of knowledge typically understands knowledge as justified true belief. This generally means that knowledge is understood in a propositional way which shows up as "S knows that P." "S" refers to the subject and "P" refers to the proposition that is known. In The Dance of Person and Place, Thomas M. Norton-Smith explains that propositional knowledges deal with knowing-that. Native American conceptions of knowledge are particularly different in that they deal with knowing-how.¹ Procedural knowledge is an experiential form of knowing where individuals come to know through their own bodies.² In the Native American tradition, knowledge is not gained through propositions but through experiences. Procedural knowledge must also be taught through activities and actions so that another individual may learn through participation. Lee Hester and Jim Cheney also explain that it is difficult to verbally explain procedural knowledges as they must be experienced.³ For example, when learning how to drive a car, verbal explanations are helpful, but one must sit behind the wheel and perform the action in order truly to learn.

Of course, the epistemological differences between the Western and Native American worlds do not negate the existence of other forms of knowledge. This means that while Western epistemology understands knowledge in a propositional way, there is still procedural knowledge in the Western world, such as the above example of driving a car. This is also true for propositional knowledge in Native American epistemology. Norton-Smith explains that a big difference between propositional and procedural knowledge is lifespan.⁴ Procedural knowledge in Native American epistemology is understood as knowledge that is carried with individuals through their lifetime. This is because this form of knowledge is experiential. On the other hand, in Western epistemology, propositional knowledge is understood as knowledge that is eternal as it is designed to outlive us. For example, the propositional knowledge statement "dogs are mammals" is understood as being true whether a knowing subject is alive or not. Propositional knowledge claims are thought to outlast an individual lifespan as the knowledge itself is not tied with lived experiences.⁵

In The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology, Shay Welch further explains procedural knowledge. She maintains that any fair analysis of Native American epistemology must understand procedural knowledge as more than just "know-how" knowledge.⁶ She maintains that with procedural knowledge, one must be an active participant in coming to know. There is a creativity involved in the "doing" that creates procedural knowledge. This is because embodiment is central in Native American epistemology and procedural knowledge. Given that procedural knowledge involves lived experience, the body is a key part of this form of knowing. Individuals come to know through their bodily experiences. For example, when a new mother is learning how to breastfeed, she comes to know with and through her body. Or, when a child is learning to ride a bike, they learn through bodily movement.

Further, procedural knowledge is not only relegated to skill. Procedural knowledge encompasses all actions that cause an individual to come to know. Welch maintains that Native American epistemology does not attempt to transform procedural knowledge into propositional knowledge claims. There is no venture to change know-how knowledge into know-that claims.⁷ Procedural knowledge need not be forced into a propositional statement. Welch also emphasizes that the word "procedural" is important in that it insinuates that there is a performance aspect to this kind of knowledge. Welch calls this system a "performing-knowing system" because procedures are performances as "procedure" is an adroit term. Given that this form of knowledge is phenomenologically embodied, it is constantly evolving as individuals have new and different experiences. Therefore, she adopts the phrase "procedural
Procedural knowing is communal, as our embodied experience is of being related to our environment. In their article “A Native American Relational Ethic: An Indigenous Perspective on Teaching Human Responsibility,” Amy Kliem Verbos and Maria Humphries explain that relationality plays a major role in Native American communities. They explain that learning occurs in a communal manner because knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. The relational values of the community apply to knowledge production as no knowledge belongs to an individual. Therefore, while procedural knowing may seemingly come from individual experiences, the knowledge is communal. The foundation of relationality in Native American communities means that experiences happen relationally. While a specific experience may only happen to an individual, the experience occurs in community because of the emphasis on relationality in the Native American worldview.

Furthermore, learning is a communal process in Native American education. In “American Indian Epistemologies,” Gregory Cajete explains that community is a foundation in Native American knowledge production. Cajete explains, in the same way as Norton-Smith and Welch, that Native American knowledge is procedural and experiential. This means that learning is done through action and performance. Cajete explains that Native American learning, education, and knowledge production is done in and with community. This ultimately means that in Native American epistemology, knowledge is both procedural and communal. Despite the fact that an experience may be individual, the procedural knowledge is still communal due to the fact that knowledge production is a communal process.

Community is one of the most important aspects of the Native American worldview. It is true that communal knowledge as an epistemic process is readily erased and invalidated by the academy in the Western world as knowledge production is understood as an individual process. Welch, when discussing her aim to account for an epistemology in the Native American worldview, explains that everything that one comes to comprehend is so due to their communal understanding. This is because knowing itself is a communal process. Knowing can never be individual because everyone is positioned in a particular community which helps to facilitate their own understandings. In Native theories of how we come to know, an individual is inextricably tied with their community, which means that they cannot come to know outside of the collective. A knowing agent is socially and epistemically positioned within a specific community which impacts how the agent comes to know.

Native American epistemology understands that there are polycentric perspectives. In Indian from the Inside: Native American Philosophy and Cultural Renewal, Dennis McPherson and J. Douglas Rabb explain that every person holds knowledge but no person holds all of the knowledge. Every person has a perspective and all of the perspectives together create the whole of knowledge. In this way, knowledge must be communal because no individual can hold knowledge completely. Ultimately, it is the case that procedural knowledge must be communal. This is because learning and knowledge production is always a communal process. Despite the fact that experiences might seem to be an individual phenomenon, community is the foundation of the worldview, meaning that experiences occur while one is positioned within a community. Finally, the whole of knowledge is held by the community and cannot be wholly understood by one individual.

I argue that communities can collectively learn new ways of procedural knowing after communal trauma in order for healing to take place. My argument assumes the unified survival of the traumatized community. Procedural knowing is typically understood as a practical form of knowing, which means that it typically has a clear purpose. Healing is the purpose and the goal after collective and communal trauma. I argue that trauma pushes individuals and communities to search for practices that will help to facilitate healing. Procedural knowledge as understood through the context of Native American epistemology shows that knowledge is practical and experiential. Healing that takes place after collective trauma must be an experience in which the whole community takes part. Understanding knowledge as practical means that healing is possible with procedural knowing. Healing must be the practical goal of the procedural knowing that the community all takes part in producing and doing. It is also important that the procedural knowing that attempts to move towards healing must only be done within the community that collectively experienced the trauma so that individuals or groups who did not experience this trauma cannot impede on the healing.

Of course, it is true that healing cannot take place overnight. However, I argue that procedural knowing can help to lead towards healing after communities go through collective trauma. In Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, she explains the process of planting the three sisters: corn, beans, and squash. Certainly, planting is a procedural knowledge as it is a practical experience that involves knowing. Kimmerer explains that not only is the planting a communal procedural knowledge process, but wisdom and lessons can also be gained through the planting of the three sisters. She also argues that the planting allows the individual to feel closer with the earth and to feel more connected with the plants and with the community. The planting of the three sisters can show that procedural knowing is able to move an individual and a community. The procedural knowing of planting helps to build up the community because of the wisdom that is gained. Kimmerer’s explanation of the three sisters shows that procedural knowing can have a good and practical impact on the community as a whole. Understanding that lessons and wisdom can be gained through communal procedural knowing is important in order to further understand that healing is possible through procedural knowing. While the planting of the three sisters may not specifically be a healing type of knowledge, it is a way of procedural knowing that can facilitate healing. Many non-Native communities also find that planting can be healing individually and communally.
Ceremonies and rituals, similar to the planting of the three sisters, involve procedural knowing in that they are practical and experiential. Welch explains that when rituals are in harmony with the environment, they can aim towards specific goals such as healing. 17 Welch argues, through explaining Indigenous dance as politically radical, that procedural knowing can be a site of healing. Welch explains in her discussion on Native dance that the procedural knowing that facilitates healing works to counteract trauma that occurred in Native American communities. 18 She maintains that using procedural knowledge to help heal trauma is actually a way of furthering Native American epistemology. When procedural knowing is used to facilitate healing, Native American epistemology as a whole is strengthened because healing becomes a part of the knowing process. 19 This ultimately means that knowledge production can actively involve an aspect of healing.

The fact that procedural knowing is embodied plays a major role in helping communities to heal after collective trauma. Qwo-Li Driskill explains in “Theatre as Suture: Grassroots Performance, Decolonization, and Healing” that embodied performance and procedural knowing helps individuals to learn what healing feels like. 20 Knowing what healing feels like makes it easier for individuals to “do” healing with their bodies. Procedural knowing involves the whole individual, meaning that their body is involved in the knowledge process. Trauma happens to the whole individual. This means that healing must involve the whole individual as well, so their flesh must be involved in the procedural knowing in order for healing to truly occur. When embodied knowing has the goal of achieving healing, the individual’s body comes to know healing and start to reverse the collective trauma that occurred.

The healing process that procedural knowing can help to facilitate occurs within the community. Of course, as outlined previously, despite the fact that the experience may seem individualistic, the communal foundation means that the healing of the procedural knowing is a collective process. Given that the trauma that occurred was communal and collective, the most beneficial way for healing to occur is in a communal and collective manner as well so that the healing is unified and impacts all. Therefore, the procedural knowing that facilitates healing is a communal type of knowing and knowledge production. The fact that the trauma happened to a community as a whole helps the community to create procedural knowing for healing collectively. Given that trauma can impact individuals in many different ways, communal practices of healing allow for different healing styles that can reach each person. While healing may not occur in the same way for all individuals in a community, the process of healing through procedural knowing is ultimately a collective one.

Rebecca Wirihana and Cheryl Smith explain in “Historical Trauma, Healing, and Well-Being in Maori Communities” that communal trauma is passed down from generation to generation. 21 They argue that performances and actions can facilitate healing when they are an emotional release. Procedural knowing processes can be developed to offer a therapeutic feeling to a community. After collective trauma, communities have an opportunity to create practices to release the pain that they experienced. 22 A practical and embodied way of expressing emotion is a form of procedural knowing that helps to offer a release from communal and collective trauma that has occurred. A communal procedural knowledge that offers an emotional release can create an intergenerational process of healing. 23 This allows the community to deal with the emotions that the trauma brought as a collective.

I argue that when collective trauma occurs, communities are pushed into creating procedural knowledge for healing to take place. Trauma causes individuals to develop practices in order to deal with the hurt with which the whole community deals. When relationality is a core value, the community is pushed to work collectively to help each other when faced with pain and trauma. Given that knowledge production is a communal process, it logically follows that after collective trauma, knowledges would be created as a community for healing to take place. Procedural communal knowing having practical goals means that when communities come together in an attempt to reach healing, they can create ways of procedural knowing in order to benefit one another and help the collective. Hurt pushes individuals to take actions to deal with the pain that they have. Therefore, communal trauma pushes the collective to take actions as a community to recover. Collective action is taken after communal trauma to form procedural knowledge to move the community towards healing.

Performances of procedural knowing also create the space that is necessary for healing to occur. When collective trauma occurs within a specific community, the procedural knowledges that are formed for healing must also be done within that community. I argue that there is a level of epistemic isolation necessary for procedural knowledges to have a healing aspect. This isolation gives the community protection from the dominant culture. Epistemic isolation refers to only communicating with and learning from one’s own social group. There are many benefits for a traumatized community’s being epistemically isolated when it comes to producing procedural knowledge for healing. The community must not be with the traumatizer in order for true healing to be possible for the collective. When the community is epistemically isolated from the traumatizer, they do not have to deal with a privileged group minimizing or doubting their trauma. I argue that communal procedural knowing that has a goal of achieving healing requires epistemic isolation from those who played a role in the traumatizing so that the community does not have to prove that they faced trauma or that they need to heal. When the community is epistemically isolated, space is created for healing to occur.

Given that trauma is carried with the body, it is important that procedural knowing for healing must allow the body to tell its truth about the trauma. The damage done by trauma occurs to the flesh and down into the bones. Therefore, healing practices must involve the flesh and the bones as well. Welch explains that Native dancing finds and shows truths that are within the body. 24 Embodied procedural knowing that attempts to move a community towards healing allows the body to recall the memory of the trauma and tell its own truth. The performance of embodied procedural
knowing gives individuals and the community as a whole the opportunity to tell their own story of hurt and pain that was experienced. When this embodied re-membering is done with the community, the trauma that exists within bodies can be dealt with collectively. Damages to the body can be dealt with when the community uses their bodies to search for healing. This embodied procedural knowing that is used to move towards healing is resistive towards the trauma that occurred.

I further argue that “doing” healing as a community helps to expedite the healing process. If an individual is to search for healing on their own, they are not in relation with individuals who can help them. Additionally, when trauma occurs collectively, other individuals are aware and familiar with the struggle. This familiarity aids individuals in attempting to help one another reach healing. It is still possible that an individual can create procedural knowledges on their own to try and reach a point of healing. However, when procedural knowledges are created in and with community for the purpose of healing, individuals can heal collectively from trauma that occurred. This maintains the relational aspect of the trauma, allowing the community to heal in a unified way. Further, this communal aspect of procedural knowledge with a goal of healing is helpful in that it brings the community together. It is often the case that communal or collective trauma attempts to tear individuals apart from one another or create a divide. When procedural knowing and healing is done with the community, the collective is brought together and the goal that the traumatizer may have had to break up the community is ruined.

In conclusion, communities create ways of procedural knowing after collective trauma in order to reach a place of healing. Given that procedural knowledge is practical, it can have a purpose or goal of healing. Wisdom and lessons can be gained through certain procedural knowledges, which can help to facilitate the process of healing the community. Ceremonies and rituals, when experienced by the whole community, can lead towards healing and counteracting trauma, which ultimately strengthens the epistemological system. When trauma is passed down from generation to generation, the procedural knowing must be a transgenerational way of releasing emotions that were caused by the collective trauma. Additionally, the procedural knowing is an embodied experience which allows for the body and flesh to be healed from the trauma. Procedural knowing for the purpose of healing helps to teach bodies what healing feels like. Communities must also be epistemically isolated for healing to occur in the best way. Further, communal procedural knowledge for the purpose of healing helps to bring the community together and reverse the goals of trauma. Communities are pushed towards creating ways of procedural knowing as a collective after trauma occurs to the whole in order to reach healing for the entire community.

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NOTES

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How Reconnecting with the Land May Help Heal Trauma in Native American Communities

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Before the Western invasion of their land, Native Americans were bound to their homelands through cultural ties. Indigenous lands were seen as more than a geographical land space. Instead, they were communities in which individuals lived in harmony with nature. As a result, the land encouraged the facilitation of knowledge. For Indigenous Americans, living with the land is a critical part of their identity. However, through centuries of violence and systemic oppression, Native Americans have lost access to their homelands through forced removal, and thus have lost part of their identities.

Furthermore, the loss of identity with Indigenous cultures prevents many Native Americans from engaging with traditional cultural ceremonies. While in this essay I argue the stripping of Native Americans from their homelands is a contributing factor to the development of generational trauma in Indigenous communities, I also will claim that a modified reintroduction to Native Americans spaces—one that takes into consideration the fact that many Native American lands have been stolen or inaccessible—may contribute to the healing of trauma and prevent the transmission of pain and loss to the next generation. This essay will focus on the importance of land in the native communities as a space to develop knowledge through ceremonial performances.

Conceptually, living within the land is the concept that one is living in harmony with their moral obligations to the earth. The earth and the individual live in relation to each other as equals as opposed to human beings being thought of as above the earth and in control of plants and animals. From the Native American framework, there is an expansive concept of persons. The expansive concept of persons is rooted in the belief that trees, animals, and spirits are nonhuman persons that are as worthy of respect as humans. According to Brian Burkhart in Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures, in order to live within the land, you must live within a locality. Living within a locality is living within nature, meaning that the individual lives in harmony and balance with the land itself. Living in a delocality, however, is the opposite of living in a locality; the human maintains an attitude that they are separated from nature, and not only believes that humans are separate, but holds further that some humans are seen as above nature, and therefore they do not have a moral obligation to protect and provide for it. The notion of bounded space is the space within living in a locality; when an individual lives in a locality, they are bounded to a particular space in which they are equal to the land.

I argue that it is better to live in a locality like the Indigenous American framework as opposed to the Western framework of living in a delocality. This is because living within the land is important to understanding our identity. Home is not where the heart is, but rather is where we live. Where we live has a critical impact on our identity: regardless of who we are, many of us strongly identify with where we live and often define who we are in accordance to where our childhood memories are located. The text Culture, Tradition, and Globalization: Some Philosophical Questions by Asha Mukherjee states, "The sense of belonging, the common sedimented experiences and cultural forms that are associated with a place, are crucial to the concept of a local culture." Thus, living within the land, or living in a locality, is crucial to understanding the identity of the individual. For humans and nonhumans alike, our needs and desires are shaped by the area in which we live in. It is not possible to exist without having some relationship to the land. This is why a person’s identity is tied to where they live, as this is their home. Unfortunately, though, the Western framework is conceptually tied to the idea of living with in a delocality, as previously mentioned. This delocality results in humans having no sense of place. Without a sense of place, it is difficult for individuals to maintain an identity, because everything is around them is in flux—an attachment to the land does not exist. Living in a locality allows for a person to have an established identity. Particularly, Native Americans have been stripped of identity with the land due to Western civilization colonizing the land, making it difficult for Native Americans to have bounded space, which is essential to their framework.

Moreover, delocality results in binary relationships. Binary relationships are those in which there are only two options: something either A or non-A. Binary frameworks lead to some humans determining the values of nonhumans and humans. The binary system derived from delocality results in Westerners viewing anything aside from themselves as worthy of unlimited consumption. The view that white men have dominion over everything else is why the land and the Indigenous people that lived on the land have been mistreated and exploited for centuries. In "The American Indian as a Miscast Ecologist," Calvin Martin argues that Westerners lack a land ethic, that is, a moral obligation to the land, especially a human-to-land ethic. I argue this lack of land ethic leads to all nonhumans having instrumental value. As discussed by Burkhart, instrumental value is based upon how useful a nonhuman person is to the human, whereas intrinsic value is where value is placed on nonhumans because it is essential to the nonhuman. Native Americans have always had a land ethic, and have thus seen that everything in nature has value. This ideology leads to Indigenous Americans having a moral obligation to provide for the land, as it provides for them. In different Native American tribes, the land has been particularly generous to
them. It provides space for ceremonies, food, and shelter. Land is critical to Native American identity, resulting in living in a locality. Living within the land creates an ethical reciprocal relationship between humans and nonhumans alike.

Moreover, another concept essential to living within the land is the concept of communalism. Communalism bases itself on the belief that others, and our relationship to others, is more important than us as individuals. It focuses on the "we" instead of the "I." Unlike Western culture, Indigenous Americans believe that in order to be a person, and have an identity, there must be a community. An individual is part of the community, and there is a reciprocal relationship between members of a community and the individual; in other words, the individual benefits from the community, and the community also benefits from the presence of the individual. The text How It Is by V. F. Cordova discusses how a Native worldview has a conceptual framework, that is the basis to ideology and values. One of these values, communal reality, is critical to the Native American conceptual framework because it determines the values and way of living a particular group of people believes in.

Communalism, however, is not simply defined by the people of a particular group. As previously mentioned, Native Americans believe in the expansive concept of persons; thus, communalism includes the people, nonhuman persons, and the land itself. The land itself is an integral part of community. In "People Speaking Silently to Themselves: An Examination of Keith Basso's Philosophical Speculations on Sense of Place in Apache Cultures," Martin Ball discusses how oral traditions in Apache culture use the land to embody past traditions by associating stories and events with places and landforms. I agree with Ball in the sense that oral tradition does have the ability to connect individuals to the land. However, I add that the land provides Native Americans the opportunity to engage in the act of place-making; since the land provides place-making, the traditions and persons living within the land are all engaged in the concept of communalism. The development of communalism through the land encourages Indigenous people to live within a locality, as they are able to be more in touch with the community, and the community helps to create the individual's identity. Moreover, the land that has provided Indigenous Americans the ability to practice traditions also has supported their well-being. Native American tribes that are located in particular geographic regions have a communal reality that is centered in a particular region. For example, being located by a river is influential to the community because the people have a reciprocal relationship between the river and the people. Geographical landmarks are part of the Native American conceptual framework; thus they help create the community.

Unlike the predominant Western belief that the individual is more important than the group, most Native American communities support the opposite theory, that the group is more important than the individual. The individual's need should be aligned to the community's needs. The community itself serves as a means of teaching and learning in Native American culture. In Native American cultures, the children learn the ways of respect and tradition from the elders: this helps develop their individual values to be centered on the community's values. When the community is intact, there is a creation of balance and harmony. Each person and nonperson in the community has a subjective experience that is considered valid and thus the entire community is comprised of multiple truths. The individual is influenced by the truths of their community, in which their own truths are formed and help form their identity. Because in turn the community is formed of multiple truths, all truths are considered to be of equal value. Individualism, on the other hand, creates a false need for competition and hierarchy, thus destroying the possibility of true community.

Communalism from living within the land results in the creation of traditions. Traditions are one of the ways in which an individual can find its identity, or internal sense of place. Native Americans have a special regard to traditions that is not typically held in Western culture. In Yuchi Ceremonial Life: Performance, Meaning, and Tradition in a Contemporary American Community, Jay Miller argues that the Yuchi people have maintained their relationships with family by upholding their traditions with the three sacred grounds that they use for their ceremonies. I argue, however, that the land has a critical relationship with Native American values. Without the land, there would not be a community for Indigenous Americans to create traditions because most Indigenous American traditions are rooted in place-making. Thus, the framework that the land and people are equal provides a reciprocal relationship in which community is developed. This community is essential to a Native American person's identity, which can only come from living in relation to the land. The concepts of living within the land and communalism are therefore related, because in order to have a community, you must be living within the land.

Given that living within the land and communalism create a sense of reciprocity between the people and the environment, I suggest that reconnecting with Native American lands can heal trauma in the Native American community. Native Americans have experienced historical violence from European colonizers since Europeans arrived in America. European colonizers who believed in the idea that they were above the land also believed that they were above humans who were of a darker complexion and practiced different beliefs. Because of their hierarchal framework, they were able to justify the false belief that Native Americans are savages. Because the colonists endorsed a false, racist ideology, they were able to falsely justify the belief that Native Americans needed to be "civilized" if it was not moral to kill them. The brutal process to ensure "civilization" involved the forced removal of Indigenous Americans from their homelands. Removing Native Americans from their homelands ensured that they were unable to traditionally practice their sacred ceremonial practices. The process of removing Native Americans from their homelands resulted in generational trauma that is still occurring today. Molly Castelloe, in "How Trauma Is Carried Across Generations," discusses how trauma is passed down from parent to child. The transmission of trauma from parent to child is known as vertical transmission. It can occur from societal problems such as oppression of a
particular group. The children must address the trauma in order to heal from it and to prevent passing it on to their children. In the Native American community in particular, studies have been done to attempt to understand where the trauma lies and what effects it has on the community. For example, the “Split Feathers” study by Carol Locust studied children who were taken from their traditional homelands. The effects were devastating. Children who had been removed had experienced

1. The loss of identity, 2. The loss of family, culture, heritage, language, spiritual beliefs, tribal affiliation and tribal ceremonial experiences, 3. The experience of growing up being different, 4. The experience of discrimination from the dominant culture, 5. A cognitive difference in the way Indian children receive, process, integrate, and apply new information in short a difference in learning style.6

It is important to note that while this study is based primarily on the separation between adoptive children and their communities, children who experience a separation between their identity often suffer from the same symptoms as mentioned in the “Split Feathers” study. This trauma that has manifested has resulted in Native Americans being far more likely to commit suicide7 and also abuse substances to cope. In “Native Americans and Alcohol: Past, Present, and Future,” William Szlemko, James Wood, and Pamela Thurman discuss how Native Americans are more likely than other ethnic groups to abuse alcohol and experience fetal alcohol syndrome. While Szlemko and colleagues argue that this is a result of historical trauma (historical trauma is considered to be a collective theory of trauma that causes emotional harm to an individual or collective after a traumatic event), I argue that in regards to Native American people, the historical trauma stems from the inability to reconnect with homelands and engage in traditional practices. This disconnect, like most trauma, is often swept under the rug, and as a result many Indigenous people engage in harmful practices in order to cope. I will claim that this trauma can be addressed and healed by reconnecting with homeland, thus living in the land, and communalism.

Traditional homelands have provided Native Americans the ability to gain procedural knowledge. Procedural knowledge is knowledge that is gained through action. Actively participating in practices that successfully and respectfully complete a goal is how procedural knowledge becomes truth. Native Americans have traditionally engaged in finding truth by engaging in procedural knowledge through connecting with their homelands. This is why their homelands are considered sacred spaces. These sacred spaces are part of their identity. Procedural knowledge is much more effective than its contrasting method of knowledge, propositional knowledge. For example, many parents learn how to take care of their children by actively engaging in child-rearing practices. While reading parental books can certainly help, most people would agree that procedural knowledge has a lasting impact in knowledge building. Propositional knowledge is the Western method of knowledge. Propositional knowledge exists within a binary system, in which something is either true or it is false, and there is no room for ambiguity or subjectivity. As a result, propositional knowledge fails to consider moral aspects to finding truth; it also does not take into account the subjective experience of persons. While something can be true in part, the method of discovering this truth can be immoral and damaging to the environment and the people who are part of the environment. For example, the unethical studies of birth control in Indigenous communities were without consent and often resulted in the forced sterilization of women. While they discovered the side effects of birth control, the studies themselves are inherently unethical. In fact, many discoveries in Western sciences are true in the sense that they are scientifically accurate; however, the methods to discovering the truth were not respectful and resulted in trauma that has not properly been redressed.

Since discovering truth is done in the Native American framework by engaging in procedural knowledge, it is often done by engaging with the land or living within the land. This allows Indigenous Americans to discover their place in the world, what their moral obligations to the land are, and how they can best live a life in which they fulfill their moral obligations to the land as well as the people. I am arguing here that Indigenous Americans’ ability to engage in procedural knowledge and thus find truth regarding their identity is applicable to healing trauma. Trauma can only be healed in Native American communities if they can discover their truth. Being able to exist within the land allows this, and by discovering their truths, they are able to effectively heal some of the trauma regarding who they are as a people, and how they can best morally engage with the world, with human persons and nonhuman persons alike. Uncovering this truth can help Native Americans heal and have an identity with Native American values and culture. This will prevent the effects that were experienced by children in the “Split Feathers” study and help mitigate the trauma from being passed onto the next generation.

Now that I have established that Native Americans should engage in the concept of living within the land in order to engage in procedural knowledge to find truth, and thus heal from trauma, I will continue my argument by adding that the methods to engaging in the land should be done with the community, thus engaging in communalism. While certainly there is individualistic healing of trauma that might be specific to a particular person’s trauma, I argue that communalistic healing is also important and comes from engaging in the land. Often, when Indigenous people engage in their beliefs for healing trauma, it is in the form of a ceremony. Traditional ceremonies are important in Native American culture. Traditional ceremonies often involve engaging in the land and community members engaging with each other. Practicing ceremonies as a community can heal trauma more effectively than by an individual alone. This is because a Native individual cannot function without a community. Community provides the individual with people who have experienced similar trauma—the trauma of being forcibly removed from their original homelands. This provides a sense of familiarity and allows all people in the community to have a sacred space. Ceremonies that focus on the healing of trauma are also more beneficial as a community because they allow Indigenous Americans the space to practice traditions
that reflect on their Native American tribal values. This is psychologically more beneficial for Indigenous Americans. By engaging in ceremonial practices with a community, in their original bounded spaces, Indigenous people are able to feel comfortable with their identities and also take pride in them. Additionally, since Native Americans already believe in "we" over "I," there is more value placed upon engaging in ceremonial practices as a group instead of only as an individual.

It is important to understand what kinds of ceremonial practices may be helpful for Native Americans in order to help redress trauma and promote healing. Ceremonies are a form of social practice. According to Shay Welch in *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology*, social practices are performances. Performances are part of developing procedural knowledge, because procedural knowledge involves performing an action respectfully to complete a goal. Welch discusses how Native Americans have often relied on ceremonial dances to engage in procedural knowledge and social performance to engage in truth. Welch argues that Native American dancing is regarded as essential to Native epistemology. I argue that because Native American dancing is crucial to Native epistemology, it can be useful for healing trauma in Native American communities. Since the social performance of dancing involves the embodiment of Native American values, truth, and procedural knowledge, it has the ability to heal trauma. Dancing can be used to embody trauma and can be a method of accepting that generational trauma has occurred, and can, in addition, provide a bounded space within an original homeland for working through and understanding generational trauma. Dancing is typically a part of Native American ceremonies. The social performance of dancing as a community thus can help Native Americans establish an identity with Native American culture and promote healing.

Another social practice that helps to connect Native Americans to their original homelands, and help Native Americans heal from trauma, are Native American rituals. According to *Legends of America*, some tribes have used peyote, a plant, during ceremonies, to promote physical and spiritual healing. These ceremonies are guided by healers, known as roadmen, that guide the individual through their life. This is a communal practice as it involves more than the individual in order to be effective. Native American trauma should typically be addressed in a communal fashion in order to be beneficial for the individual. The ability to engage in these practices is thus important for Native Americans to effectively heal from trauma as a collective; however, these rituals also need to be done in Native American original homelands. The original land spaces are able to provide Native Americans with their identity and help promote healing spaces in which Native Americans can unlearn and cope with trauma.

Specifically, "Historical Trauma, Healing, and Well-being in Māori Communities" by Rebecca Wirihana and Cherryl Smith highlights how reconnecting with cultural heritage has been helpful for healing from trauma in Indigenous communities. Maori cultural heritage includes the ability to use songs and chants, which are considered a formal speech, as well as dance. Wirihana and Smith argue that Māori communities benefit from being able, verbally and physically, to express their emotions. The grieving process at Tangihanga, a traditional funeral ritual site, allows Indigenous people to express trauma through their tears and remorse. I am arguing that these practices allow Indigenous people to heal from trauma because they are able to engage with the land in a sacred space as a community. The act of performance serves as a method of achieving truth and thus identity, and therefore is able to heal trauma in the individual.

Since Native Americans strongly value living within the land and being in harmony with the land, there is little doubt that the forced removal of Native Americans from their sacred spaces inhibited their ability to fully engage with the land to their best ability. Native Americans have been forced to assimilate to varying degrees in order to survive under Western colonization. Western culture also introduced Native Americans to alcohol and other substances. The suffering of Native Americans at the hands of Western colonizers has created a vertical transmission of generational trauma—passed from parent to child. I have argued that in order for this trauma to be redressed, Native Americans can heal by being able to reconnect with their homelands. Their homelands have long provided the ability for Native Americans to have balance and harmony. These homelands have also provided the space to engage in traditions and social practices that involve being able to exist within the land. The ability to engage with the land allows Native Americans to gain procedural knowledge, and procedural knowledge leads to Native Americans engaging in the action of performance to uncover the truth. These truths are essential to having a Native American identity. I have also argued that the loss of Native American identity is part of why Native American people have dealt with generational trauma for centuries. Additionally, it is best that this trauma is redressed through communalistic practices because communalism has always been essential in the Native American conceptual framework. Communalism can create a sense of balance and harmony with other humans as well as nonhuman persons. Communalism also provides Indigenous Americans with an identity. Many Native American tribes have found ceremonial practice as a community beneficial as well. While it is certainly not possible to undo the historical colonization of Native Americans by Europeans, living with the land as a community to heal from trauma is a step in the right direction.

On the other hand, however, some might claim that Native Americans do not need to practice ceremonies that are particular to their tribal affiliations that connect them with their homelands. Unfortunately, many Native Americans cannot connect with their homelands because Westerners have forcibly removed them from their land. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, only roughly 22 percent of Native Americans currently live on reservations. Therefore, most cannot engage in ceremonies with the land at all, or in the same way that they could have prior to European invasion. This could lead to a loss of identity and, as a result, trauma,
which could cause the vertical transmission of trauma to continue for Native Americans.

In response to this, however, I admit that there is no denying the fact that Native Americans have been pushed off of land that is significant to them and instead some might live on reservations. However, reservations are still land, and still count as a type of bounded space. In fact, while many people of Native American heritage do not live on reservations and Indigenous people might not be able to reconnect with the same land as before, reservations are still places where tribal ceremonies can be held. These ceremonies would have the ability to help Native Americans heal from the trauma of displacement. Reservations also allow Native Americans the space to live within the land as a community. There can still be beneficial connection with the land that occurs even after Western intervention, which is why I argue that while the most ideal scenario involves Native American people returning to their original homelands, it is highly unlikely that this will occur. Therefore, Native Americans will have to engage with the land that they currently have and use it to provide space for ceremonies and healing to the best of their ability.

Even still, there is also the argument that Native Americans reconnecting with their heritage through ceremonial social practices could potentially result in Native people experiencing more trauma. This is because Native Americans would be engaging in social practices that have been affected by Western culture, and when confronting trauma there is a possibility that an individual can experience negative effects.

I do not disagree with the notion that confronting trauma and experiencing the pain from it can be triggering for individuals. However, I would argue that it is necessary in order to heal from trauma. There can be differentiations in the intentions behind trauma: some trauma can be repeated from the intention to further harm, and other methods of confronting trauma can be used to heal and deconstruct it. To face trauma as a community can create a sacred, safe space where it is acceptable to embrace emotions regarding displacement and abuse. Additionally, I admit that Native Americans may not be able to engage in their ceremonial practices towards promoting healing in the same way as they could prior to Western interference. Pretending that they can would be as if I were erasing the fact that Native Americans have been oppressed, or that trauma in and of itself is entirely erasable. I am not claiming either of these notions.

In summation, Native Americans have strong ties to their homelands, which has led to land-specific performances and practices. The destruction of identity through forced removal of Native Americans by Westerners has also led to the development and transmission of generational trauma between adults and children. If Native American people are able to reintegrate with their land, they would also be able to engage in traditional ceremonies that help to establish a sense of cultural identity and belonging. One of the many causes of trauma stems from a lack of identity, and thus reestablishing a healthy relationship with the self can allow for the healing of generational trauma. While this healing certainly is not an easy task, and can force an individual to confront potentially triggering subjects, Native Americans' confronting their trauma can be a very positive experience overall. While ideally, it would be best for Native Americans to be able to reconnect with their own lands, I acknowledge that it is highly unlikely that they will be able to do so given most lands were stolen. However, I argue that Native Americans have the ability to claim new lands and still heal from trauma. The healing of generational trauma through living with the land and the development of communalism has the capability to redress some of the trauma that Native Americans have faced. While it is not possible to undo the historical trauma that Native Americans have experienced, it is possible to cope with the effects of trauma as a means to collectively work towards preventing the vertical transmission of trauma from parent to child.

NOTES

1. See Thomas Norton Smith, The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy, 77–94.
3. Ibid., 177–88.
7. Martin W. Ball, “People Speaking Silently to Themselves: An Examination of Keith Basso’s Philosophical Speculations on ‘Sense of Place’ in Apache Cultures,” 460–78.
10. Cordova and Moore, How It Is, 50; Vincent Schilling, “Centers for Disease Control Release Suicide Stats. Native American Women Top the List with 139 Percent Increase.”
12. “Profile: American Indian/Alaska Native.”

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FROM THE EDITORS

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We begin this issue of the APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience with a “Footnotes to History” featuring Cornelius Golightly (1917–1976). Golightly earned his PhD in philosophy at the University of Michigan in 1941 and then was a Rosenwald Fellow at Harvard University. He published articles in well-respected journals in philosophy, Negro education, and legal studies. When Golightly was hired by Olivet College in 1945, he became the first Black philosopher permanently hired to teach at a white institution in the twentieth century. He also became the first African American to teach at Wayne State University when he was hired to be an associate dean and professor of philosophy there in 1969. Throughout his career, he was a productive scholar, a leading teacher at several institutions, a public intellectual, and a social activist. He was also an elected member of the Milwaukee School Board in the 1960s and an appointed member of the Detroit School Board from 1970 until his death in 1976. This issue’s “Footnotes to History” section is a revised and expanded version of John H. McClendon III’s Black Past article on Golightly, “Dr. Cornelius Golightly (1917-1976): The Life of an Academic and Public Intellectual,” which was originally published on March 25, 2014.

We are excited to publish Stephen C. Ferguson II and Gregory D. Meyerson’s essay, “Shred of Truth: Antinomy and Synecdoche in the Work of Ta-Nehisi Coates.” Ferguson and Meyerson’s essay originally appeared in Cultural Logic: Marxist Theory & Practice 22 (2015–2017): 191–233. It has been revised by the authors, and it is reprinted here with permission from both the publisher and them.

In “Shred of Truth,” Ferguson and Meyerson critically examine Ta-Nehisi Coates’s analysis of race and racism, especially in his acclaimed book Between the World and Me and his Atlantic articles from the early to mid-2010s, from a Marxist perspective. Not surprisingly, they find Coates’s analysis wanting. They claim that “Coates conflates class and caste, conflates race and class (where ruling race becomes ruling class), and conflates two very different binaries: freedom and slavery and ruling and working class.” These conflations on Coates’s part obscure how racism negatively affects every member of the entire working class, regardless of race or ethnicity, both in the United States and globally. These conflations also obscure who belongs to the ruling class. For example, Coates’s analysis of race and racism cannot adequately account for the inclusion of more people of color into the ruling class—not as token, but as enthusiastic participants in the global capitalist order. Nor can it adequately demystify the dominant narrative where the major ideological conflict is between corporate multiculturalists and right-wing populists so that we can clearly see how capitalist exploitation and oppression currently operates in the United States.

We are also excited to publish two review essays in this issue. In the first review essay, “Not the Sound of the Genuine! A Review of Kipton Jensen’s Howard Thurman,” Anthony Sean Neal critically evaluates Kipton Jensen’s recent book on Howard Thurman’s thought. While Neal acknowledges that Jensen has succeeded in depicting Thurman as someone whose ideas are worth taking seriously, he criticizes Jensen for accomplishing this at the cost of making them only derivative in nature. In Jensen’s book, Thurman is depicted as someone who at best builds his thought from various traditions (e.g., Gandhian pacifism; American pragmatism; theistic, pedagogical, and philosophical personalism) and at worst simply parrots the better-known representatives of those traditions. In either case, Jensen does not explore what makes Thurman’s thought philosophically significant in its own right. Neal ends this essay by noting that Thurman deserves to be read on his own terms.

In the second review essay, “Ontology, Experience, and Social Death: On Frank Wilderson’s Afropessimism,” Patrick O’Donnell critically evaluates Frank Wilderson III’s recently published “memoir-cum-manifesto,” Afropessimism. O’Donnell reconstructs the main argument for Wilderson’s Afropessimism in that book and evaluates the general methodology underlining that argument. After he reconstructs Wilderson’s main argument for Afropessimism, he argues that Wilderson’s claim that Black people are Slaves simply by the virtue of them being Black is false. He then considers Afropessimism’s political upshot or lack thereof. He ends this essay by noting that perhaps his difficulty with entertaining Wilderson’s claim that Black people are Slaves, ontologically speaking, is due to him being a non-Black person.
SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

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

All article submissions should be between 10 and 20 pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between 5 and 7 pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author. Please send submissions electronically to apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com.

DEADLINES
Fall issues: May 1
Spring issues: December 1

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FORMATTING GUIDELINES
- The APA Newsletters adhere to The Chicago Manual of Style.
- Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use *italics* instead of underlining. Use an “em dash” (—) instead of a double hyphen (—).
- Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:


FOOTNOTES TO HISTORY

**Cornelius Golightly (1917–1976)**

Philosopher, teacher, civil rights activist, public intellectual and educational administrator, Dr. Cornelius Lacy Golightly used his rich philosophical insights and commanding intellect toward the consistent aim of eradicating segregation and seeking racial harmony. The grandson of former slaves, Cornelius Lacy Golightly was born in Waterford, Mississippi, on May 23, 1917. He was one of ten children born to Richmond Mack and Margaret Fullilove Golightly. A Presbyterian minister, Rev. Richmond Mack Golightly was a native of Livingston, Alabama, while Margaret Fullilove hailed from Honey Island, Mississippi. Richmond Mack farmed land, which supplemented his income as a minister. Growing up in Waterford, a small farming community between Holly Springs and Oxford, Mississippi, Golightly was subject to early and regular encounters with racial segregation and discrimination which would have an indelible impact on his life and motivate his activism.

In 1934, seventeen-year-old Golightly left Mississippi for Alabama where he enrolled at Talladega College. Founded in 1867 by two newly freed slaves, William Savery and Thomas Tarrant, its mission was educating the thousands of new freed people in the state. Golightly excelled academically as well as in athletics. As a student-athlete, he participated in football, baseball and tennis. His reputation for academics and athletics extended far beyond Talladega. On July 9, 1938, Golightly was a Black newspaper in Durham, North Carolina, wrote glowingly about his participation in the “Intellectual Olympics,” which the New History Society held in New York City. Golightly was one of only five Black students from across the nation to earn honors in this 1938 academic competition.

Golightly met his future (first) wife, Althea Catherine Cater, at Talladega. Catherine Cater was the daughter of James Tate Cater, the Academic Dean at Talladega and a former student of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois at Atlanta University. Catherine Cater was herself a brilliant student who majored in English and minored in philosophy. Largely due to Dean Cater’s concerted efforts, Talladega College developed a fine reputation as a strong liberal arts institution. Talladega, for example, received an evaluation of “A” from the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1931, a rare designation for an all-Black institution.

This stellar academic environment facilitated the development of a small core of African American students who would eventually distinguish themselves as philosophers of note. For example, Dr. Carlton L. Lee graduated from Talladega in 1933 and Dr. Broadus N. Butler in 1941. Golightly and Winston K. McAllister, a fellow philosophy major, graduated in 1938. Dr. Winston K. McAllister later assumed the chair of the philosophy department at Howard University. Both Golightly and McAllister, in the ensuing years, were members of the American Philosophical Association and served on its Committee on the Status of Blacks in Philosophy.

After Golightly’s graduation from Talladega in 1938, he decided to study philosophy at the University of Michigan. Remarkably, Golightly completed his doctoral work in three years, earning an MA in 1939 and a PhD in 1941. During this period a number of African American philosophers, including Golightly, were attracted to doing scholarly work on Alfred North Whitehead. Golightly’s doctoral dissertation was on the Thought and Language in Whitehead’s...
Categorial Scheme. Ten years later, his first scholarly article, “Inquiry and Whitehead’s Schematic Method,” appeared in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (June 1951), a leading journal in the field. After receiving his PhD at Michigan, Golightly did post-doctoral work as a Rosenwald Fellow at Harvard University.

Dr. Alain Locke, chair of the philosophy department at Howard University, hired Golightly as an instructor of philosophy and social science for the academic year 1942-1943. Locke was keenly aware of Golightly’s intellectual accomplishment and background partly because there were so few African American PhDs in the nation at the time, and partly because of his own interest in philosophy. Golightly fit the Howard model of scholar-activist because of his concern about how Black higher educational institutions confronted the reality of Jim Crow racism. His article in the July 1942 issue of the *Journal of Negro Education* titled “Negro Higher Education and Democratic Negro Morale” explores that dilemma. Golightly astutely remarks, “For Negro higher education to ignore the present reality of the color bar brings frustration and futility. Certainly education should not adjust Negro youth to accept the barriers of the status quo.”

Golightly’s commitment to a racially integrated world led him to serve as president of the Barnett Aden Gallery in Washington, DC, from 1942 to 1943. This gallery reflected Golightly’s social philosophy of integration, whereby African American and white artists’ works were displayed together and before an integrated gallery audience; a rare occurrence in then-highly segregated Washington, DC.

Golightly remained at Howard only one academic year. In 1943 he became a Compliance Analyst with the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), a post he held until the end of World War II in 1945. The FEPC was a consequence of Executive Order 8802, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed on June 25, 1941. The committee’s task was to ensure the end of racial discrimination in government employment and in those companies that had contracts with the federal government which in World War II meant thousands of employers and the millions of workers they employed. Executive Order 8802 was the most sweeping anti-discrimination measure taken by the federal government since Reconstruction and twenty-six-year-old Cornelius Golightly, as compliance analyst, was assigned the task of ensuring that the original order and a second order, issued in 1943, Executive Order 9346, which specifically outlawed discrimination in federal hiring, were carried out. Golightly’s critical reflections on his work were included in a 1945 memorandum which he coauthored titled Negroes in the Federal Government and in a published article on the topic he co-wrote with John A. Davis, a leading civil rights activist. The article, “Negro Employment in the Federal Government,” appeared in *Phylon* (October 1945).

Golightly resumed his academic career as an academic philosopher when he was hired at Olivet College in Michigan in 1945. This faculty appointment, as professor of philosophy and psychology at this small mid-state Michigan college, marked a historic moment when Golightly became the first Black philosopher permanently hired to teach at a white institution in the twentieth century. Golightly was soon followed by Black philosophers Forest O. Wiggins (University of Minnesota) and Francis M. Hammond (Seton Hall) when both were employed in 1946, and William T. Fontaine at the University of Pennsylvania in 1947. Cold War restrictions on the faculty’s academic freedom prompted Golightly and his spouse, Catherine Cater, to leave Olivet College in protest in 1949.

Golightly was quickly hired by the Philosophy Department at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, remaining there until 1955. He then joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee working there for the next fourteen years until 1969. Throughout this period Golightly published widely in journals such as *Journal of Philosophy* and *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*.

Although he remained a productive scholar and leading teacher throughout his career, Golightly also became more active in community life beyond the campus. Among his affiliations were member of the NAACP, ACLU, the Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations, and president of the Milwaukee Urban League. In 1961, Golightly became first African American to win the city-wide election to the Milwaukee School Board (which also made him one of the earliest Black elected officials in the state of Wisconsin). As board member, Golightly fought to introduce busing to promote the integration of Black students into school throughout the city. Like most civil rights activists of the time, he believed Black student access to the best schools in the community through racial integration would lead to significant African American economic and political progress. Golightly, however, moved beyond most established civil rights leaders in the early 1960s when he pushed to have a federally sponsored free breakfast program for poor students. Unfortunately, both of his efforts were blocked.

In 1969, Golightly accepted an appointment as Associate Dean and Professor of Philosophy at Wayne State University in Detroit, thus continuing his string of “firsts” by becoming the first African American to teach in the Wayne State philosophy department. He also served in the Wayne State University administration as associate dean. At Wayne State, Golightly wrote several scholarly articles. His “Ethics and Moral Activism” in *The Monist* (1972) was typical of his research and writing during that period. As associate dean, among his numerous duties, Golightly served on the Community College Liaison Advisory Committee, Whitney M. Young Jr. Memorial Lecture Series, and the Committee on Admissions, Records, and Registration.

Golightly’s legacy as a public intellectual and social activist in the greater Detroit community is best reflected by his tenure on the Detroit School Board. First appointed to a vacant seat in 1970, he was elected President of the Board in 1973, accordingly marking him as its first Black president. Golightly remained on the Detroit Board until his untimely death in 1976. He served during a volatile period of local and national racial confrontation around busing and school integration. A steadfast proponent of busing, Golightly was at the center of the issue when federal courts ordered
busing for Detroit, decisions that angered both Black and white opponents of busing. Sadly, Golightly never lived to see this contentious issue resolved. He died of a brain hemorrhage at the age of fifty-eight in Detroit on March 20, 1976. His family donated his body to the University of Michigan for medical research. To honor his legacy, the Detroit Public School system established the Golightly Career and Technical Center in September 1982, with the expressed aim to prepare “students for college and other post-secondary educational opportunities.”

**SELECTED PUBLICATIONS**


**SECONDARY SOURCES**


**ARTICLE**

*Shred of Truth: Antinomy and Synecdoche in the Work of Ta-Nehisi Coates*

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Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.

— Karl Marx

When I was in Washington last [Christ]mas, we should have met and gone over one or two possible things to be done in connection with my plans to leave Howard University. Perhaps it is just as well because my disgust with the place is just about as great as yours and good riddance...

— Harris to Alain Locke, May 10, 1947

People keep saying, ‘We need to have a conversation about race. . . . This is the conversation. I want to see a cop shoot a white unarmed teenager in the back, . . . And I want to see a white man convicted for raping a black woman. Then when you ask me, ‘Is it over?’, I will say yes.

— Toni Morrison

On August 9, 2014, eighteen-year old Michael Brown was gunned down by police officer Darren Wilson, in the suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. Riots broke out a few days later, led primarily by working-class Black youth. The city was overtaken by “warrior cops,” the fog of tear gas, a hail of rubber bullets, and military tanks. Days later, members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) would appear, arguing that voting at the ballot box was the only legitimate manner of addressing the anger in the streets of Ferguson. These politicians hoped to transform the anger in the streets into a midterm election turnout that would favor the Democratic Party. And President Barack Obama stated, “I won’t comment on the investigation [in the death of Michael Brown],” only to add, “Cynicism is a choice, but hope is a better choice. Get those souls to the polls. If we do, I guarantee we’ve got a brighter future ahead.”

By January 2015, “Black Lives Matter” was the rallying cry heard throughout the world; even typically apolitical Black professional athletes—like Reggie Bush, Derrick Rose, Kobe Bryant, and LeBron James—donned T-shirts with the slogan “I Can’t Breathe.”

The uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri, were the result of deindustrialization in the Midwest Rust Belt. The closing of two Chrysler plants in nearby Fenton, Missouri, in 2011 was the culmination of decades of plant closures beginning in the late 1970s. During its heyday as a boomtown
for industrial migration, North St. Louis County—which includes Ferguson, Hazelwood, and Florissant—was the home of railroad workers, several automobile plants such as Ford and Chrysler, as well as food production plants like General Mills and Sara Lee. By August 2014, the Black unemployment rate in Ferguson was reportedly 19 percent, whereas the national Black unemployment rate was 11.5 percent. The median household income in Ferguson was $44,000 compared to $75,000 for St. Louis as a whole.1

One year after the tragic death of Michael Brown and scores of other Black men and women, Ta-Nehisi Coates with his Between the World and Me (BWM) published what many consider to be the political manifesto for the emerging “Black Lives Matter” movement. Across the nation, on nearly every social media platform, in barbershops, reading groups, high schools, universities, and newspapers, Coates has been lauded as a literary genius who unveils the gut-wrenching truth about racial inequality in the United States. Coates’s book weaves together memoir, social commentary, and political manifesto in order to explain the World to his fifteen-year-old son, Samori. Borrowing the epistolary form of Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time (1963), his book has created a fanfare, particularly after being lauded by Toni Morrison (“I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died”), then awarded the prestigious MacArthur “genius” grant in addition to the 2015 National Book Award for nonfiction. He has become a celebrated Black public intellectual by both bourgeois liberals and parts of the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

The vast majority of reviews have been positive—with the occasional critic being disappointed with Coates’s pessimism. Given its literary success, the arguments and presuppositions of the book (and affiliated writings) need to be subject to a critical evaluation. As Marxist literary scholar Barbara Foley has noted in another context, success in the US book market is not just a question of literary excellence or authorial prominence. Often, there are literary figures whose success hinges on a text’s embodiment of normative assumptions about bourgeois civil society and self.5

In this essay, from a Marxist perspective, we aim to examine the conceptual underpinnings of Coates’s analysis of race and racism, principally in his award-winning book but also in his well-known articles for The Atlantic. We hope to clarify the differences between Coates’s anti-racist (essentially liberal-nationalist) analysis and a Marxist (class) analysis of racism. We examine several antinomies that run throughout Coates’s work: class versus race, white freedom versus Black subordination, voluntarism versus determinism, and essentialism versus anti-essentialism.

In brief, Coates conflates class and caste, conflates race and class (where ruling race becomes ruling class), and conflates two very different binaries: freedom and slavery and ruling and working class. These conflations are partly expressed in his fetish term “the Black body,” a term which appears over one hundred thirty times in BWM, and in his belief that, as two expressions of this corporate body, he and his son are, in Derrick Bell’s phrase, “at the bottom of the well.” And these conflations are partly expressed in his view that all whites benefit from racism, though, following James Baldwin, they are morally and psychologically damaged by the process of white self-invention. These contradictions are at the heart of his analysis and are the result of his failure to give any serious attention to the role of class and class struggle in history.

We will proceed with a close examination of Coates’s view of (1) American history—from slavery and Jim Crow to the “new Jim Crow” and “Age of Austerity”—that follows from the above conflations; (2) Coates’s romantic view of historically Black colleges and universities along with an attendant view on Black and white selves that repudiates vulgar romantic nationalism in favor of a hipper, socially constructed nationalism that we might call postmodern essentialism; and (3) his ersatz conception of political struggle, rooted in classic bourgeois anachronies.

We will argue that racism hurts the entire working class, both nationally and globally, through differential exploitation and oppression. The less exploited and oppressed do not benefit at the expense of the more exploited and oppressed. And contra Coates, the ruling class is not some mysterious white ruling caste. Class rule in the United States has never been that simple. Today, things are even more complex as more people of color—who are not tokens—are being incorporated into the ruling class. Moreover, corporate multiculturalism in conjunction with right-wing populism functions to mystify the nature of capitalist exploitation and social oppression operating in the US social formation.

COATES’S ODYSSEY THROUGH AMERICAN HISTORY

Historian N. D. B. Connolly claims that “[w]ithout question, the historical profession has likely had no better evangelist” than Coates. Others such as MSNBC host Chris Hayes have declared Coates the “greatest essayist of our time.”6 In short, there are no shortage of people who are celebrating Coates’s book for its insight into the “Black mind” in the Age of Obama.

Coates’s bildungsroman of sorts is divided into three sections. In these sections, Coates traces the history of white violence against “Black bodies,” “the long war against the black body” (98), which he claims is at the center of United States history. Coates often solicits the reader’s agreement on a number of key “nodal” points in United States history. The most prominent “structured silence” surrounds the notion of class as a determinate social relation in the United States and the World. He attempts to persuade the reader that the United States is a caste system composed of “Black bodies” and “white Dreamers.” Coates portrays Euro-American people as those “who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.” Here Coates—following the white privilege position so prevalent today—presents white people as an undifferentiated mass with a common experience of privilege, access and unfettered social mobility.65 For Coates, there are no fundamental class divisions or differential power within the Euro-American population. All white people—as a result of their whiteness—have power over all nonwhite people.
His journey through US history begins with an acknowledgment that race is a social construction. In an attempt to explain the process that has led to the creation of a racist polity, he argues that racial divisions “were imposed on us by the Virginia Planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible” (42). This shorthand of the origins of slavery is obviously inadequate, as shorthands are—but it is also an important rhetorical maneuver used by Coates. He intentionally elides how the planters arrived at racialized slavery in the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion (BR is discussed in The Case for Reparations, not BWM). But it’s at least worth noting that the subject here is the Virginia Planters and the object is “as many Americans [a term anachronistically employed] as possible.” In the course of the book, the Virginia planters, or what a Marxist analysis would unapologetically call the ruling class, quickly morphs into “Americans” understood for the most part as “white.”

Coates thus embraces—following Edmund Morgan’s thesis in the classic American Slavery, American Freedom—what Theodore Allen calls the paradox view of American history. According to this view of American history, with the establishment of racial oppression, the multiracial working-class threat from below was solved and the “white race” was freed. With Black slavery comes American (white) freedom. Consequently, Coates concludes that “America begins in black plunder and white democracy.”

The implication here is that “America” begins shortly after 1676 in the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion. With the birth of racial slavery, we are to infer that the class exploitation of both free and bond labor, of both the African and European proletariat, was quickly transferred into white freedom based on Black slavery. From Coates’s narrative, we are led to believe that a system of caste oppression was founded after Bacon’s Rebellion and continues to imprison the United States polity.

But Coates goes further to argue not merely the “paradox” thesis of American history, but that the contradiction between white freedom and Black slavery is analogous to the contradiction between classes. Or more accurately, to the extent that class exists in his narrative, it is synonymous with caste. Indeed, it is not far from the truth that Coates eliminates class structure, class rule, and class exploitation in the Marxist sense from his world. He substitutes a ruling race for a ruling class. As he states in his widely read article, “The Case for Reparations”: “at the beginning of the 18th century, two primary classes were enshrined in America” (CR, IV). Black people have become America’s “indispensable working class” and all whites have become rulers. Coates uses—as evidence—an 1848 quote from the former Vice President and Senator John C. Calhoun, quoted in both BWM and his essay on reparations:

The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black. . . . And all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals.

Coates adds the following commentary: “And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of sacred equality. And that right has always given them [“whites”] meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below. . . You and I, my son, are that ‘below’.” In “The Case for Reparations” article, Coates—surprisingly—uses John Wilkes Booth to bolster his case for caste (which in turn underlies his case for reparations):

This country was formed for the white, not for the black man,” John Wilkes Booth wrote, before killing Abraham Lincoln. “And looking upon African slavery from the same standpoint held by those noble framers of our Constitution, I for one have ever considered it one of the greatest blessings (both for themselves and us) that God ever bestowed upon a favored nation. (CR, V: The Quiet Plunder)

Coates, as noted, is following the historian Edmund Morgan, who opens the door to a sociogenic analysis of racism (a class analysis as opposed to a psychocultural one). At one point, Morgan argues: “the answer to the problem [of preventing a repeat of Bacon’s Rebellion] was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt.” But then towards the end of his book, Morgan shuts the door he opened when he introduces the paradox analysis of American history, an analysis based on the false assumption that when “race” replaced class, there were then “too few free [white] poor to matter.” In response, Theodore Allen argues that Morgan “is wrong on the facts and wrong on the theory.”

Indeed, the proportion of landless European-Americans did not shrink to insignificance as a social category in the plantation colonies in the century between Bacon’s Rebellion and the American Revolution. In 1676, the overwhelming proportion of the population of Virginia was in the Tidewater region. Of its economically active (titheable) European-American population, half were bond laborers and another one eighth were propertyless freemen. Of the 40 percent that did own such labor, about one fourth were large landowners, those owning over five hundred acres.

While the status of poor whites improved relative to African Americans, “they faced a decline of opportunity for social mobility after 1680.” When we widen our lens to the country as a whole, “in 1770 when Ben Franklin praised ‘middling America,’ 3% of the people owned 30% of the wealth; and in de Toqueville’s America of 1830, one percent of Americans owned nearly half the wealth.”

On this account, we should not take Coates seriously nor Calhoun about the upper class consisting of rich and poor whites.

As Allen notes, the “all whites benefit” line leaves much unexplained. If Black slavery was based on the collaboration of the formerly poor whites with the gentry, a shared interest due to the formerly poor whites becoming property holders, then “why did that collaboration not diminish when the contrary tendency [spread of propertylessness] set in, as it evidently did, and ‘racial’ competition for employment became one of the well-known features of American society?” And what is the rationale for the exclusion of the free Black people? “[i]f the operation of the slave
Coates’s quick change from class to race, a transition that is a transition in causal analysis, is based, interestingly, not on Morgan’s analysis of separating dangerous white from dangerous Black people (dangerous from point of view of social control), but based on the cheapness of the African slave and the status of the European indentures as English subjects. But this truncated narrative is in its own way as distorted a narrative as Morgan’s own when Morgan describes the free white poor as too few to matter.

It is simply false to assume that the “rights” of Englishmen were respected in the case of European indentures. As Allen notes, before the invention of the white race, women bond servants in the colonies, as a punishment for marriage, had their terms extended often by two and a half years. The flip side of this is that male supremacy (“the man’s home is his castle’ principle”), a key feature of English social control, was abrogated for European male bond servants.

This “denial of the right to marriage and family” was “not a social aberration” but an “indispensable condition” to the preservation of “that particular form of capitalist production and accumulation.” But there are complexities. In doing this, the plantation bourgeoisie denied themselves the “benefit of patriarchy as a system of social control over the laboring people.” Allen surmises that one of the elements encouraging the 1676 rebellion of servants and slaves was this loss of privilege.

In the transition to the white race, this privilege would be returned to the now whitened European male and denied not only to slaves (this is obvious) but to “free Negroes and Mulattos.” Allen provides voluminous evidence against the Morgan “paradox.” The existence of this large propertyless strata, according to Allen, requires that they be given privileges of status centering on stripping the “free male Negro” of his status. After all, we return to this in a moment, why not allow the “free Negro” to occupy his normal class status as part of the buffer against the negro slaves, much as was done in the Caribbean?

Allen argues that the cheapness of African labor would not have been affected by retaining the status of the “free Negro”; that the cheapness of the labor was decidedly secondary to social control. Allen focuses on the well-known landmark legislation of 1705 Virginia that set free and slave “Negroes,” Indians, and Mulattos apart and was so central to the invention of the white race, i.e., the white race class collaborationist social control formation; it’s worth focusing on later acts taken by Maryland Governor Gooch in 1723 and English Attorney General Richard West’s initial objections to these laws. Richard West’s response to the law of 1723 (West was responsible for evaluating laws in the colonies for their compatibility with English law) was to wonder “why one freeman should be used worse than another, merely on account of his complexion.” And he concluded, after enumerating the rights of freemen, that it “cannot be just . . . by a general law . . . to strip all free persons of a black complexion . . . from those rights which are justly valued by every free man.”

It should be noted that these laws, including those put into effect by Governor Gooch, which included the elimination of the franchise for “free Negro men” and the right to hold office, meant “repealing an electoral principle that had existed in Virginia for more than a century.”

The contrast with the bourgeoisie’s behavior in the Caribbean cements the analysis that deliberate ruling class social control not “race consciousness” was operative:

In the early 1720s, at the same time that the Virginia assembly was emphasizing the exclusion of free Negroes from any place in the intermediate social control stratum, in Barbados, free Negroes and other persons of color, like other free persons, were required to serve in the colony militia, and in Jamaica the assembly offered free Negroes and persons of color free homesteads. In both cases the policies were calculated to promote and maintain social control and the security of those colonies.

And again:

the difference between the English plantation bourgeoisie in the British West Indies and the continental plantation bourgeoisie cannot be ascribed to a difference of degrees in “white consciousness. . . . The difference was rooted in the objective fact that in the British West-Indies there were too few laboring class Europeans to embody an adequate petit bourgeoisie while in the continental colonies, there were too many to be accommodated in the ranks of that class (vol. two, 240 and 243).

Let’s return to the Calhoun quote. Coates himself shows the quote is false when he notes that three fourths of the whites in the South in 1860 did not own slaves. Of the one fourth who did, most of those owned one or only a few.

The justification of slavery by Calhoun, George Fitzhugh, and others attempted to present slavery as the best of all
possible worlds. But Calhoun’s ideological statement did not represent the views of all Euro-Americans in the United States. With the consolidation of capitalist slavery in the United States, the hatred of one class against another was intense. As Abram Harris and Sterling Spero observe, “The poor white envied the slave’s security and hated him for his material advantages, while the slave envied the white man’s freedom and hated him for the advantages of his whiteness. Each group, in an effort to exalt itself, looked down upon the other with all the contempt which the planter aristocracy showed to both. The slave was a ‘nigger’ and the poor white was ‘po’ white trash.”

For centuries, historians, philosophers, and sociologists have debated the character of antebellum slavery in the Old South. One thing is certain. While all slaves were necessarily Black, not all exploited people in the United States were Black. It is generally agreed that the majority of slaves were owned by 4 percent of the Southern white population. The historian Mark R. Cheathem further explains:

... in 1860, almost half of the South’s slaveholders owned fewer than five slaves. Only 12 percent (approximately 46,000) owned more than twenty. Around 1 percent (approximately 3,800) owned fifty or more slaves. Owners of over 100 slaves numbered 2,292. There were only fourteen with 500 or more slaves, and just one with more than 1,000. Interestingly, of the fourteen largest slave owners, nine were rice planters; the largest, Joshua Ward, was a South Carolina rice planter (Parish 1989, pp. 26-28; U.S. Census). These figures indicate that by 1860, the typical slaveholder owned few slaves, but the typical slave lived on a sizable plantation.

Given the unequal distribution of wealth within the slaveholding class, the majority of Euro-Americans were engaged in subsistence farming on small plots of land. According to the 1850 census, there were only 347,525 slave owners out of a total white population of about six million in the South; there were a total of 23,191,876 people in the United States with a total slave population of 3,204,313. When we include the total population of the United States in 1860, which was 31,443,321 people, the percentage of Euro-Americans who owned slaves decreases further. (In 1860, it is calculated that there were 3,953,761 slaves, representing 12.6 percent of the total population.) As of 1860, one third of Southern white people had no assets of any kind, including slaves or land. On the other hand, among the ruling class, for fifty of the first sixty-four years of United States history, the presidents were slave owners.

Between 1789 and 1850, eighteen of thirty-one Supreme Court justices were slaveholders, from the Old South or ideological representative of the plantation bourgeoisie, most notably, John Jay (New York), John Marshall (Virginia), and Roger B. Taney (Maryland). The planter aristocracy vis-à-vis the common white yeoman was a dominant force in national politics prior to the Civil War.

Hinton Rowan Helper’s 1857 book The Impending Crisis and How to Meet It provides a counternarrative to both Calhoun and Coates. Helper was no friend of “the Negro.” In protest against the poverty and powerlessness of the Southern nonslaveholding class, he exposed the relationship between Black subordination and the class rule of the plantation bourgeoisie. Helper argues: “The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks, who are bought and sold, and driven about like so many cattle, but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all nonslaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated.” For Helper, the only solution to the “impending crisis” was a social revolution in which the white nonslaveholders of the South overthrew the planter bourgeoisie and destroyed slavery, “the frightful tumor on the body politic.” Moreover, in calling for the abolition of slavery, Helper proposed that slaveholders be taxed in order to colonize all free Black people in Africa or Latin America.

Calhoun as pro slavery ideologist may have said that slavery was “the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world,” but a New York Tribune editorial, in a statement representative of the Republican position, commented that the slavery question was “a question whether the mass of Americans would retain their liberty or whether it would be nullified like that of the poor whites in the South.”

And Richard Wright has noted in 12 Million Black Voices, analyzing the antebellum period,

But as we blacks toiled, millions of poor free whites, against whom our slave labor was pitted, were rendered indigent and helpless. The gold of slave-grown cotton concentrated the political power of the Old South in the hands of a few Lords of the Land. . . . To protect their delicately balanced edifice of political power, the Lords of the Land proceeded to neutralize the strength of us blacks and the growing restlessness of the poor whites by dividing and ruling us, by inciting us against one another.

Later, Wright argues:

poor whites are warned by the Lords of the Land that they must cast their destiny with their own color, that to make common cause with us is to threaten the foundation of civilization. . . . And so both of us, the poor black and the poor white, are kept poor, and only the Lords of the Land grow rich. . . . The Lords of the Land stand in our way; they do not permit the poor whites to make common union with us, for that would mean the end of the Lords’ power.

Wright clearly outlines how racism (in both its ideological form and material practice) is used as a means of social control by the “Lords of the Land,” that is, the antebellum plantation ruling class. Wright was not alone in assuming that racism, by dividing the working class along ideological lines and differential oppression, harmed the class interests of both white and Black workers. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass stated unambiguously of slaveholders, “They divided both to conquer each.” Douglass elaborated, “Both are plundered and by the same plunderers. The slave
is robbed by his master, of all his earnings above what is required for his physical necessities; and the white man is robbed by the slave system, because he is flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages.” However, with Coates (and by default Calhoun) the planter class becomes representative of the ruling (white) race, and class is transformed into caste.

**HOUSING DISCRIMINATION AS SLAVERY BY OTHER MEANS**

In the “Case for Reparations,” just as Coates moves “smoothly” from Bacon’s rebellion to Calhoun’s quote taken as real social analysis, he also moves from slavery to housing, as if housing is the modern equivalent of slavery in terms of its reproduction of white supremacy. As our analysis (below) of the statistics indicates, the cases are not analogous. Slaveowners made up one fourth of whites and slaveowning was greatly concentrated within the Southern population. Homeownership reached much higher proportions (60 percent by 1960) and, of course, sizes of houses obviously differed with differences of wealth among whites. Black people for all practical purposes did not own slaves; but Black people do own homes. Coates draws a further analogy between slaveowners’ purchase of De Bow’s Review and today’s homeowners purchasing This Old House (CR, V: The Quiet Plunder). Coates’s point is to suggest that slaveowning and homeownership were part of the American dream (a similar point is taken up in BWM), and thus aspirational. As we have seen in the stunning use of Calhoun and Wilkes Booth as historians offering evidence for his view of white supremacy, Coates’s faulty historiography involves treating American ideology as if it’s actually true, substituting ideology for history. In effect, to treat slaveowning and homeownership as continuous is to treat aspiration as reality, American dream for reality. It is well known, for example, that one form of American idealism comes in the form of the hopes of college students to be millionaires. In surveys, roughly one third of college students see themselves as millionaires. But what Americans aspire to is not equivalent to reality.

Though much of the housing discussion in CR focuses on the racist profit-making behavior of real estate figures in Chicago, Coates again smoothly transmutes the focus to all whites benefitting from housing discrimination against Black people, and if we slide some of his assumptions over from BWM, this discrimination comes from “the democratic will” of (white) Dreamers. The dynamic Coates describes is economic, on the one hand. He notes that even wealthy Black folks, those making over $100,000 per year and living in mostly Black neighborhoods, live in neighborhoods equivalent to whites making $30,000 per year (Coates conflates Black people making $100,000 per year with those living in predominantly Black neighborhoods, thus excluding Black people with the same income who do not live in predominantly Black neighborhoods). He notes that Black people are on average much more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods (many of which are hypersegregated—usually defined as areas with under 10 percent whites) than white people. As Cedric Johnson notes, his analysis of housing discrimination reduces to whites viewing Black people as a “contagion.” Rather than discussing the role of capital flight, Coates would have us focus on the free will of whites and so-called “white flight.”

First, the mechanisms of housing segregation, including the process of Black stigmatization, need explaining. It’s not enough to point to contagion as if that’s its own explanation. The explanation involves not the democratic will but powerful real estate interests allying with the government in the production of at once the federal highway system and suburbanization, a process driven by racism. These mechanisms involved block busting (orchestrated by real estate companies), redlining (denying home and business loans and insurance to people in poor and segregated neighborhoods), and racist law; and when laws were passed banning such discriminatory behavior, enforcement was lax. Interestingly, Coates uses the term “contagion,” suggesting that “white flight” is an instinctual racial process. In reality, what he shows is actually quite similar to what we have described above, with big real estate interests spreading panic among whites so that they sell cheap to real estate agents who then turn around and sell dear to people of color.

In a recent Forbes article, the author noted that neighborhoods lost value when Black people reached 10 percent of the neighborhood population. She noted also that housing values in rich Black neighborhoods were 18 percent below that in rich white neighborhoods. To make of these statistics? The 10 percent statistic appears to confirm the contagion notion of Coates. But serious analysis should not accept this reification as an explanation. Is there really evidence of an internal barometer in whites which causes them to flee Black people unless whites outnumber them nine to one? Coates’s statistics about Blacks and whites growing up in poor neighborhoods need scrutiny because the shape of American racism changes. Coates notes that for those born between 1955 and 1970, 62 percent of Blacks grew up in poor neighborhoods while only 4 percent of whites did. But to capture racism’s changing shape, one we contend is incompatible with a caste analysis, you have to then ask the same question about the next generation just as you would ask about the prior generation. What the numbers seem to suggest is complex, with segregation decreasing overall and hypersegregation increasing. We hope to explain this dynamic below. Coates does not explain it; his history is cherry picked to eliminate variation, class stratification, and class struggle.

Now, while little to nothing is being done to transform “American apartheid” (in fact, it is being exacerbated by mechanisms we will explain), that is, those neighborhoods where racialized poverty is entrenched, America as a whole is becoming more diverse and it is this mixture of diversity at some levels and segregation at others that needs explaining, and it cannot be explained on a caste analysis. The number of all-white neighborhoods, defined as 90 percent or more white, declined markedly from 1990 to 2000, from 38 percent to 25 percent. Neighborhoods, however, that were 90 percent minority or more did not decline but in fact increased from 9 to 12 percent. Mixed neighborhoods are on the increase. More recent statistics, based on a GAO study, indicate that from 2000 to 2014, the percentage of
schools with so-called racial or socioeconomic isolation grew from 9 percent to 16 percent. Isolated schools are “those in which 75% or more of students are of the same race or class.” The Civil Rights Project at UCLA notes that the percentage of “hypersegregated schools, in which 90% or more of students are minority, grew since 1988 from 5.7% to 18.4.”40

Meanwhile, diverse neighborhoods are spreading and there is some evidence to show that the most diverse neighborhoods are characterized by appreciating housing values. In a recent study comparing diverse neighborhoods to alternatives, the “more diverse neighborhoods have higher population growth and stronger price growth in the past year and they’re a bit more expensive to begin with.”41

The author notes correctly such appreciating neighborhoods are likely to drive poorer people of color out. In other words, diversity that leads to housing appreciation is likely inseparable from gentrification processes, that this kind of diversity cannot be understood apart from the social class of the multiracial gentrifiers. A complex process whereby racialized poverty in neighborhoods could be amplified while gentrified multiracial cosmopolitanism expands is what needs explanation. And it’s not that hard to explain. For professionals with enough resources to make lifestyle choices, cosmopolitanism may not just be a social preference but a real professional benefit, especially in a context of neoliberal globalization. Just as we should expect to see more corporate diversity, we should see professionals seeking more diversity. This kind of diversity carries much benefit and little cost, either to capital or to the professionals seeking to move into diverse neighborhoods in urban and suburban areas. Once these neighborhoods get underway, resources will flow in. Very little in the way of egalitarian incentive structures would have to be set up. However, to produce working class diversity, with stable home prices not subject to precipitous devaluation, etc. in neighborhoods made impoverished by both historical legacy and the battening processes of neoliberal deindustrialization (whether we are talking about the bigger problem of hypersegregated racialized poverty or the left behind white working class areas in the Rust Belt) would require major social investments, including something like a massive insurance program to buttress homes against devaluation, a necessity to discourage flight and encourage entry. In other words, diversity consistent with market forces will be fostered while diversity inconsistent with it will be discouraged.

The analysis as stated would explain increased market-friendly diversity, but it would not explain increasing (not just ongoing) segregation coupled with concentrated poverty. But this increasing segregation is well explained by books like Matthew Desmond’s Evicted, which offers us a host of positive causal forces (in addition to the negative forces, those absent forces that are absent since they conflict with market mechanisms and profit desiderata) that work to reinforce the combination of segregation and concentrated poverty.42

Desmond’s study focuses on Milwaukee’s renters, and within this population he studies ethnographically a “poor white” trailer park (and its white landlord) and poor Black renters (along with respective Black landlords) in Milwaukee’s North side “ghetto.” Desmond makes clear that poor women bear an enormous eviction burden, but that poor Black women are especially burdened. And as we will see, evictions both augment concentrated poverty and reinforce prior segregation through mechanisms that punish the poor, especially the poor with children, but are largely race neutral, though always inequality reinforcing. The eviction rate in general and the racialized differentials in particular have little (though not nothing) to do with the differential (i.e., racist) behavior of current landlords, who generally want their rent money.43

Black women in the poorest Black neighborhoods are nine times more likely to be evicted through the court system (many evictions do not pass through the court system) than poor white women living in the poorest white neighborhoods. In general, in Milwaukee, Desmond finds that Black renters have a one in five chance of eviction compared to one in twelve and one in fifteen for Hispanics and whites, respectively.44

In the Milwaukee case, the high rate of evictions among poor women is closely connected to the devaluation of single motherhood. Poor single mothers in Milwaukee and the US (and poor single mothers with more children) are more likely to be evicted than poor single women for a host of reasons: one is for the simple reason that poor single moms are on average poorer, in part because they generally require more expensive (however substandard) housing but also have more difficulty on average keeping a job, precisely because of childcare responsibilities assumed to be the sole responsibility of the parent in the absence of a social commitment to universal daycare. Desmond notes that in Milwaukee circa 2009, high-quality- and low-quality rental housing differed in price by an average of only $275.

This high price of low-income housing is itself the result of the deterioration of affordable housing stock not just in Milwaukee but nationally. So the upshot is that substandard rental housing is very expensive comparatively, and two-bedroom-and-up rental housing is even worse. So those struggling to make ends meet have the burden of more expensive housing, making nonpayment more likely. Insofar as Black women are more than three times more likely to be single moms than white women (for reasons themselves related to prior racism), they are more likely to be evicted.45

Single moms with children are generally more vulnerable, thus easier to evict; insofar as children themselves in poor neighborhoods can be hard to “control,” their perceived “bad” behavior often leads to eviction. “Nuisance laws,” which put increasing responsibility on landlords to police their tenants, mean that child-related complaints, either made by other tenants complaining about the children of (more vulnerable) single moms or made by some moms in defense of their children, often lead to eviction.

Poor women of color in Milwaukee, especially Black women, with an eviction on the record, are more likely to end up in less stable, more dangerous, more segregated
neighborhoods. Once a person is evicted, it goes on the record available to landlords, who then, of course, are likely to reject those with prior evictions or prior criminal records. The rental agencies use screening process software sensitive to prior eviction and criminal records of you or those living with you. Thus, any poor person with prior records directly or indirectly in these areas will be forced into worse neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. And both events make it harder, for different reasons, to find and/or retain (low-wage) employment.

The role of Milwaukee’s legacy of segregation can perhaps be understood in the following way. If we control for poverty, single motherhood, and number of children, working-class Black single mothers from Milwaukee with an equal number of children to their white counterparts—with an eviction history or not—are more likely to be steered in the direction of hypersegregated neighborhoods, which have historically, by design, been less stable and more dangerous. These poor single moms are then more likely than their white counterparts to be evicted or evicted again. The more vulnerable the neighborhood, the more vulnerable the renter to landlord action, whatever the race of the landlord.

Current racist practices would be landlords illegally charging higher rents to Black people or reserving properties in worse condition for Black people while charging the same price that would be charged to non-Blacks for nicer properties (on the racist argument that Black people don’t take care of property as well as non-Blacks). After observing such behavior on the part of a landlord, Desmond reported the person (he never was contacted). Were this problem remedied, the race-neutral mechanisms battening on past unremedied discrimination would still continue to reproduce the worsening status quo.

It is worth noting, as it makes more precise the dialectic of class and race, that with the dissolution of the old Jim Crow, working-class Black folks lost network resources as better-off relatives could move out of segregated neighborhoods. “Normal” processes of class formation among the Black population made things worse for those left behind. And finally, it is extremely important to note that this correlation of single motherhood and poverty is not inevitable and in fact is much less likely to be found in countries with stronger social safety nets. Single motherhood does not cause poverty; it is associated with poverty in societies which punish single moms.

If housing is the new slavery for Coates, as his reference to the Calhoun quote would suggest, Coates must view white and Black poverty as not merely different in degree but in kind. Coates offers a single piece of evidence from white and Black poor neighborhoods in Chicago. This single example will function as a synecdoche for the claim that the white and Black poor live in different universes. In CR, he cites a study where “a black neighborhood with one of the highest incarceration rates (West Garfield Park) had a rate more than 40 times as high as the white neighborhood with the highest rate. ‘This is a staggering differential, even for community-level comparisons,’ Sampson writes. ‘A difference of kind; Not Degree’). While we will not question this particular statistic’s accuracy, we do question its rhetorical function as representative, that is, synecdochic. The point of Coates’s statistic is to support a thesis that imprisonment is not a problem among the white working class, nor is poverty. The differences in imprisonment rates in this example are stark and clearly not representative of the overall situation since the white/Black differential in imprisonment rates is between five and six to one, not forty to one. Coates uses statistics to maximize disparity between whites as a group and Blacks as a group. As we will see, the cherry-picked use of shocking disparity in imprisonment rates will facilitate his caste interpretation of the prison industrial complex. But the reality is that, following our Marxist thesis on differential oppression, the extreme oppression of Black workers makes things worse for all workers, in part by making it seem as if white workers live in a different universe or, in Coates’s interpretation, are part of Calhoun’s “Upper Class.” A book like Desmond’s which details racial inequality in housing but also shows the panoply of race neutral mechanisms affecting the Black and white poor alike refutes Coates analysis. Instead of just averages, the statistic most susceptible to synecdochic distortion, we suggest thinking also in terms of departures from average, i.e., distributions, with means and standard deviations and outliers; and mechanisms, racialized, race neutral, and entangled.

THE NUMBERS GAME: PLAYING GAMES WITH STATISTICS

The notion of “white skin privilege”—that is, all whites share a common interest in upholding a system of white supremacy—is foundational to Coates’s outlook. From the rosy dawn of slavery until now, we are told that the white population, “the Dreamers,” benefit both psychologically and materially from the domination of “Black bodies.” Coates uses the concept of “the Dreamers” to characterize all whites or as he puts it “these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white” (7). White people exist in a “liberated” white galaxy, where “children [do] not regularly fear for their bodies.” We are told that, today, the white galaxy is suburban and “endless.” As opposed to all Black people, white people qua Dreamers reside in “perfect houses with nice lawns,” living a dream that “smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake” (20-21).

Those people who believe they are white became white through a process, “through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own [Black] bodies” (8). He notes that “white America” is “a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies.” And that whiteness is inseparable from this “domination and exclusion,” without which “white people” would cease to exist. The difference between “their world” and “ours” is that we (black bodies) “did not choose our fences.”

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Coates places the “long war against the black body” at the center of his social analysis. (98) The “Black body” is “enslaved by a tenacious gravity,” governed by “cosmic injustice” and disciplined by violence and fear. The “Black body” is in “constant jeopardy.” (18) The “Black body” is caged by the prison of racism (or what Coates sometimes refers to as white supremacy). The “Black body” is putatively the site of the concrete, the specific, and the particular.

In the hands of Coates, the “Black body,” which seems to be a corporal, material body, is in fact a reifying abstraction severed from the historical materiality of class struggle, the divisions of labor, and social relations of production. The abstract concept of the “Black body” replaces the concrete—and contradictory—experiences of the Black lumpenproletariat, working-class, petit bourgeoisie, and bourgeoisie. We are to believe that the “Black bodies” of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Rekia Boyd are the same as Barack Obama, Susan Rice, Ursula Burns, Rosalind Brewer, Richard Parson, Sheila Johnson, and Michael Steele—all, along with Coates and his son, at the “bottom of the well.”

The key point about this epistle letter to his son is that it functions as a false concrete universal. Coates’s son is at once intimately particular, immediate, proximal, and, on the other hand, abstract universal. He is there only in the form of an abstract Black body, but also a particular instantiation of the Black body’s miraculous diversity. (In fact, we only become aware of his son’s existence after reading sixty-eight pages of the book.)

By implication, Coates offers a dual systems theory with racism existing relatively independent of and distinct from capitalist relations of production. As the sociologist Oliver Cox noted—so many years ago—this approach “lumps all white people and all Negroes into two antagonistic groups struggling in the interest of a mysterious god called caste. This is very much to the liking of the exploiters of labor, since it tends to confuse them in an emotional matrix with all the people.”

As such, for Coates, nonwhite people can never be members of the ruling class in the United States—even if they are president, secretary of state, attorney general, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, a correctional officer, a police officer or a billionaire. Based on this presupposition, he argues, as we note above, that the gut-wrenching nature of Black poverty is qualitatively distinct from white poverty. The reader could be led to the conclusion that, as we note above, white poverty really doesn’t exist at all.

A good part of the narrative surrounding Between the World and Me (BWM) is the story of Prince Jones, a former classmate of Coates. Jones, twenty-five, was shot to death in September 2000 by Cpl. Carlton B. Jones, an undercover Prince George’s County, Maryland, police officer. Cpl. Jones fired off sixteen shots into Prince Jones’s car. Prince Jones’s body was riddled with six bullets. One shot ripped into his arm; five shots struck him in the back. The officer suspected Jones of being a drug dealer. Not only was the officer’s suspicion mistaken, everything points to the possibility that he acted criminally in shooting Jones and that his plea of self-defense was fraudulent. Coates writes that the killing and the immediate absence of any subsequent prosecution of the officer “took me from fear to a rage . . . and will likely leave me on fire for the rest of my days” (83). One thing that Coates leaves out of his letter to his son is the role that collective political struggle played in garnering some measure of justice for Prince Jones’s family. In the aftermath of Prince Jones’s murder, community activists, Howard University students, and leftist organizations (like Revolutionary Communist Party – United States and the Progressive Labor Party) held rallies and marches seeking justice for Jones. We would note, and will return to this point below, that this omission on Coates’s part is no accident.

The most interesting facts about the Prince Jones shooting are the following: Prince Georges County was and is the wealthiest Black-majority county in the United States; there were Black officials in the highest positions in local government; both the county executive and the county prosecutor were Black, as were many elected officials, and the cop who shot Prince Jones was a Black man.

The Prince Jones shooting had a tremendous impact on Coates. How could a member of the Black petit bourgeoisie with a future—who was not doing anything criminally wrong—lose his life at the hands of a Black police officer in a county run by Black folks in control of their own bodies? Coates describes Cpl. Jones as a “force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s physical laws” (83). Coates writes: “I knew that Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth” (78). He later claims:

The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country’s criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies—the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects—are the product of democratic will. And so to challenge the police is to challenge the American people who send them into the ghettos armed with the same self-generated fears that compelled the people who think they are white to flee the cities [see the contagion metaphor above] and into the Dream. The problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by majoritarian pigs. (79, italics added)

In CR, it is clear that those to be sued by the victims of racism are not the ruling class or “elites,” but the citizens, assumed to be white. These citizens morph into Dreamers or majoritarian pigs in BWM. One interpretation of what is said above is that the murderer of Prince Jones had no free will but was the vehicle of the Dreamers’ democratic will (who nevertheless cannot help themselves), those who “need to be white.” Whether the Dreamers include the Black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie who reside in Prince George is never made clear, but following the logic of the above quote, since Black agency that reinforces the status quo is erased, and is made the puppet of the Dreamers’
majoritarian agency, the answer here would seem to be, “No.” If state violence and police shootings are a force of nature, that is, inevitable, why should we resist what is inevitable? And yet, there was resistance, a resistance to which we will return later. We might note briefly that Coates lambastes Richard Wright for his naturalism in *Native Son*, turning social forces into natural forces, because it robs Black people of agency. Yet that is exactly what he does here.92

After discussing the tragic murder of Eric Garner, Coates writes to his son: “All you need to understand is that the officer carries with him the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and they necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black” (103). Now, this statement is significant because it expresses what has been taken as an “article of faith” in political circles, media coverage, and social media.

Since the shootings of Trayvon Martin (not killed by police), Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, the world has been focused on the “wild and disproportionate” number of police shootings in the United States. What is striking about the media coverage around these shootings is the assumption that white people are basically unaffected by the problem of police shootings and by extension the criminal justice system. This assumption, prominent throughout the media, characterizes the “Black Lives Matter” movement and, not surprisingly, Coates’s writings. What is of note is that media coverage has focused almost entirely on Black victims, making it seem as if police shootings operate in a near caste-like manner. On the Black Lives Matter’s understanding of white supremacy and white privilege, it would be expected that media coverage of Black victims should be underreported quantitatively and qualitatively and media coverage of white victims should be overreported quantitatively and qualitatively. But media coverage has focused on Black victims over white and Latino/Hispanic victims—following BLM’s focus on the misleading racist character of “all lives matter,” and the demand for Black particularity with the slogan “say the names.” Oddly enough, given the media coverage generally, most people paying attention know the names of Black victims: Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and past victims, from Sean Bell to Amadou Diallo to Oscar Grant.

One of the common claims made primarily through social media is the following: “Black males aged 15 to 19 are 21 times more likely to be killed by police than white males in that age group.”93 This statistic has become a synecdoche, often standing in for people’s perception of the whole problem, particularly activists associated with “Black Lives Matter.” We saw above how Coates’s use of statistics is cherry picked to emphasize “wild and disproportionate” racial disparity.

This statistic comes from a ProPublica analysis of federally collected data on fatal police shootings. While this statistic has circulated widely through social media, there has been relatively little discussion of the flaws in ProPublica’s analysis of the data. First of all, the authors of the study—Ryan Gabrielson, Ryann Grochowski Jones, and Eric Sagara—examined more than 12,000 police homicides stretching from 1980 to 2012 contained in the FBI’s Supplementary Homicide Report. Yet, their major statistical finding is selectively focused on 1,217 deadly police shootings during a three-year period from 2010 to 2012. And even more than that they only report on male shooting victims from the ages of fifteen to nineteen.

Second, the authors acknowledge that the FBI database is flawed because there are often more police shootings in the United States than are reported by the FBI database and, yet, they report their statistical findings as if they are representative of what is actually happening or probably can happen. If we take the FBI data—for what it is worth—the data shows that the Black male-white male disparity over the past fifteen years is much lower than the three-year period featured by ProPublica. The 21:1 ratio is the result of the way ProPublica parsed the data. We would point out that the reason that the three-year period cited by ProPublica gave such a high ratio is that only one non-Hispanic white was reported as killed in 2010, skewing the figures. By only analyzing a three-year period rather than a total of fifteen years, eliminating Hispanic youth from the category of whites, and focusing on young victims rather than all victims, we arrive at a fantastical probability or ratio—a “wild and disproportionate” racial disparity. The wild exaggeration of the actual disparity, incidentally, by falsely painting the fantasy of separate universes, tends to deprive Black victims and their families of the cooperative support and active participation in mass protests by the families, friends, and allies of working-class white victims.

Third, there is a methodological error in the study which, interestingly enough, is tucked away in a footnote in the article. The authors observe:

ProPublica calculated a statistical figure called a risk ratio by dividing the rate of black homicide victims by the rate of white victims. This ratio, commonly used in epidemiology, gives an estimate for how much more at risk black teenagers were to be killed by police officers. Risk ratios can have varying levels of precision, depending on a variety of mathematical factors. In this case, because such shootings are rare from a statistical perspective, a 95 percent confidence interval indicates that black teenagers are at between 10 and 40 (the interval is large due to the small sample) times greater risk of being killed by a police officer. The calculation used 2010-2012 population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.94

So the nineteen to twenty-one figure is taken as the mean of the confidence interval without giving the actual range, substituting instead an inaccurate putative range, and the numbers are based as noted on a small sample (three years) of a flawed FBI database, with the small sample containing a number (one non-Hispanic white killed in 2010) which is almost surely a fiction as we will see, but, on the face of it, at best an extreme statistical outlier. It is also important to note that risk ratios are usually associated with epidemiological studies characterized by far larger sample
populations, since the larger the sample, the smaller the margin of error.\textsuperscript{55}

In contrast to Coates and others, we contend that police shootings, police brutality, and racial profiling—on the part of police—are not merely an example of irrational white hatred of the “Black body.” The use of racial profiling is a manifestation of repressive state power for the purposes of social control and is ideologically justified as a means of targeting those most likely to commit crimes. We are told that police—in their role as armed agents of the bourgeoisie State—are merely fighting a necessary evil, in the course of the infamous “War on Drugs,” in order to keep crime down or to thwart the threat of gang violence by “urban terrorists.”\textsuperscript{56} What is class-based racial profiling becomes just good ole’ preventive police work.

The police in conjunction with the military function to enforce the rule of the bourgeoisie. It is principally working-class—white, Black, and brown—communities that are most heavily policed—not Brookville, New York (where the average net worth is estimated at $1,670,075) or Rolling Hills, California ($1,647,622), or Belle Meade, Tennessee ($1,578,235).

The expansion and intensification of the activities of the police, the courts, and the prison systems over the last thirty years has been first and foremost a class phenomenon; it is not a mass—broad and indiscriminate—phenomenon. (To highlight the class character of police shootings and the criminal justice system in general is not to diminish the murder of Prince Jones, a member of the petit bourgeoisie, but it is to emphasize that Coates takes Jones’s situation, an outlier, as representative in order to make his caste argument.) Historically, the State apparatus uses its coercive powers—in the form of the army, police, prisons, and the judicial system—to maintain the hegemony of the ruling class. The message is simple: “We have the guns, we have the dogs, you will obey.”\textsuperscript{57} In preserving “law and order,” police even draw upon members of the working class, whether through “community policing” or as employees of the police, prisons, and courts. In times like these we are reminded of the words of left-wing prison activist and writer George Jackson. In his 1972 classic Blood In My Eye Jackson observed, “Anyone who can pass the civil service examination today can kill me tomorrow. Anyone who passed the civil service examination yesterday can kill me today with complete immunity.”\textsuperscript{58} Here we should note that Jackson does not use metaphors such as “majoritarian pigs” that blur the true nature of power relations. For Jackson, “anyone who passed the civil service examination”—whether Euro-American, African-American, Asian-American, or Latino-American—is allowed to justly kill someone in the name of maintaining “law and order” or, as in the case of Trayvon Martin, “standing your ground.”

In the post-civil rights era, it is important to note that the “rule of law” is carried out on behalf of a multi-racial/multi-national ruling class—composed of both men and women—which includes Charles E. Samuels, Jr. (former head of the Federal Bureau of Prisons), Edward Lee (mayor of San Francisco, California), Jean Quan (mayor of Oakland, California), Stephanie Rawlings-Blake (mayor of Baltimore, Maryland), Susan Rice (United States National Security Advisor), and Barack Obama, among many other individuals who are extremely diverse ethnically.

The media coverage has led well-intentioned and learned people to make some rather absurd and callous statements. Take, for instance, the remarks from the Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison: “People keep saying, ‘We need to have a conversation about race. . . . This is the conversation. I want to see a cop shoot a white unarmed teenager in the back,’ Morrison says, finally. “And I want to see a white man convicted for raping a black woman. When then you ask me, ‘Is it over?’, I will say yes.”\textsuperscript{59}

The framework of this sort of comment is repeated by Coates in his Atlantic article on reparations when he suggests, “[a]n unsegregated America might see poverty, and all its effects, spread across the country with no particular bias toward skin color. Instead, the concentration of poverty has been paired with the concentration of melanin.”\textsuperscript{60} Now, as we have suggested, an “unsegregated America” would rob the ruling class of one of its main sources of social control. But putting this point aside for the moment, what is interesting about Coates’s and Morrison’s comments is that they weirdly mirror the neoliberal ideal, which would eliminate racial and gender inequality and naturalize gross class inequality. The point is that both Morrison’s and Coates’s claims are based on some questionable assumptions. In order to get a better grasp of the issue, let’s actually look at some of the statistics concerning police shootings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Raw Numbers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other and Unknown Racial Background</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Depending on the source, in 2015 alone, there were between 990 and 1,145 police shootings/killings in the United States—compared to twenty-two in Canada, three in the United Kingdom, two in Germany, and none in Japan. According to the Washington Post database, there were a total of 990 fatal police shootings. Of the total number of "fatal shootings," the vast majority of victims were males. Of the total number of "fatal shootings," 50 percent of the victims were Euro-American and 25.1 percent were Black people. A total of 93 people (or 9.4 percent) killed by police were unarmed; Black people accounted for a total of 41 percent (38 of the 93) shot dead compared to 34 percent (32) who were white.

Now, if we compare the Washington Post database to The Guardian, there are some interesting differences. The Guardian reports that a total of 1,145 people were killed—not necessarily shot and this difference between shootings and killings appears to account for most of the difference in the numbers—by police in 2015. Two hundred thirty-three of the people killed were unarmed compared to ninety-three as reported by the Washington Post. Out of the 233 who were unarmed, 105 of them were white compared to seventy-nine Black people. A total of thirty-three people armed with a toy weapon were killed according to the Washington Post; twenty-two of these people were white, and five were Black. On the other hand, The Guardian shows that twenty-eight people with a toy weapon were killed in 2015. In The Guardian, those killed with a toy weapon are included in a separate category called “other.” In this category are included victims who do not fall clearly into either the armed or unarmed category (as the example of toy weapon suggests) and includes using a vehicle as a weapon (driving toward an officer) or holding a baseball bat. Or where the facts are somehow “unknown.” In this category of “other,” fifty of the victims are Black, one hundred four are white.

These statistics are pretty stark evidence of racism. After all, Black folks are about 13 percent of the population while white (non-Hispanic) folks make up about 62–64 percent. On the one hand, in 2015, twice as many whites were fatally shot by cops in absolute terms as Black people. On the other hand, Black people were shot 2.5 times more by the police, relative to their proportion of the US population. If we look at the data disaggregated, we find that in the 18–29 group, the numbers as a percentage of the population are roughly five to one Black/white; for under eighteen, the ratio is roughly five to two in 2015. The older people get, the smaller the ratio, and in the category of men 45–54, white men are killed at a slightly higher rate.

Now, imagine if a group focused on this latter statistic and treated it as synecdoche? We might assume whoever did this to be a white supremacist, neo-Nazi, or, to cite a more establishment source, a news anchor on Fox News. Coates, Morrison, and various members of the “Black Lives Matter” movement are guilty of cherry picking the numbers. What is clear is that the BLM meme of Black youth killed at a rate of nineteen to twenty-one times that of white youth is not supported by the best sources for statistical information.

### Table: Age Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>18 to 29</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 44</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>171</td>
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<tr>
<td>45 and up</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** The Washington Post, Police Shooting Database, 2015.

### Table: Race Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Raw Numbers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other and Unknown Racial Background</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** The Guardian, Police Shooting Database, 2015.

### Table: Age Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Raw Numbers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 and up</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** The Guardian, Police Shooting Database, 2015.

### Table: Country Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Per Million</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1,145</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of people killed by police throughout the world in 2015. Source: The Independent.
From a Marxist perspective, police violence is part of a larger crisis within the political economy of monopoly capitalism affecting all working-class people. It is not the result of a “white conspiracy” against “Black bodies.” In line with the sociologist Loïc Wacquant, we argue that police practices, the courts, and prisons “have been finely targeted, first by class, second by that disguised brand of ethnicity called race, and third by place.” The regular victims of police harassment, arrest, imprisonment, and shootings are members of the working class; this includes “disproportionate numbers of the homeless, the mentally ill, the alcohol- and drug-addicted, and the severely handicapped: nearly one in four suffers from a physical, psychiatric, or emotional ailment serious enough to hamper their ability to work.”

If we focus on the Black-white duality when it comes to the criminal justice system, we will ignore the existence of class disproportionality within both white and Black people as a group. That is to say, members of the Black bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie are far less likely to be victims of police shootings, harassment, and arrest. Why? Because of their class position and the places they frequent, their neighborhoods, that is, geographical locations, the Black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie are less likely to come in contact with police and the criminal justice system. As Bruce Western argues, “the cumulative risk of imprisonment for African American males without a high school diploma tripled between 1979 and 1999 to reach the astonishing rate of 59%, the lifetime chance of serving time for black men with some college education decreased from 6% to 5%.”

Note that Western’s statistics say little about the Black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie, as many people attending some college are themselves working class and will remain so. But the comment does give some idea of how much education matters even as it is only a weak proxy for class. As Wacquant so eloquently puts it, to focus on the Black-white duality in discussions of the criminal justice system “obfuscates the fact that class disproportionality inside each ethnic category is greater than the racial disproportionality between them.” To be clear, we are not implying that members of the petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie are never victims of police shootings, harassment, or prison incarceration.

Even though Coates and others may argue that working-class whites belong to the “master race,” and are “Dreamers,” should we view their deaths as “justifiable homicides of felons,” collateral damage, or the result of friendly fire? Sociologist Paul J. Hirschfield makes a perceptive observation: “Although various forms of racism are likely important to any valid explanation of America’s exceptionally lethal police, they are far from the whole story. American police are also killing whites at alarming rates. Using FE (fatalenencounters.org) data, I calculated that 490 non-Latino white Americans were fatally shot by the police in 2013. If German police fatally shot as many people (seven) in 2013 as they did in 2012 (Lartey 2015) and all were white, then white Americans were 26 times more likely to die by police gunfire in 2013 than white Germans.” For Coates, the number of Black people killed can only be “wild and disproportionate” because he completely ignores the real number of whites killed.

In order to reach the conclusion that the number of Black people murdered by police is “wild and disproportionate,” Coates has to make the United States polity a caste system. This is evident in his Atlantic article “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” He explains the prison industrial complex in a nutshell as giving employment to white workers to guard Black bodies. Black bodies suffer and white workers benefit seems to be the obvious implication. It is further implied that this stark dichotomy updates the relation of white slave patrols to Black runaway slaves. This narrative is reinforced in his response to Cedric Johnson where he notes, as discussed above, that white and Black workers live in different universes with regard to the prison industrial complex. If we put the two comments together, we have the following argument: they are in different universes with regard to imprisonment but are reunited in the prison in the form of white workers ruling over Black bodies. Coates returns to this claim in BWM. The following quote comes as part of a culminating narrative in which Black bodies continually play the same role (the plundered) for the Dreamers:

In “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” Coates notes: “Deindustrialization had presented an employment problem for America’s poor and working class of all races. Prison presented a solution: jobs for whites, and warehousing for blacks.”

If we look at the statistical data from both The Washington Post and The Guardian, we can only reach the conclusion that Coates has provided us with a “wild and disproportionate” claim grounded in his immediate perception, not objective reality. First of all, there are nearly 900,000 non-Hispanic whites in jails and prisons. One of the implications of a “race first” or “liberal nationalist” analysis of racism, as we have been arguing, is that while the racial disparities (i.e., racism) of the prison system and other US capitalist institutions are highlighted, the impact on whites, particularly white working-class folks, is assumed to be either negligible, irrelevant, or a “benefit.” Statistics show that the white male imprisonment rate of 678/100,000, while dwarfed by the Black male rate of 4300/100,000, would itself lead the world by a wide margin. The caste interpretation misses the larger picture of how racism impacts the entire working class negatively and by virtue of this omission almost inevitably acts to divide the working class further.
Second, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2015, Black people make up 11 percent of the “judges, magistrates, and other judicial workers,” 26 percent of “bailiffs, correctional officers, and jailers,” and 23.3 percent in the category of “probation officers and correctional treatment specialists.”27 The statistics around police shootings and the prison industrial complex seriously undermine Coates’s caste account. For Coates, the statistics expressing the reality of police shootings and the prison industrial complex are all about a one-dimensional plunder of “Black bodies” for the benefit of Dreamers, those who think they are white. But the reality we say fits a Marxist view of racism, hurting all workers enormously but differentially.

To be blunt, Coates’s focus on the “Black body” lets capitalism off the hook by blaming injustice on whiteness abstracted from class dominance. If the vast majority of victims of police shootings—whether Euro-American, African-American, Latino-American, or Asian-American—are from working-class backgrounds, how do you separate racism from class exploitation and domination? To be fair, it is possible to imagine “class differences” without exploitation if we assume that class is Weberian in nature and really about status, income, occupation, or education. However, from a Marxist perspective, as Ellen Wood astutely notes, “the difference that constitutes ‘class’ as an ‘identity’ is, by definition, a relationship of inequality and power, in a way that sexual or cultural ‘difference’ need not be.”73

The political scientist Adolph Reed is on the right track to argue that the “race first” position reflects the neo-classical economic presupposition—associated with Milton Friedman, Gary Becker, and Thomas Sowell—that “the market is a just, effective, or even acceptable system for rewarding talent and virtue and punishing their opposites and that, therefore, removal of ‘artificial’ impediments to its functioning like race and gender will make it even more efficient and just.”74

The “Black Lives Matter” movement and Coates, through their “race first” analysis, separate out racism from class dominance, and as part of this separation, incorporate liberal versions of whiteness studies and the social construction of race while rejecting Marxism as “class reductionist.” One of the most prevalent beliefs emerging from this strain of antiracist politics has been a level of visceral and vitriolic anti-Marxism. For instance, Marissa Johnson, co-founder of the Seattle “Black Lives Matter,” rallied against Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders for being a “class reductionist” and not recognizing that the struggle for racial democracy is separate from issues related to economic inequality.75 (Of course, we beg to differ.) As such, it could be implied that the fight for racial democracy is the antipode of socialist democracy, that is to say, addressing grievances that could be construed as specifically racial take precedence over and are separate from issues dealing with the redistribution of wealth or the elimination of capitalism. This position is rooted in the explanatory primacy of race.

Whiteness becomes a mysterious property brought into being by the presence of nonwhite bodies so that the Norwegian, Jew, and Irish person are turned white—not by a complex ideological process shaped primarily by the ruling class—but by an impetus triggered by the opportunity to dominate nonwhites bodies. The new antiracists also incorporate liberal versions of queer theory, thus updating Black nationalism for our neo-liberal, multiculturalist moment. To return to Barbara Foley’s point on what publishing success and the integration of BLM into the democratic establishment narrative indicates about civil society’s normative assumptions, Coates’s work (assigned to the entering freshman class at Howard University, by the way) itself may be helping to restructure bourgeois social control, facilitating the class rule of a neo-liberal, multicultural bourgeoisie and fostering divisions among multicultural/mutiracial workers.

Coates’s caste analysis in conjunction with the policy suggestions offered by the liberal faction of the “Black Lives Matter” movement never question the legitimacy of bourgeois civil society and the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.” They are content to suggest that body cameras, bike patrols, community policing, and other such efforts are possible solutions to police shootings. They never question whether these reforms will only further legitimate the use of police in working-class communities. The only real reform—possible under capitalism—is to take away the right of police officers to use violence against citizens, that is, take away police weapons. We don’t need community policing or more appropriately friendly repressive police tactics. Given their objective role in the reproduction of bourgeois civil society, police can never be simply “benevolent problem solvers” in working-class communities, though such problem-solving may occur on occasion, e.g., when they act as an ambulance to rush an injured person to the hospital or remove a spouse abuser from the house without injury. As Kristian Williams convincingly argues, “Community policing turns the citizenry into the eyes and ears of the state and by the same means creates a demand for more aggressive tactics. This is where street sweeps, roadblocks, saturation patrols, zero-tolerance campaigns, and paramilitary units come into the picture.”76 In recent years, we have seen community policing has gone hand-in-glove with urban renewal, neighborhood revitalization and ultimately gentrification. We need a de-militarization of the police force.77 We need to do away with “zero-tolerance policing” and take away police officer’s militaristic weapons and tactics and access to “legitimate” state violence. This is not a utopian demand; this is a demand for the protection of our human rights and an end to arbitrary harassment, brutality, and arrest. As long as police officers have weapons, violence—or the threat of violence—is implicit in every police interaction with citizens and is more likely to rear its head when it is inappropriate and illegitimate. Any effort to reform criminal justice policy in the United States must have a broad working-class base in order to make a difference. 

“A DIFFERENT WORLD”: HOWARD UNIVERSITY AND BLACK BOURGEOIS COSMOPOLITANISM

In the discussion of the historically Black Howard University, Coates presents the reader with political commentary in the form of self-criticism. This retrospective on his “student days”
at Howard offers a portrait of the political enlightenment of the young Coates, in which he soothes the reader's potential anxiety about his adoption of an essentialist form of nationalism. Since his nationalist dream is torn to shreds at Howard University, Coates would deny that he should be characterized as a nationalist. But the reality is that he reconstitutes his nationalism in a way that might be called postmodernist; that is, he discards racial essentialism with respect to Black people, adopts a social constructionist conception of race, only to replace his conception of Black identity with Black bourgeois cosmopolitanism. The whole process is almost dizzyingly incoherent and so please be patient as we attempt to analyze its incoherence, historical inaccuracies, and rhetorical function.

Coates spends a considerable amount of time reminiscing about his time at Howard University, a historically Black college in Washington, DC, which he calls "The Mecca" (a reference full of ambiguities given his professed atheism). "The Mecca" is a "machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples." He even describes DC as "the capital of federal power and black power." In this section, we argue that Coates's discussion about Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) functions as a form of ideological mystification about bourgeois civil society.

Coates presents to the reader and his son his initial dalliance with Black nationalism and racial essentialism. The first stage of Coates's political enlightenment ("the cold steel truths of life") comes as a result of being exposed to Black nationalism and/or Afrocentrism through the works of Chancellor Williams, J. A. Rogers, John Jackson, and others; he states that the African historian and Howard professor Chancellor William's book *Destruction of Black Civilization* was his Bible. Like so many before and after him, Coates came to accept the myth that all Black people are descendants of African kings and queens. At Howard, Coates finds "the Dream of a 'black race'" as the antipode of the American (white) Dream. Coates's nationalist Dream—"the story of our own royalty"—becomes an intellectual weapon against white supremacy, against the Dreamers. After taking courses in the history department at Howard, however, he is awakened from the false dream of Afrocentricity and/or a naïve form of nationalism.

Coates's journey contrasts Black nationalist mythologies with the white Dream. Eventually, Coates reaches the conclusion that there is nothing essential about being Black. He notes: "There was nothing holy or particular in my skin; I was black because of history and heritage. There was no nobility in falling, in being bound, in living oppressed, and there was no inherent meaning in black blood. Black blood wasn't black; black skin wasn't even black." He later reaches the conclusion: "To be black and beautiful was not a matter for gloating. Being black did not immunize us from history's logic or the lure of the Dream. The writer, and that was what I was becoming, must be wary of every Dream and every nation, even his own nation. Perhaps his own nation more than any other, precisely because it is his own" (53). One of the ironies of this quote is the suggestion that even Black people can be Dreamers.

He prefaces his journey beyond naïve nationalism with the comment that the Black World is more than a "photonegative" of "that people who believe they are white." The Black World is full of diversity, teeming with "Ponzi schemers and Christian cultists, Tabernacle fanatics and mathematical geniuses." "The Mecca" is the "crossroads of the black diaspora" (40). All the students at Howard University were "hot and incredible, exotic even, though we hailed from the same tribe" (42). Howard, the so-called "Capstone of Negro Education," becomes the embodiment of Black bourgeois cosmopolitanism for Coates. While Coates admits that he is driven by nostalgia, he, nonetheless, sees Howard as a place of self-discovery and self-invention, "a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples" (40). Clearly, this Black self-invention is to be contrasted to white self-invention, with its need to dominate.

Coates's self-criticism of his naïve nationalism is focused on its essentialism, that is, the view that all Black people are essentially the same and qualitatively different from those "people who believe they are white." Despite the fact that essentialism is often counterposed to social constructionism, with Coates we get a modification. While not all members of the Black "tribe" are identical in every respect, their identity rests in the essential diversity of Blackness. So, a close reading of the book reveals that he does not completely reject nationalism. Rather Coates's nationalism is reconstituted on the basis of an essential diversity of Blackness (Blackness as a "herd of dissenters") (50); but it is an essential diversity itself rooted in the dismissal of class "diversity" among Black people and the aestheticization of this diversity as "hot." The Black body is a "spectrum of dark energy" (50). This metaphor, Coates's official rejection of Afrocentrism notwithstanding, should remind the reader of the idealist presupposition of Afrocentrism associated with Molefi Asante, Marimba Ani, and others. Asante's concept of a "composite African" entails that continental Africans and people of African descent—whether in Cuba, Brazil, the United States, England, or Africa—respond to "the same rhythms of the universe, the same cosmological sensibilities, the same general historical reality." Here a concept of Black particularity is grounded on a theory of identity frozen in time that conveniently ignores dialectical change. The essence of identity, for Asante, is not seen as a process of *becoming*; rather, it is a fixed, natural, state of *being*. We should take note that Asante's claim is presented as a self-evident fact or apodictic. We would add if, in this version, African peoples are reessentialized through their essential diversity, "whites" are essentially homogenous.

Coates's stroll down memory lane is more fantasy than reality. There is no denying the fact that most African Americans were not allowed to attend predominantly white colleges and universities prior to the elimination of Jim and Jane Crow. Consequently, HBCUs took on the mission of "uplifting the race" and providing quality education to Black people. The HBCU motto could be summarized as "All those who desire an education should have the opportunity to receive one." Even today, HBCUs are marketed as the only educational institutions in the United States which provide nurturing environments for Black students. Yet,
Today, the missionary spirit of these institutions has died a slow death, the quality of education has declined, and they have become completely subordinated to the logic of capital—no different than white peer institutions. Whatever truth there was to the missionary spirit of the HBCUs, these institutions have become “purveyors of super-American, ultra-bourgeois prejudices and aspirations.”

All universities and colleges have been and are currently subjected to the pressures of the capitalist market, that is, the drive for profits. As Ferguson has observed:

University presidents, government leaders in conjunction with “captains of industry” [have begun] restructuring the university in order to completely subordinate it systematically to corporate and finance capital. The capitalist restructuring of universities [means] that each department [is] . . . a “revenue center,” each university course a consumer product, each student a customer, each professor an academic entrepreneur, each administrator a manager, all stakeholders in promoting the university in its never-ending search for profits. A “new” free-market vocabulary of customers and stakeholders, shared governance, massive open online courses (MOOCs), niche marketing, technology and curriculum innovation, assessments and branding [have become] the governing mantras on college campuses. . . . Priorities in higher education [have become] increasingly determined by the bottom line.

This describes any and all institutions of higher learning in the United States—whether HBCU or PWI. By ignoring this reality, Coates’s portrait of HBCUs becomes as romantic as Spike Lee’s School Daze or the television sitcom A Different World. We are not discounting the rich history of HBCUs. But this history must not be romanticized. We have to look at the antinomies of HBCUs. Coates willfully ignores the views of John Hope Franklin, Abram Harris, Ernest Everett Just, Alain Locke, Amiri Baraka, and too many others who criticized HBCUs, particularly Howard, for being “citadels of political quiescence and paternal authoritarianism,” sinking in economic quicksand lead by incompetent and bureaucratic leadership.

The renowned African American historian John Hope Franklin, a member of the Howard history department from 1947 to 1956, was quite critical of Coates’s Mecca. Franklin was disgusted with the authoritarian impulses of Howard’s first Black president Mordecai Johnson, who rivaled Ralph Ellison’s larger-than-life character Dr. Bledsoe. Based on his experience as a faculty member at Howard, Franklin recalled that Howard’s administration ruled as feudal lords through tyranny and bureaucracy, while fleecing any and all money from the pockets of students. Franklin later recounted that his experience at Howard was nothing short of a “series of frustrations.”

Coates writes as if HBCUs have never been in a constant state of impending crisis. Whether Mordecai Johnson’s Howard University, Benjamin May’s Morehouse, or Charles S. Johnson’s Fisk, or, in modern times, Wayne A. I. Frederick’s Howard University or Harold Martin’s North Carolina A&T, these institutions preach a gospel of “make do with less.”

In the Age of Austerity, HBCUs are trapped by Booker T. Washington’s dream of industrial education. Today, the dream is one of producing more Black engineers or stockbrokers rather than the next Romare Bearden, John B. McLendon, Jr., Kara Walker, or Paul Beatty. The business of universities is to construct majors tailored to the marketplace. Institutional funding trickles down to the humanities, particularly English and philosophy. Historically, these institutions languish in the dungeon of anti-intellectualism, heavy teaching loads, and underpaid faculty and staff—while every Black chancellor or president is imprisoned with the hope that their institution will be the next “Black Harvard.” And, yet, these institutions remain underfinanced and understaffed caricatures of whatever predominantly white institution they have decided to emulate. Students and faculty are left to their own devices when their library resources are a notch above most high school libraries. In fact, scholarly research is virtually impossible without access to the library resources of a nearby predominantly white college or university.

In our “post-racial” times, HBCUs find themselves competing with predominantly white colleges and universities for Black students. Many HBCUs—like Bennett College and Chicago State University—are on the brink of closing their doors because of low enrollment and/or declining state funding. And those HBCUs that are receiving public funding are struggling to retain and/or graduate students. HBCUs awarded only 15 percent of the bachelor’s degrees Blacks earned in 2012-2013 compared with 35 percent in 1976-1977. In his flight of fantasy, Coates ignores the ways in which HBCU presidents are paid mid-six-figure salaries while tuition is rising and the salaries of faculty and staff are stagnating—if not declining. Today, presidents at HBCUs, the Board of Trustees, and donors have become prisoners of government and military funding in addition to capital-fund projects such as $1.3 million clock towers and lavish multimillion student centers. Desegregation becomes both a blessing and a curse for HBCUs.

While HBCUs do not substantially differ in many respects from predominantly white colleges and universities, the key difference rests in the manner in which the Black College Mystique is used to perpetuate the fraud that HBCUs are “crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples.” Such that Coates tells his son, “Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca” (151). What is the “warmth of The Mecca,” the reader might ask? We do know that the fictional images that Ellison paints in The Invisible Man and Nella Larsen in Quicksand are closer to reality than “The Mecca” of Coates.

“I URGE YOU TO STRUGGLE” – FOR WHAT? COATES’S SUBJECTIVIST CONCEPTION OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE

Coates often utilizes metaphors of natural disaster when describing the horrors that result from the history of
race in the United States. As Lester Spence astutely notes, for Coates, “white supremacy has the impact, the visceral impact, of what Christians would call an act of God. But [Coates] simultaneously believes it is the creation of institutions with very specific man-made roles and powers.”

As such, Coates’s narrative oscillates between voluntarism and fatalism. This is reflective of the age-old antinomy between free will and determinism. This antinomy is largely shaped by Coates’s need to see whites (mostly American) as plunderers of “Black bodies” and the Earth. It would seem to derive from a deep and for all practical purposes psycho-cultural essentialism that immunizes the “Dreamers” from change to the extent that they are not worth struggling with. US society is dominated by those who freely invent themselves as white in order to dominate Black folk and Mother Earth. And yet they cannot help themselves. Coates’s rhetoric thus describes those who need to be white as products of self-making and democratic will on the one hand yet driven by deep psychocultural influences they appear largely incapable of resisting on the other—influences that Coates does not analyze, relying on James Baldwin to do the analytical work. White people—who are representatives of the democratic will of America, the majoritarian pigs whose lead the police follow—have willingly plundered “the Black body” and yet they are driven by psychocultural forces beyond their control. Black folks, on the other hand, are faced with their own version of this antinomy: on one hand, those like Prince Jones are helpless victims of “cosmic injustice”; on the other hand, others, like Coates and his son, can struggle, but not with the Dreamers, who cannot be reached or are not worth reaching.

Coates, as noted above, claims that racism is “a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s laws” (83). Coates offers us many reiterations of this point throughout BWM. Here is one example:

Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen. The fact of history is that black people have not—probably no people have ever—liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts. In every great change in the lives of African Americans we see the hand of events that were beyond our individual control, events that were not unalloyed goods. You cannot disconnect our emancipation in the Northern colonies from the blood spilled in the Revolutionary War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from slavery in the South from the chancel houses of the Civil War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from Jim Crow from the genocides of the Second World War. History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life. (96-97, italics added)

While this might seem in isolation compatible with the Marxist view that people make history but not in conditions of their own choosing, it is not. White supremacy becomes naturalized as the product of the curse of whiteness. It is a force of nature, the ultimate form of “cosmic injustice” (106). If white supremacy is an unstoppable force of nature, then there is no objective necessity to engage in political struggle.

He tells his son in essence that the “Dreamers” cannot be struggled with; that the “Dreamers” must struggle with themselves. Engaging in class struggle (a term he never uses) is futile. Having already written off the white working class because they are also “Dreamers,” Coates’s analysis also writes off the Black working class. We would note here, to return to the events surrounding the shooting of Prince Jones, that Jones’s shooting occasioned a fierce and prolonged struggle of multiracial leftist forces against the verdict. And while we noted Coates’s omission of this struggle above, it is important to note that Coates’s text has to omit it as the facts of multiracial antiracist class struggle in protest of the shooting and the behavior of the Prince George Police Department would absolutely undermine his entire ontology of struggle.

Coates and his son’s “Black bodies” are in the “dungeon,” or “the bottom of the well.” As Coates observes, “You and I, my son, are that ‘below.’ That was true in 1776. It is true today” (105). Magically, despite their objective class position as members of the petit bourgeoisie, we are to believe that Coates and his son are eternal members of the “wretched of the earth.” Moreover, anyone who has a Black body is supposed to be below—politically and economically—whites, the Dreamers, regardless of their class position. In our “post-racial” times, we are to believe that Barack Obama and Sonia Sotomayor (associate justice of the United States Supreme Court) are “below” a white working-class male or female.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008, we find the specter of right-wing and extremely racist populism (Donald Trump in the United States, Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, as well as True Finns in Finland, and the UK Independence Party in the United Kingdom) is on the rise. Throughout the world, the anarchy of capitalism has become, as James Joyce’s Stephen declared in Ulysses, “a nightmare from which [we are] trying to awake.” The world is caught in a seemingly bottomless state of crisis in which “Dante would have found the worst horrors in his Inferno surpassed.” What advice does Coates give his son (and by proxy the reader) on how to struggle against the exploitation and oppression throughout the world? What advice does he give his son on fighting against the juggernaut of “justified homicides” on the part of police officers—“our friends in blue”?

At best, Coates’s answer is pessimism clothed in apparent realism: Son, get along the best you can in a country “lost in the Dream.” At its worst, his answer is escapist, driven by an “irrepressible desire to unshackle [his] body and achieve the velocity of escape”—and, ultimately, go to France (21). Unfortunately, Coates does not tell his son to join the ranks of working-class Black youth and engage in the struggle against police violence. He does not tell his son to commit “class suicide” and fight to make the lives of working-class people better. There is not one mention of socialism, class
struggle, or anticapitalist struggles throughout the book. He doesn’t tell his son to link the fight for the national democratic rights of Black people with the struggle for decent jobs, quality integrated housing, education, and health care for all. At best, we get a call for reparations based on the historical wrongs done to Black people. At his worst, Coates gives us the following:

I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves. And still I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. (151)

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, the question lingers, what is Samori to struggle for? What is the struggle that Coates wants us to engage in? His warning—to his son—that he should not “struggle for the Dreamers” leads us down the path of political quietism and inertia. The end result of Coates’s political odyssey is nothing more than stoicism, subjective passivity in the wake of objective crisis. And ultimately the handmaiden and mirror image of the very racism that divides and conquers all the separated sections of the working class.

The trope of the “Black body” allows Coates to avoid offering a class analysis of the World writ large. We never get a sense of the social totality from Coates. In a period in which the “outdated antagonisms” of class struggle are staring him in the face, his vision is blind to the necessity for a leftist critique of bourgeois civil society and class dominance. Coates is perhaps the latest incarnation of the Black public intellectual—interpreting the hidden injuries of living in a Black body for the white (liberal bourgeois) public. Ultimately, despite his call for his son to engage in struggle, the reader of his book is left with a subjectivist conception of political struggle grounded on bourgeois cosmopolitanism, existential pessimism, moral suasion, and a politics of empathy seeking to invoke white guilt. Coates’s son is the victim of his father’s antinomies: “Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. . . . But do not struggle for the Dreamers.”

Coates’s work focuses on the political and cultural representation of racial differences and, in turn, relegates the economics of difference to the margins of the theoretical universe. From a Marxist perspective, class differences are not reflective of differences in terms of status, lifestyle, or income. Class denotes one’s objective relationship to the means of production. And exploitation, from the standpoint of Marxism, derives from one’s objective relation to the means of production where power is attached to owning the means of production. Because the working class is not in possession of the means of production, they are subject to exploitation in the sphere of production—if they want to live. Because of the objective phenomenon of socialized production which is privately appropriated by the bourgeoisie, both Black and white workers are exploited under capitalism. This workers share in common despite racism, differences in culture, chauvinism on the part of white workers, etc. The struggle to overthrow capitalism and the fight against racism and racial chauvinism are not mutually exclusive but integrally united. This is not a purely academic question which can be politely ignored given the fact that the vast majority of Black people are members of the working class.

A class analysis of racism begins with the presupposition that in class societies power is not distributed equally. Power is always constituted at the level of production—at the level of the separation between those who own the means of production (as a class) and those who do not own these means of production and thus are forced to sell their labor power in order to survive. Power is a structural relation deployed (particularly through the mediation of the State) for the purposes of exploitation and not a free-floating abstraction to which all people, regardless of their position in the social division of labor, have access.

We must acknowledge that not all Black people are subject to exploitation in the Marxist sense. Some Black people, as a result of their relationship to the means of production, are exploiters and oppressors. Here we could mention Oprah Winfrey (CEO of Harpo Inc., and OWN network), Janice Bryant Howroyd, Stephen L. Hightower (founder and CEO of Hightowers Petroleum Co.), TiAA-CREF President and CEO Roger W. Ferguson, Jr., Harold Martin (Chancellor of North Carolina A&T), Kenneth I. Chenault (Chairman and CEO of American Express), Chairman and CEO of Xerox Corp. Ursula Burns, Carl Horton (CEO of the Absolute Spirit Company Inc.), Attorney General Loretta Lynch, former Attorney General Eric Holder, Merck Chairman and CEO Kenneth Frazier, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, or Robert Parsons (CEO of AOL Time Warner). Can we seriously entertain the claim that Barack Obama or Oprah Winfrey as members of the ruling class are at a disadvantage with respect to the white working class?

Despite the fact that Coates divides the world into Black bodies and the (white) Dreamers, he tells his son, “It does not matter if the agent of those forces [that assault the Black body] is white or black—what matters is our condition, what matters is the system that makes your body breakable” (18). Yet, Coates does not offer us much detail on “our condition” or “the system.” We might note that Coates’s use of the term “system” trades on more radical connotations; but it is senseless on the caste interpretation he commits himself to. This is yet another example of the incoherence, which if not pointed out for what it is, allows him to seem liberal, nationalist, antiesentialist, and radical all at once or, more appropriately, a “Black radical liberal.”

Leading up to the 2016 presidential election in the United States, there is much to justify the “radical Black liberalism” of Coates. Social media and news pundits have given voice to a fraction of the ruling class—fueled by the rhetoric of Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Pat Buchanan, Ronald Reagan, Rudy Giuliani, and Donald Trump—which appeals to the “Silent White Majority,” pitting one segment of the working class against the other in the hopes of “making America great again.”

On the other hand, a significant, yet often ignored, reality today is that the ruling class and its political allies and
especially its ideologies are multiracial in character. The power relations of class domination and racial inequality are being mediated by the articulation of a multiculturist ideology. Corporate multiculturalism is functioning as a new model of social control. Corporate diversity or multiculturalism can facilitate capital accumulation and reproduction. But it should not be inferred that corporate multiculturalism will lead to the elimination of racial inequality or the redistribution of wealth in order to destroy class inequality. This new form of social control is a form of “benign neglect” of class inequality; while integrating more nonwhites into the ruling class, the exploitation of a segregated multiracial working-class continues.

The advance of a few individuals into the ranks of the petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie should not signal the end of racial inequality. Rather, it is a sign of the restructuring of class domination. So, while racial inequality has not disappeared, the Black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie is playing a significant role in the reproduction of racial inequality via its support of finance and corporate capital. The social consciousness of this new Black bourgeoisie differs from that of the old Black capitalist class because its economic existence depends to a greater extent on finance and corporate capital. It does not market its services or commodities exclusively to the Black community and it has a weaker affiliation with and interest in the political, social, and economic development of the Black working class. The increased immiseration of the Black working class goes hand in glove with the growing political power and wealth of the Black bourgeoisie.

Clearly, we are not arguing that we live in a post-racial society. We are arguing that the manner in which racism is reproduced has definitely changed. Historically, the existence of the “Color Line” as a system of oppression ostensibly involved the exclusion of non-whites, particularly Black people, from participation in bourgeois (white) civil society at all levels. In the post-Civil Rights era, however, deepening class conflict within the Black class structure has greatly impacted the reproduction of racism.

The ongoing class struggle for political and ideological hegemony is reflected in the appropriation of multiculturalist discourse. This multiculturist ideology is not tokenism but a systematic process of political incorporation. It would appear that multicultural tolerance of difference has become something practiced by the ruling class; it is not just an ideal. (Even Trump has Latino and Black supporters like Katrina Campins and conservative pastor Darrell Scott). Tokenism has become dialectically sublated by multiculturalist ideology, and corporate diversity has come to function as an ideological smoke screen for the reproduction of class domination and racial inequality. Political strategies organized around the politics of identity discount the political economy of differences, that is, class inequalities, or pit “race” against class, while distorting both.

In today’s times, images of diversity are everywhere including news staffs, advertisements, presidential campaigns, sports coverage, entertainment, and popular television shows. It is common to witness companies such as Google, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Qualcomm, and EMC Corp. denouncing North Carolina’s recent anti-LGBT legislation Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (NC HB2). In April 2014, Donald Sterling, then-owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, was stripped of his ownership, banned from the NBA for life, and fined $2.5 million by the league after private recordings of him making racist comments were made public. Ultimately, Sterling was forced to sell 100 percent of the Clippers to former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer for $2 billion; Sterling made a record profit since he purchased the struggling San Diego Clippers (the predecessor to the Clippers) for $12.5 million in 1981. It has become a common practice of both political parties to routinely run political candidates that are multiracial, female, and gay, who are not politically radical but committed to the reproduction of bourgeois social relations of production. Multiculturalist discourse celebrates diversity without fundamentally changing power differentials between the working class and the bourgeoisie. It functions as a smoke screen for the continuation of racism with the participation of a multi-racial ruling class—composed of both men and women.

One has to look at the irony of corporate executives coming out to oppose North Carolina’s HB2 law, but no corporations have come out in opposition to a plethora of voter ID laws—which primarily impacts the participation of working-class people in the political process—passed by state legislatures in the past few years.

Why has Coates’s “middle-class” Black rage and consequent appeal to white guilt propelled him to his success? One answer would be that Coates’s ideas are now hegemonic, reflecting the ideas of a fraction of the ruling class, namely, the liberal bourgeoisie, which has had to respond to and incorporate a host of movements from below. Coates’s social commentary and political ideas represent an attempt to combine bourgeois liberalism and bourgeois nationalism as an answer to the crisis of capital. While he publicly entertains the idea of a “beautiful struggle” for social democracy, he silently accepts that the vampire of capitalism is here to stay. This would, perhaps, explain why Coates has become the doyen of “Black radical liberalism.”

CONCLUSION

As noted briefly above, Coates sees the plunder of Black bodies being extended to the plunder of the earth. That the Dreamers threaten the planet is on the one hand an absurdity, as noted just above. But if we take it seriously, this makes his position on struggle even more incomprehensible and certainly incoherent.

Although our focus here is on the relation between Coates’s essentialist (however updated) understanding of whiteness and Blackness and its implications for his understanding of struggle, it ought to be pointed out how misguided it is to analyze climate change as deriving from flawed national character (the need to plunder) and not capitalism’s triple imperative of maximum profit, competition, and constant growth. The problem of constant growth should be obvious on a finite planet while competition fueling the growth imperative almost guarantees that global cooperation (including the sharing of genuinely green innovations) required to solve this problem will not occur. And of
course the profit criterion makes the problem of sunk capital a very serious one since massive investments in fossil fuels are not likely to be written off: witness the serious problem that China has with its relatively recent coal plants they’ve built, totaling according to Vaclav Smil upwards of 300 billion dollars. It is well known that at this point, the world’s leading emitter of greenhouse gases annually is China, and India is pretty likely to pass the US as well. Will we now be condemning three national characters or arguing nonsensically that the Chinese and Indians have become themselves “Dreamers”?\(^{103}\)

It has been our point all along that Coates omits class struggles from his narrative. And—similar to Cedric Johnson’s critique—Coates leaves us with white liberal guilt (like Baldwin); instead of solidarity, Coates asserts that “exclusion promotes solidarity” too. Coates notes, “whiteness confers knowable, quantifiable privileges, regardless of class—much like ‘manhood’ confers knowable, quantifiable privileges, regardless of race. White supremacy is neither a trick, nor a device, but one of the most powerful shared interests in American history.”\(^{104}\)

Our response to this is the following: There is the solidarity of multiracial working class unity, where antiracism is made central to the forging of such unity, rooted in the understanding that divisions in the working class always operate in the interests of capital and against the interests of the exploited class. And then there are class collaborationist, even fascist, forms of solidarity like white supremacy. Solidarity in the interests of human flourishing cannot be equated with solidarity rooted in rhetorics and strategies of fear and insecurity. And these rhetorics and strategies, to the extent that they gain power, cannot be laid at the feet of ordinary workers. As Wright notes in *Native Son*, solidarity can go in many directions: Bigger is as attracted to fascism as he is to the rather embarrassing reds Wright offers us. Bigger fantasizes being a Mussolini type, whipping people into a “tight band.” Are these two solidarities equivalent? Does Bigger have a shared interest in both? Why not? Coates collapses questions of solidarity with questions of interest, a conflation that underlies his tendency to take the appearance for the reality.\(^{105}\)

Johnson’s reference to white guilt does not deny the material effects of racism, as Coates supposes. To say that “whites” get democracy while Black bodies get plundered means white liberal antiracism necessarily takes the form of guilt. This guilt then forms the basis for the moral appeal underlying the case for reparations, even as, to articulate one of Coates’s numerous antinomies, such an appeal is undermined by the ontology of struggle presented in *BWM*. One of the reasons Coates’s central metaphor of the “Black body” carries such fetishizing, synecdochic power is because it registers what Johnson has called the “morally powerful but historically specious view of universally felt racial injury.” The problem with universally felt racial injury is that it, in our current moment, makes (nationalist) class collaboration feel right and multiracial working class unity, where common class interests must trump the absence of common experience, feel wrong.

NOTES


8. See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016), 210. For Coates, all white people are either Bill Gates, Alice Walton, or Donald Trump. Or, more poetically, every white person is the “American Psycho” Patrick Bateman, aspiring to be Donald Trump, imprisoned by their whiteness and a psychological desire to destroy the Black body.


13. Ibid., 18.


18. Ibid., 147.

19. Ibid., 146-47.


22. Ibid., 242.


As the tables show, the US poverty and near poverty rates for Black and Asian Americans (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014); and Coates himself notes that ordinary white homeowners, given a prime moneymaker for those who saw opportunity in land scarcity, housing dilapidation and racial segregation. See ibid., loc. 3918, chapter 20.

Desmond notes that “[w]omen from black neighborhoods made up 9 percent of Milwaukee’s population and 30 percent of its evicted tenants.” Note that this mismatch is severe but far less severe than the comparison of “poorest areas,” whose differential is nine rather than –3. The difference here is inseparable from the legacy effects of prior segregation and current neglect. The race neutral mechanisms discussed here work on the raw material of prior conditions, reinforcing them. Though it is reasonable to assume at some point on sheer demographic grounds that “undesirable” multiracial neighborhoods will begin to form. For Desmond’s statistics, see chapter 8 and loc. 4709, Esplique.

We are distinguishing between the liberal and left-liberal interpretation of “white privilege” and that of Theodore Allen. While we do not agree with everything Allen’s understanding of the term and reject its use, Allen makes clear that white workers do not benefit from “white privilege” but are harmed by it.

We agree that “white identity” is a distortion and, following Allen, has been inseparable from racism. Note, though, the ease with which Coates conflates, following his caste analysis, ruling class practices with nonruling class practices. And note how he overpathologizes white identity, a practice that facilitates a psychocultural analysis of identity instead of a materialist one.


Coates makes the following comments about Richard Wright via Twitter: “I kinda hate Native Son. There I said it.” He goes on to complain that Wright’s literary naturalism is “too deterministic” in that “I thought his basic point—racism destroys black humanity—just wasn’t true. It misses one of the lovelier [sic] aspects of black life,” https://storify.com/sjemery/opinions-son-richard-wright-s-native-son (last accessed May 31, 2016).
Coates’s difficulty accounting for the murder of Prince Jones should be compared to Michelle Alexander’s much more convincing discussion of minority police officers and police chiefs in The New Jim Crow, 237-38. Alexander (see note below) compares such police officers and police chiefs to Black slave drivers and Black plantation owners. We think, despite the decided advance over Coates, this is where her caste metaphor gets her into trouble. Contemporary class formation among US Blacks is different post Jim Crow and pre Jim Crow. Under Jim Crow, there was no Black ruling class. Period. Now there is. And police officers and police chiefs are not part of an under caste, though the people they dominate are often members of a hyper-segregated working class.


54. Ibid.

55. We will be looking at the Post and Guardian data momentarily, but to give you a sense of how easy it is to cherry pick as synecdochically possibly unrepresentative samples, when we last looked at the Post database, it listed through May 388 shootings for 2016. In the forty-five and up age group, whites kill the police outnumbered Blacks fifty-one to five. Imagine the headline if this statistic were taken as representative of the relation of race and policing and widely publicized?

Some statistical terms: The standard deviation represents the typical distance from any point in the data set or distribution to the center (mean, average) of the distribution. Given a bell curve or normal distribution, one standard deviation from the mean delimits 68 percent of the distribution; two standard deviations delimit 95 percent of the distribution, and three standard deviations, 99 percent.

The confidence interval is for judging whether or not a hypothesis (that police shootings are shaped by “race,” for example) is statistically significantly likely to be true. The standard for statistical significance is by convention often though not inevitably chosen at 95 percent.

A textbook example might involve estimating the number of people in a population who drive red cars. If you sample at random one thousand drivers, and you desire 95 percent confidence, your confidence interval must be given with a margin of error above and below the sample’s proportion of red-car drivers by two standard errors (SE measures how much a sample statistic deviates from its mean in the long term). This means that if you sampled drivers over and over (say one hundred samples of one thousand drivers each), ninety-five of those counted numbers of red-car drivers would be expected to fall within your confidence interval. Statistics II for Dummies, “a confidence interval represents the chances of capturing the actual value of the population parameter over many different samples.” Small sample sizes are unreliable and if your sample statistic is based on a small sample, the confidence interval will be large, as in this case, since the smaller the sample the larger the confidence interval.


The statistics from the Washington Post and Guardian belie Morrison’s simple assumptions about race and criminal justice. A recent example from Leonard Pitts adds texture to the contemporary tendency to eliminate police violence against the white working class from our purview. See his February 2, 2016, Miami Herald story on Caroline Small, a working-class white woman with mental health issues whose shooting at the hands of police was covered up. Pitts notes that “her death was every bit as outrageous as those of Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Freddy Gray and Tamir Rice but has received only a fraction of the attention.”

60. Coates, “The Case For Reparations.”


62. Here are select Guardian statistics for 2016: 1,024 killed as of December 13; 71 of the victims are unknown; 504 are white, 243 are Black. In the category of unarmed, 38 are Black, 75 are white. In the category of “other,” 126 of the victims are white, 59 Blacks. The two factors contributing for the population is about 2.4. If we combine unarmed and other, the ratio is about 2.1 (2.1 times as many Blacks are killed as whites controlling for population) for these categories.


64. Ibid., 43.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 44.


70. The total numbers of imprisoned people have varied between 2.2 and 2.3 million for around the last decade, the high year being in 2008. “Non Hispanic whites” make up 39 percent of the prison population (compared to 40 and 19 for Blacks and Hispanics, respectively). So this would mean the population of whites would vary between 858,000 and 897,000. Statistics show that the white male imprisonment rate of 678/100,000, while dwarfed by the Black male rate of 4310/100,000, would itself lead the world by a comfortable margin. See http://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2016.html for statistics.

71. It is commonly accepted, and rightfully so, that what brought the racist character of the prison system clearly into view had much to do with Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, while her book focuses on the panoply of mechanisms producing racial disparities in imprisonment, it also suggests, even as it uses the caste metaphor repeatedly, that this system of racial control, as she calls it (we would call it racial control as social control in the service of class rule), hurts poor whites or working-class whites. And she further suggests that affirmative action has actually functioned as a kind of “racial bribe” akin to whiteness that has helped to obfuscate the racist character of the prison system.

A couple of comments as this is not the place for an extended discussion of Alexander’s important book. Because the focus is so much, and for good reasons, on racial disparity, the raw numbers can get lost: that the US imprisons a larger percentage of its population than any other country by far, and that this number includes large numbers of non-Hispanic whites. Alexander’s own racial metaphors actually screen from view—through a synecdochic reduction not entirely dissimilar to Coates’s despite the superiority of her overall analysis—the very negative impact of the prison system on the “majority” population, to emphasize the far more negative impact on the Black population, especially the Black working class and poor. And even here she occasionally, in her analysis of the trope of the Black criminal,” resorts to synecdoche so as to erase the class component emphasized by Wacquant. While her overall argument about affirmative action as racial bribe is provocative, with even revolutionary implications—she notes that its combination of “meager material advantage” and “significant psychological benefits to people of color” are exchanged for “the abandonment of a more radical movement that promised to alter the nation’s economic and social structure”—her
parallel between affirmative action as racial bribe and the racial bribe of whiteness has its limits (232). She includes the role affirmative action has played in helping to create a Black elite—CEOs graduated from Harvard and Yale, Rice, Powell, Obama, but calls this the “middle class” (233). So she has confounded members of the ruling class with the middle class and that in turn with the bribe of “whiteness.” This kind of mistake is actually a piece with the confusions more systemically carried out by Coates.


75. MSNBC, NewsNation, August 1, 2016, https://youtu.be/-ajWs3zBr0 (last accessed March 31, 2016).


77. For a good discussion of the increased militarization of the police in the United States, see Radley Balko, Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America’s Police Forces (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013).

78. Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 45.


80. Coates, Between the World and Me, 43.

81. The process of re-essentializing Blackness as essential diversity is not a smooth one. Coates learns from his professors at Howard about Queen Nzinga, who treats her slave as a chair. This example is key to his abandonment of his Afrocentric nationalism. While a striking example of class “diversity” among African Americans, it does not impact his analysis of US history, however, where class quickly gives way to race (defined incoherently at once in class and caste terms, as our essay shows). He also learns from his professors about the Irish, a group not always viewed as white. But what he learns about the Irish has little conceptual impact on his understanding of whiteness as something that Europeans do to themselves, as perverse democratic self-invention. For a detailed critique of the thesis around Irish white self-making, see Kelly’s introduction to Mandel.


84. Christopher Jencks and David Reisman, The Academic Revolution, 425. As Ralph Bunche argued so many years ago, “It is not likely that any Negro school could include a sympathetic course in labor tactics, involving an honest account of labor strikes, picketing and boycotting. Negro schools can offer courses designed to prepare students for business and professional leadership, but they would be quickly embarrassed if they were to incorporate a course in workers’ education, or in training leadership for mass protest against injustice and oppression.” See Ralph Bunche, “Education in Black and White,” The Journal of Negro Education 5, no. 3 (July 1936): 356.

85. Ferguson, Philosophy of African American Studies, 55.


87. Ferguson, Philosophy of African American Studies, 25.

88. The African American historian Rayford Logan makes the following observation about President Johnson: “There is, however, one view about [Johnson] on which friends, adversaries, and neutrals tend to agree—that he possessed a ‘Messianic Complex.’ . . . This Messianic attitude became increasingly evident in President John’s public statements. . . . In certain ‘Messianic Moments’ he would tell the late E. Franklin Frazier the kind of sociology to write or the late Abram Harris the kind of economics to study.” Rayford W. Logan, Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867–1967 (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 249.


91. Ironically, Black college presidents were at the forefront of crushing academic freedom; to promote academic freedom colleges jeopardize monetary gifts from bourgeois liberal philanthropists and capital donors. Ironically, Black colleges and universities have been a safe haven of sorts for both white and African-American left-radicals, socialists, and communists (such as Lee Lorch, Forrest Oran Wiggins, Eugene Holmes, Oliver Cox) who become so completely burdened with heavy teaching loads that they were and are nearly rendered politically impotent. Fisk President Charles S. Johnson was in the forefront of fighting against the threat of communism and fired professors suspected of communist affiliation. Philander Smith College (Little Rock, Arkansas) hired Lee Lorch to be chair of the Mathematics department—after he was fired from Fisk. Dr. Marquis L. Harris, philosopher and then-president of Philander, forced him to resign after his involvement with the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas—under the risk of losing financial support from white donors and philanthropists. See autobiographical entry on Lorch at The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture: http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryid=8396. See also Ibrahim H. Rogers, The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965–1972 (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).


95. Coates is committed to this view given his caste categories, but calls this the “black middle class” (235). So she has perhaps conflated members of the ruling class with the middle class and that in turn with the bribe of “whiteness.” This kind of mistake is actually a piece with the confusions more systemically carried out by Coates.
Jensen interprets Thurman’s thought as being an “African American Philosophy of Nonviolent Resistance” (see chapter 1) while providing an understanding of Thurman’s thoughts through three frames:

1. **Philosophical personalism**: Jensen explores Thurman’s thought by historically situating it alongside a few philosophical personalists (e.g., Walter Muelder and Martin Luther King, Jr.) and by outlining which of Thurman’s ideas are commensurable with theistic and philosophical personalism because he finds it to be useful in understanding Thurman as a philosopher. He prepares the reader for this approach to...
interpreting Thurman’s thought in chapter 3 where he focuses on what he calls “pedagogical personalism.” For the sake of clarity, he describes personalism “as a belief that souls are of infinite metaphysical value” (51) and “God is personal [making] persons sacred” (51). He put forth Morehouse College as the preeminent place where pedagogical personalism entered into educational theory and put into practice specifically during Thurman’s tenure as a student there. John Hope, as president of the college during his time there, is hailed as a maker of men and the prime proponent of this educational theory. Jensen also connects Benjamin Mays and, rather interestingly, E. Franklin Frazier, to pedagogical personalism. He describes Morehouse as a place where the sacred or otherwise inviolable dignity of persons was stressed. Accordingly, armed with these concepts, Morehouse professors utilized a strategy that attempted to activate the potential of all students. Jensen focuses much of the chapter on Mays, King, and the established of pedagogical personalism as a pedagogical tradition, only focusing on Thurman towards the end of the chapter.

In chapter 4, Jensen demonstrates the commensurability of Thurman’s thought with American personalist thinkers by setting aside the question of whether it actually fits within a specific tradition of theistic and philosophical personalism (e.g., Boston personalism) and concentrating on the similarities between it and philosophical personalism broadly understood. As he states at the opening sentence of the chapter, “the concern here is less with accurately locating Thurman within the topology of American personalism—in Boston or anywhere else—than it is with showing that Thurman’s philosophical writings display many of the characteristic features of philosophical personalism broadly construed” (65). This move allows for a more inclusive vision of what counts as philosophical personalist and of who can be included into this conceptual milieu. He can now claim Thurman was a theistic personalist without having to situate him in any specific personalist tradition. He can offer an account of how one can move from King’s personalism to Thurman’s personalism. The breadth of participants in this account is certainly extensive and nearly exhaustive.

2. **Social activist mystic:** In chapter 5, Thurman is read as a social activist mystic. This goal exposes the trajectory of thought in the analysis of Thurman’s mysticism, which is the quality of the experience. With this in mind, Jensen builds on the work of Alton Pollard and Luther Smith. Despite being the book’s shortest chapter, allusions are made of many influential works that could provide the reader with sources from which to do further research. Jensen appropriates Angela Davis’s notion that religion can either assist them in their liberation or undermine their efforts at liberation in her work on Frederick Douglass at the end of the chapter to support his interpretation of Thurman as a liberation theologian who believes that religion can be liberatory (see 104-105).

3. **Prophetic Pragmatism:** Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism is a form of cultural criticism rooted in the “American heritage and its hopes for the wretched of the earth” (qtd. in 105). West’s brand of prophetic pragmatism is skillfully combined with liberation theology. In chapter 6, Jensen attempts to support the view that West’s prophetic pragmatism has something in common with Thurman’s philosophical aims. Arguably, the aims of West’s and Thurman’s thought, the material conditions under which they wrote, and sources/ interpretations from which they draw have little overlap. One might assume that Jensen compares Thurman’s thought to West’s prophetic pragmatism because of West’s prominence; Jensen could reply that he is simply exploring the connection that both of them have to Dewey’s pragmatism. However, it should be clearly stated that West could rightly be called a Deweyan pragmatist, whereas Thurman was not philosophically committed to Dewey’s pragmatism. Certainly, the distance between Thurman and Dewey is wide and cavernous on the matter of Truth. After making intelligible West’s prophetic pragmatism and demonstrating where Thurman might fit comfortably within this tradition, Jensen paints Thurman as an African American liberation philosopher.

Now, with regards to interpretive positions, Jensen’s book may be described as attempting to provide a bridge between classical American pragmatists and African American philosophers. Jensen does not use a hermeneutical approach to Thurman’s work. Instead, he places Thurman into particular philosophical traditions by demonstrating a certain commensurability between Thurman’s thought and those traditions. For example, to support the claim that Thurman is an African American philosopher of liberation, Jensen makes liberal usage of Angela Davis’s *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*. Many individuals, along with Thurman, are listed as feeding into this tradition, which Jensen designates as the Black philosophical tradition. Jensen also explains that this tradition stretches back to ancient Egyptian-Kemetic thought. Ultimately, Jensen explains that it is not important whether or not Thurman is indeed within the tradition of prophetic pragmatism, but simply that he takes up the same project that made the tradition necessary. Lastly, Jensen’s methodological and ideological orientation is mostly grounded in the work of previous Thurman scholarship, especially the first generation of Thurman scholars. Where he differs from previous Thurman scholarship is in his charting a path from prophetic pragmatism to a Black philosophical tradition with ancient roots and then placing Thurman within this tradition.

Now that I have summarized the main points of Jensen’s book, I want to offer a substantive criticism of Jensen’s interpretation of Thurman’s thought. A number of issues deserve attention. First, Jensen fails to draw a clear line of disfision between Thurman and Gandhi in the first chapter.
Are we to believe that he was simply parroting Gandhi? Are we supposed to view Thurman as an independent thinker? Second, Jensen namedrops thinkers with the expectation that the reader not only knows those thinkers’ thought, but also how they are relevant to the discussion at hand. For example, on page 52 he noted that E. Franklin Frazier and Benjamin Mays are both assimilationists. He does not explain in what way this is true. Nor does he explain whether Frazier is an assimilationist in the same way that Mays is an assimilationist. Moreover, he does not explain how his interpretation of them as assimilationists is consistent with their work. On page 60, he lists Frazier, Mays, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Mordecai Johnson as all having influenced Thurman’s pedagogical personalism without offering any evidence for this contention. Just as with his comparison of Frazier and Mays, he needs to provide more evidence to support his claim. Otherwise, the reader will not know how Frazier, Mays, Du Bois, Locke, and Johnson influenced Thurman’s pedagogical personalism.

The most troubling of these lists occur on page 115: “For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, Thurman was really lockstep with many thinkers now that we now consider to ‘Liberation Philosophers,’ including Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Kwame Gyekye.” When we turn to the footnote to see what evidence he provides for this point, we are even more confused. In what ways are all four of these gentlemen in lockstep? According to the footnote, Thurman shared Nkrumah’s commitment to philosophical materialism, Nyerere’s commitment to African Socialism via Ujamaa, and Gyekye’s communitarianism. There are clear differences between these thinkers that Jensen is not aware of. To label them simply as “liberation philosophers” may be confusing for people who are not familiar with the determinate differences between them.

Jensen does not have a view of Thurman’s dialectical development or the fundamental tenets of Thurman’s philosophical framework. Thurman’s ideas were developed over the course of many years of philosophical reflection. They were not formed during brief conversations with others such as the conversation he had with Gandhi, which, at best, lasted a few hours. Jensen shows Thurman as someone who used philosophical positions he received from others, but there is no attempt to demonstrate the originality of Thurman’s philosophical architecton. For example, Thurman was already a pacifist before meeting Gandhi in 1936. It is clear that Thurman was thinking through strategies to better the conditions for Blacks in America. What he found significant in Gandhi’s message was not a philosophy of pacifism or nonviolence as a strategy for social change. Thurman was influenced by the idea that Gandhi believed that if Black people in America were successful in a nonviolent struggle against white racism, and it is important to say white racism here, this success could change the world. Also, this Gandhian notion must be coupled with the fact that Thurman was called a “traitor” to all darker people of the world for being a Christian by another Indian, in spite of the harsh racist practices of white American Christians. One might ask, how can I form this conclusion? Thurman wrote no text on his conversation with Gandhi. In fact, if one were to add all of the pages that Thurman wrote on the Gandhian influence on his thought, it would at best be a pamphlet and not justly called a book. But being called a “traitor” to all the darker people of the world by another Indian, not Gandhi, during his time in India prompted Thurman to write Jesus and the Disinherited, where he separates institutional Christianity (that is, “the religion about Jesus”) from the Religion of Jesus and makes the shocking declaration that he followed the Religion of Jesus and not Christianity. Here Jensen could have consulted the important philosophical discussion of this topic by the Black philosopher John H. McClendon III.

Next, Thurman had an organic mind able to use the thoughts of others to express his own ideas. Oppression made many Blacks follow this practice. Thurman was also more than an amalgamator of the profound ideas of others who are traditionally found acceptable in philosophy canons. He arose from a people that existed during a time of crisis which limited access to their ability to publish. Often times, Jensen gives very little consideration to how the Black community in general influenced Thurman. If the voices of whites and others are consistently privileged over Blacks voices, a type of cultural violence is performed. Very few, if any, ideas are attributed to how the Black community provided an important historical and intellectual context for Thurman’s ideas. The concept of the “always already” should be applied in this case. In performing this type of cultural violence, the perpetrator assumes the culture being violated has no agency, and thus whatever oppression they suffered or continue to suffer is justified.

Jensen writes about Thurman as a philosopher but never presents him as one. He presented Thurman as no more than a mule for the ideas of others. If Jensen’s Thurman is a philosopher, then he is perhaps an uncritical sycophantic vessel for the ideas of others, having learned nothing from his own experience of Blackness in America. For instance, does Thurman not disagree with Royce’s racist intent found in his writings? Would Thurman not take issue with Dewey’s concept of Truth? Is Thurman a materialist in the way that others to whom he is linked are? Is there only one notion of African American philosophy, the tradition to which Jensen links Thurman?

Jensen downplays Thurman’s great concern about the damage oppression was doing to American society in general and its damaging effects on Black people in particular. For example, in his 1965 book, the Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope, Thurman wrote, “The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit.” His deepest and most well-known philosophizing on the matter of oppression was published in his 1949 book, Jesus and the Disinherited. In that book, he expresses his thoughts on the question of oppression; however, the purpose here is to demonstrate what Jensen neglects—namely, how Thurman put forward ways to address oppression in general while standing within the African American tradition narrowly defined.

Beyond the major thesis of Jesus and the Disinherited, Thurman identifies three ancillary struggles for those
who are the object of oppression. The first is fear, which Thurman described as a capacity to affect aspects of experience and detailed states of mind. In these aspects, fear becomes a tactic used by imperialist forces to wage war on the consciousness of the oppressed. Black people held captive in America fell victim to this oppressive tactic of their slave captors. After realizing that in combating this tactic, a stronger opposite force was needed, Thurman put forward his thoughts on the matter, using analogy. Thurman did this by reflecting on a quote from his grandmother, "you are not niggers, you are not slaves. You are God's children." This quote, if understood as a rule, was intended to apply to a particular moment in time and for a specific group of people. However, Thurman's intent in its reuse was as a principle. The underlying principle can be understood as such: In the face of great oppression, freedom equals choice. Sometimes the choice is as simple as saying yes, no, or maintaining a meaningful silence. No, to hurled epithets. Yes, to being equal to your greatest ideals. In maintaining a meaningful silence, there is the notion that the oppressor cannot own the thoughts of the oppressed.

Unfortunately, Jensen's book is yet another demonstration of how a Black thinker or philosopher is thought to matter if they can be shown to have ideological debt or commensurability to white philosophers. So much is lost when this is done! The Black community is never taken to be a generative space for reason to occur. The value of Black intellectuals, and thus their humanity, is measured by who inspired their thought. If their ideas are thought to have derived primarily from their own culture and the Black communities that nurtured them, then they are viewed as inferior or deformed in some way. In order to make their ideas relevant to philosophers, they need to be put into conversation with the ideas of white thinkers, or there needs to be an account of how white thinkers influenced the Black thinkers in question, regardless of how much they have written or done before encountering white thinkers.

In conclusion, Jensen's book represents a spirited and learned attempt at a philosophical analysis of Gandhi's satyagraha, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s personalism, prophetic pragmatism; and Royce's Beloved Community, along with a demonstration of how they might be placed in conversation with Thurman's thought. This tapestry of thinkers is broad. But, from time to time, Jensen manages to tackle the task at hand, comparing Thurman with "traditionally accepted" American philosophers. He focuses his attention on presenting Thurman within this American tradition while also being contingently tied to African American philosophical and social thinkers. In order to properly place Thurman within American philosophical traditions, I would suggest that the reader read Jensen's book alongside of John McCleod and Stephen Ferguson's prodigious contribution to the history of African American philosophy: African American Philosophers and Philosophy: An Introduction to the History, Concepts and Contemporary Issues.

There is a certain value derived from Jensen's focus on American philosophical traditions. One does gain a basic understanding of these variously mentioned philosophical traditions. Based on this focus, however, there appears to be a conspicuous attempt to understand Thurman as a pacifist in the Gandhian sense^1 and as an uncritical pragmatist,^2 while simultaneously focusing on the struggle for African American freedom. To be sure, there are ideas which Thurman found useful in these traditions; however, a true depiction of any thinker worthy of study should also include where she departs from prominent thinkers and ideas. Let us end with Thurman's own critique of this type of reading oneself uncritically through the thoughts of others: "There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.^3

NOTES
1. Jensen's basic interpretation of Thurman, as per his citations and interpretive view derived from those citations, is grounded in the "first wave" writers on Thurman, namely: Luther Smith, Walter Fluker, Peter Eisenstadt, Gary Dorrien, Alton Pollard, Mozilla Mitchell, and Quinton Dixie.
2. It is significant that whiteness and white racism are taken to be ubiquitous in this moment, given that Thurman made a significant connection in the oppression of Indians and that of Black people in America.
4. As used here, "organic" means spontaneous developed or informally produced. This does not mean that Thurman lacked formal training, but that he used his formal training to clarify ideas of which he developed prior to being formally trained or outside the confines of formal schooling.
5. When there are components of an event or occurrence beyond the awareness of the observer but known to be present in similar events and the presence of which is thought to logical, these components should be thought to be always already present.
6. The "African American tradition narrowly defined" can be understood to mean that Thurman was using the particular issue of Black oppression in the United States to say something about oppression in general. However, to make this universal claim, he first validated the African American tradition by introducing the quote from his Grandmother—"you are not niggers, you are not slaves, you are God's children"—to demonstrate that the tradition was worthy of being used as a source of inspiration and also ideas. This is a practice used by others such as W. E. B. Du Bois, in _The Souls of Black Folk_, when he uses the last chapter to intimate the importance of the Negro Spirituals.
7. The Gandhian encounter demonstrated to Thurman that the ideas of Grandma Nancy were more relevant to him because they arose for the Black experience. Thurman's ideas, while universalizable, arose from the existential crisis of Blackness.
8. Tommy J. Curry, Another white Man's Burden: Josiah Royce's Quest for a Philosophy of white Racial Empire (SUNY Press, 2019).
Ontology, Experience, and Social Death: On Frank Wilderson’s Afropessimism

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This is a critical discussion of Frank B. Wilderson III’s memoir-cum-manifesto Afropessimism. The central claim of Wilderson’s book is that Black people occupy the structural position of Slaves, and are thus subject to social death. I reconstruct and evaluate Wilderson’s argument for this claim, as well as the general methodology that underlies the argument. I also consider some of Afropessimism’s political upshots. Along the way I consider some complications endemic to the project of evaluating a text that is first and foremost addressed to Black audiences from the standpoint of a non-Black reader.

Section 1 outlines Afropessimism’s philosophy of Black suffering, while Section 2 focuses on the strengths of Wilderson’s book. Section 3 suggests that Afropessimism’s narrative and theoretical goals are sometimes at odds. Section 4 offers an extended reconstruction and criticism of Wilderson’s claim that Blackness is equivalent to Slaveness, while acknowledging the limitations of a non-Black perspective on this issue. Section 5 considers some possible political upshots of Afropessimism and suggests that the book’s political imagination has serious limitations. Section 6 concludes the essay by suggesting that while Afropessimism often falters in its arguments, it may succeed in articulating what many Black people need no argument to understand.

1. THE PHILOSOPHY OF BLACK SUFFERING

There is a perennial question at the heart of much Black philosophy, art, and literature: Why are Black people so persistently not recognized as human? We cannot banish this question by demonstrating what is beyond doubt, namely, that Black people belong to the same biological or psychological class as non-Black people. Rather, the question requires us to ask about the metaphysics of humanity, or what ethical status Black people hold in the community of persons. Proponents of the humanistic liberal tradition hold that Black people are indeed human, but that racist social orders have consistently failed to recognize this fact. More radical traditions, such as postcolonialism, often hold that racial domination defines more than the relations of power in a society—it defines the ontological conditions for being human at all. Following Thrasymachus, who contends in Plato’s Republic that justice just is the will of the strong over the weak, humanity just is whatever the powers-that-be decide it is. And since the powers-that-be at all manner of times and places have never seen fit to recognize Black people as human, there is a strict sense in which Black people are not human.

Afropessimism starts from the Thrasymachean view of humanity, pairs it with Frantz Fanon’s view of the totalizing violence that anti-Blackness visits upon Black bodies and consciousness, and pushes the consequences of this potent combination to its limits. According to Afropessimism, Black people are not Human, but Slaves—the sentient beings in opposition to which Humanity defines itself. While slavery is a historically existing relationship, Slaveness is an ontological structural position. Black people need not be enslaved in order to be Slaves. Drawing on the seminal work of sociologist Orlando Patterson, Afropessimists contend that, as Slaves, Black people exist in the condition of social death. In social death, sentient beings are unable to achieve recognition as “subjects” within social and civic relations. At best, Black people are unequal participants in the projects of Humans, or mere tools for the furtherance of Human ends. At worst, Black people are objects or targets for sadistic anti-Black violence.

Social death triangulates the Black Slave via three vectors. Slaves are subjected to gratuitous violence divorced from actual or perceived transgression, natal alienation from the coherence of family structure, and dishonor, or a perennial state of social abjection and contempt. And since Humanity is essentially defined by its not being Slaveness, the very coherence of the social domain is built upon a foundation of Black suffering. Social life cannot exist without social death.

Afropessimism presents an uncompromising metaphysics even by the standards of philosophies of pessimism and nihilism. The idea that suffering without reason is the sine qua non of Blackness, that (anti-)Blackness is the sine qua non of the world itself, and that there can therefore be no possible way to compensate and redeem Black suffering fundamentally reorients the “problem” of race. The problem of race is no longer one we can satisfactorily address through political means. The problem is one of ontology. The liberation of Black people would take place in a liminal space that would be literally impossible for any politics to achieve. Black people becoming Human would signify the end of social coherence, of time, of Humanity. The desire for true Black liberation is a desire for the apocalypse.

The starkness of this philosophy has not prevented it from having a bit of a moment, from grassroots to ivory towers. Beyond its cache in the academy, Afropessimistic themes appear in the work of critically acclaimed bestselling authors such as Claudia Rankine and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The internet is replete with Afropessimistic analyses of high-profile pop culture such as Ryan Coogler’s Black Panther and Childish Gambino’s “This is America.” There are indications that the worldview has captured the minds of inquisitive young people in the form of self-published social media. If you happen to debate competitively at the high-school or collegiate level, a working knowledge of Afropessimism is rapidly becoming a requirement for success. In a time in which the problem of Black suffering has truly hit the non-Black mainstream, Afropessimism promises to reveal the horrific and irresolvable depths of that suffering.

2. FRANK WILDERSON’S AFROPESSIMISM

Wilderson’s Afropessimism takes bold strides into this moment. Alongside scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Saidiyah Hartman, and Jared Sexton, Wilderson can lay claim to developing the philosophy of Afropessimism—he is even credited with coining the term. Afropessimism, a manifesto within a memoir, is an impressive yet flawed experiment that attempts to anchor the theoretical edifice of
Afropessimism within the narrative of a remarkable life. As a memoir, the book charts Wilderson’s gradual intellectual journey from Catholic boy to Marxist radical to resigned Afropessimist, and how that journey has been formed by his own lived experience. As a manifesto, the book aims to establish Afropessimism as a “meta-theory” of the politics of liberation. It also aims to explain how the “assumptive logics” of “Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism” are rooted in an inability or refusal to grasp the depth and uniqueness of Black suffering (14).

According to Wilderson, these discourses fail to understand the fundamental relationship between Black suffering and social order. If Blackness is the condition of social death, then Black existence is rooted in “a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of social, political, or national redemption” (15). Insofar as Black people are not “subjects” within these narratives, their role is to serve as “structurally inert props, implements for the execution of white and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures” (15). Black bodies are simultaneously sites for the fulfillment of non-Blacks’ political and erotic desires and the mass of flesh upon which ghastly spectacles of violence are enacted. Within this by turns “Negrophilic” and “Negrophobic” libidinal economy, Black suffering is the lifeblood of the social order.

Afropessimism is an engrossing, well-told story. Among other things, the narrative spans Wilderson’s childhood in an affluent, practically all-white neighborhood of Minneapolis in the 1960s, being suspended from and subsequently reinstated to Dartmouth, being in a relationship with a revolutionary lover who changed his life, getting schooled on racial politics in South Africa in the 1990s while waiting tables at an Italian restaurant, engaging in aboveground and guerilla political struggle in Johannesburg, finding revolutionary clarity during Edward Said’s office hours, experiencing a nervous breakdown during a conversion into the black power cult, and culminating in a wrenching epilogue in which Wilderson watches his mother—an accomplished psychologist, and no pessimist—succumb to dementia.

Wilderson’s expertise in film reveals itself here in the form of careful pacing and directorial savoir faire. He knows just when to switch scenes, when to drop and pick up a narrative thread, and when to reintroduce a leitmotif. He is also a writer with a deeply poetic sensibility and an attentive observer capable of crafting descriptions of remarkable clarity. More than once I was stopped in my tracks by a phrase or paragraph that I needed to read again, say aloud, and ponder in silence. And while no one may experience Black suffering quite like Black people, Wilderson’s talents allow him to render a painfully sharp phenomenological account of what it is like to recognize oneself as Black in a thoroughly anti-Black world, to realize that one is, as Fanon puts it, “an object in the midst of other objects.”

On a theoretical level, the chief value of Afropessimism lies in its interpretation of Black suffering and social vulnerability as first and foremost a problem of ontology. Wilderson’s admirable clarity on this point is a welcome perspective in a debate which often frames the problem of Black suffering as fundamentally cultural, political, or economic while shuffling unstated ontological assumptions into the background. Afropessimism is also worth reading for its unforgiving questioning of humanist, liberal, and progressive orthodoxies about the causes and remedies of racial oppression. Optimists should test their views against Wilderson’s perspective, and the book should serve to temper the complacency and self-satisfaction one often finds in these quarters. If “civil society is a murderous juggernaut of murderous vengeance void of contingency, trial, or debate” for Black people, and “violence without sanctuary is the sine qua non of Blackness” (161), Black suffering presents an existential problem that can never be reconciled by the strategies of humanist meliorism.

To this extent, Afropessimism is a welcome addition to philosophies of pessimism more generally. Admirers of pessimism know it to be a philosophy in which depth of thought is often inseparable from depth of feeling. The great pessimists tend to feel the weight of the world more acutely than most, and it is this melancholic depth which allows them to push ever more deeply into those thoughts that would offend, depress, or terrify those less sensitive to the world’s horror. Pessimists are always “glad” to meet a fellow sufferer (more accurately, a fellow sufferer who knows they are a fellow sufferer), and they should find one in Wilderson, a writer with both the hard head and the tragic heart of a pessimist.

Yet from a pessimistic point of view, it is perhaps fitting that a book of such depth and power should also have correspondingly serious flaws. The back cover of Afropessimism features encomia from a number of well-respected authors, and each blurb reflects a common challenge: “you may not agree with this book, but it’s important to read it and articulate where you think it goes wrong.” Here goes. Afropessimism falters in two major places. First, the narrative and the theory don’t always mix together well. Second, the book’s central theoretical claims are undermotivated, oversold, and almost certainly false.

3. NARRATIVE AND THEORY
Afropessimism suffers from frequent dissociation between the narratival and theoretical goals of the book. First, in contrast to the flowing, pensive narrative, much of the theoretical meat of Afropessimism is doled out within the boxy steel cubes of post-structuralist jargon. It is simply jarring to find the same writer dropping the remarkable phrase “Birds strafed the sun like a fist of pepper in the last good eye of God” (51) at just the right place in a dense moment, and later artlessly explaining that “my writing must be indexical of that which exceeds narration, while being ever mindful of the incomprehension that the writing would foster, the failure, that is, of interpretation were the indices ever to escape the narrative” (246). When he switches into theory mode, Wilderson often gives into the all-too-academic temptation to use a $25 word for a $5 concept. This is all the more puzzling when we remember that the former were supposed to make the latter more precise, and that Wilderson’s lyrical style would have been more than adequate to the task of conceptual explication in any case.
Second, and more seriously, there are times when the logic of the narrative clashes with the logic of the theory. For instance, Wilderson argues that humanist politics presupposes an optimistic narrative structure that leads from dispossession to struggle to eventual redemption, but this narrative coherence is not available to Black people. Drawing on a seminal essay by Hortense Spillers, Wilderson argues: “The narrative arc of the slave who is Black (unlike the generic slave who may be of any race) is not a narrative arc at all, but a flat line of ‘historical stillness’: a flat line that ‘moves’ from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux-equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated” (226).

Note that from a pessimistic point of view, it is not clear that the pseudo-progression from “disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux-equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored” is unique to slave narratives. After all, such is life (squalid birth, meager satisfaction, boundless disappointment, annihilating death). Nevertheless, this claim about the uniqueness of Black slave narratives allows Wilderson to unite three core claims: 1) that Black people lie “outside” the narrative framework that humanistic optimism presupposes, 2) that Black people are subject to an eternal recurrence in which the same forms of violence and dispossession (“disequilibrium”) accrue to Black people over time, and 3) that no moment of “equilibrium” will ever redeem or compensate Black suffering.

Yet, the appearance of this claim is strange in what is ultimately a memoir. Curiously, Wilderson describes this dynamic disequilibrium-faux-equilibrium-disequilibrium structure as a “flat line of historical stillness.” And while the story that Wilderson tells in the narrative is not quite one of redemption, it is also not a “flat line.” Stuff happens in a coherent narrative order, with the resolutions and denouements which characterize any story with a point. The theoretical conception of Slave time thus seems to undermine the logic of a memoir told from the perspective of a Slave (as Wilderson identifies himself in the acknowledgments.) Wilderson might claim that this performative contradiction between theory and narrative is one of the work’s many irresolvable “paradoxes” that we must “sit with,” but it really is not. Here are some options: 1) Wilderson is a Slave and therefore can have no narrative arc; 2) Wilderson is not a Slave and therefore does have a narrative arc; 3) Wilderson’s claims about the Black Slave having no narrative arc are false, true in some trivial sense, or inapplicable to the current narrative. The first claim seems flatly false (after all, we can read the narratival), but for reasons we will discuss in the next section, I’d bet that claims 2 and/or 3 are true.

The point here is not that this theory of Slave time is false or uninteresting. Rather, it is that the tension that claim generates inAfropessimism is less a symptom of an irresolvable paradox at the heart of Black experience, and more a symptom of Wilderson overplaying his hand in an attempt to bridge theory and memoir. Another indication of the tenuous coherence of that experiment is Wilderson’s propensity to repeat certain phrases and paragraphs nearly verbatim throughout the book. This might be an intentional meta-comment on the recurring narrative flatness of Slave time, but it just as easily might not.

4. ARE BLACK PEOPLE SLAVES?

Let’s turn our attention to the metaphysical theory of Blackness that Afropessimism presents. Is that theory defensible on its own terms? It’s hard to tell from the book itself. Despite the provocative nature of its central claims, Afropessimism does not attempt to argue for many of those claims at all. In Wilderson’s hands, they take on the status of a priori truths, or of axiomatic constraints on what an acceptable theory of Black suffering would be. Yet, it is precisely because so much rides on the truth of those claims that one would hope to see arguments for them, and not only reflections on what implications their possible truth would have for Black liberation, Marxism, post-colonialism, feminism, etc.

On the other hand, readers (especially non-Black readers) might ask themselves whether it is fair to expect an argument from Wilderson. As in Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks, many of Wilderson’s theoretical claims are rooted in direct experience of being Black in an anti-Black world. If Wilderson is correct that Black suffering and susceptibility to anti-Black violence are phenomenologically unique, at least some of the evidence for the truth of Afropessimism is only accessible and appreciable from a Black perspective. This in itself does not mean that there are no arguments that can be marshalled against this philosophy, but non-Black readers in particular would do well to treat some of Wilderson’s phenomenological claims with an appropriate degree of moral deference.

Yet, Afropessimism is clearly not only a reflection on how the world “seems” from a Black perspective. Wilderson also tries to paint an accurate picture of the social world, and he argues that the accuracy of this picture makes pessimism a rational attitude. To that extent, the book is partially aimed at rational persuasion, and not only at a rhetorical appeal to common experience. This section attempts to reconstruct an argument for Wilderson’s central claims and suggests that the argument fails. I then turn to some more general concerns about Wilderson’s methodology in the book.

Let’s start with the basic claim that Black people are Slaves. Wilderson goes so far as to say that “Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness” (229). One way of putting that claim is that all Black people (necessarily) occupy the same structural position in the social order, and that position is (necessarily) characterized by vulnerability to the experiences characteristic of social death. Note that this is much stronger than saying that Black people are especially vulnerable to certain harmful experiences. That much is uncontroversial. Wilderson’s controversial claim is this: the harmful experiences to which Black people are vulnerable share an essential property in common that no other form of experience shares. It is not simply that Black people’s diverse experiences of suffering have a “family resemblance” with one another. Rather, these experiences constitute a kind which shares a common underlying grammar of violence.”

In evaluating this claim, it is worth considering in more detail the nature of the connection between structural position, lived experience, and social death. First, does sharing the same structural position entail having
"essentially the same" sorts of experiences? Second, does a purported "essential similarity" in experiences across Black people provide evidence that Black people occupy the same structural position? Third, do Black people's experiences necessarily take place in the context of social death? Wilderson presumes that the answer to all three of these is "yes." Yet, there are reasons to be skeptical.

First, consider the idea that structural position entails essential similarity in lived experience. It is already controversial to assert that Black people qua Black people occupy the same structural position in the social order, not least because there are multiple social orders and multiple ways that Black people are embedded within them. But let's set that aside. Even if all Black people occupy the same structural position, it does not follow that the individuals who occupy that position will have much else in common at the level of lived experience. For example, Marxists sometimes contend that everyone who must work for a living is technically part of the "working class." It may even be the case that to occupy this position is to suffer exploitation. Yet, a comfortably upper-middle class tenured philosophy professor fifteen years shy of their retirement goals is not embedded within the dynamics of capitalism in precisely the same way as a quasi-homeless door-to-door salesman. The professor is largely spared the debilitating experiences and life trajectories that accompany exploitation, and their comfortable position is even made possible by exploited labor. The salesman is far less sheltered from these experiences, and largely is exploited labor. Occupying a structural position, even one that has a generalizable connection to oppression, often tells us little about the texture of individual lives that labor under that oppression. This diversity is not surprising.

After all, structural positions don't have lived experiences; people occupying those positions do, and their experiences are affected by much more than their structural position. Similarly, even if every Black person occupies the "Slave" position, it doesn't follow that all Blacks necessarily have much in common at the level of experience. To take an extreme example, Barack Obama and Mumia Abu-Jamal are both targeted by anti-Blackness, but the two mens' life experiences are not readily comparable.

Of course, Wilderson is aware that Black people have diverse experiences. Yet, Wilderson contends that the surface diversity in Black peoples' experiences has an underlying "logic" or "grammar" of violence that makes these experiences essentially similar on a deeper level. Readers may be surprised to discover that the experiences that share in this grammar of violence include not only slavery, lynching, incarceration, genocide, and rape, but also microaggressions, inquisitive white people, dirty looks, religion, leftist politics, and skepticism about Afropessimism. What entitles Wilderson to the claim that these diverse experiences have an essential similarity?

Wilderson's response is that all these experiences have a similar functional role within a broader economy of pleasure and power that allows non-Black people to achieve "confirmation of Human existence" (219). These experiences are products of Humans' projects to define their identity in contrast to Slaves. The question then becomes whether these diverse experiences play the "same role" in this project.

Here is where the authority of Black experience comes in. In chapter 5, Wilderson finds himself in a breakout session at an academic conference on race in which Black attendees discussed their experiences out of the earshot of non-Black attendees. Freed from the burden of analogizing Black suffering to that of other people of color, "I was able to see and feel how comforting it was for a room full of Black people to move between the spectacle of police violence, to the banality of microaggressions at work in the classroom, to experiences of chattel slavery as if the time and intensity of all three were the same" (205). Wilderson maintains that, while no one in the room presumes these to be literally equivalent, the discussion reflected "a collective recognition that the time and space of chattel slavery shares essential aspects with the time and space, the violence, of our modern lives" (205).

Yet, it is unclear what evidence this exchange is supposed to provide for the claim "Black people are Slaves." Let's first bracket the complication that no one alive today has ever had a firsthand experience of American chattel slavery, and so even an experientially informed Black perspective can render no authoritative judgment on what "essential aspect" it might share with casual disrespect in the workplace. More important is that this exchange demonstrates that the assertion of an underlying sameness in Black people's diverse experiences over time is not actually evidence for the claim that Black people occupy the position of Slaves. Why not? Because it only makes sense to think of Black experiences of the brutality of chattel slavery and Black experiences of microaggressive social contempt as sharing "essential aspects" if you are already prepared to treat Black people's structural position in 1852 as "essentially the same" as Black people's structural position in 2020.

To throw this underlying circularity into relief, let's summarize: Wilderson claims that all Black people have the same structural position (Slaveness.) Occupying this position makes it the case that Black people are vulnerable to the same harms, and the harms to which they are vulnerable share an "essential similarity." If the considerable variation among Black people's experiences or vulnerabilities to those harms is pointed out, Wilderson can claim that this indicates mere "surface" diversity that masks an underlying essential "grammar of violence" that unites those experiences.

When we ask why we would think that all these experiences (from chattel slavery to microaggressions) share in this selfsame grammar of violence, Wilderson has two answers: 1) Black people just know that these experiences share in this grammar through direct experience of anti-Black racism, and 2) Black people always have the same structural position, and this structural position entails essential similarity in experience. I've suggested that 1) may be true in a qualified or metaphorical sense. Yet, 2) renders Wilderson's defense of "Black people are Slaves" explicitly circular, because the assertion of "essential sameness" among Black peoples' diverse experiences is
both evidence for and implication of the claim that Black people share the same structural position.

Perhaps this circularity is nonvicious. If Wilderson is correct that Black people always occupy the condition of social death, and are forever alienated from counting as full "subjects of relations," then the idea that Black people's suffering constitutes a common grammar is on stronger grounds. Yet again, the claim that Black people are socially dead is too strong. This is not to deny what every person who is not in willful denial should see: Black people are demonstrably and especially vulnerable to state violence without sanction, mass incarceration, social contempt, interpersonal racism, economic dispossession, and political silencing. This calls out for social explanation and diverse strategies for redress. Yet, it is one thing to say that being Black at a certain time and place makes one especially vulnerable to these harms. It is another to say that the harms to which Black people are made vulnerable are, in all times and places, and in every case, harms which arise from the condition of social death.

Wilderson's account simply ignores this distinction. And despite the horrific and consistent institutional failure to understand and address Black oppression in the twenty-first century, there's little reason to think that Black people occupy the condition of social death. For one thing, it discounts the investment that many modern social orders have in recognizing Black people as subjects. Representation of Black people in politics, the creative arts, academia, sports, the police, military, and so on all give the lie to the notion that Black people are socially dead. For these reasons, Orlando Patterson, who originally coined the concept of social death, unequivocally denies that unenslaved Black people still occupy that condition. Again, we can recognize that Black people are full subjects while also acknowledging the depth and ubiquity of anti-Black racism.

This brings us to the matter of Afropessimism's troubling methodology. Wilderson often fails to recognize a distinction between inferiorizing representations of Black people in the "collective unconscious" and actual facts about the Black people represented. This is a consequence of the radically conventionalist or Thrasyzamecan view of humanity we described at the outset. In the hands of the powerful, the myths about Black people become the truth about Black people. Yet, the conventionalist perspective is not forced upon us. Universal belief in a fairy tale doesn't make the tale true, and the same goes for the tenets of anti-Black racism.

To this extent, Afropessimism is a paradigmatic example of what Barbara and Karen Fields have identified as racecraft. For Fields and Fields, "race," like "witch," is a concept without extension. While both these concepts can fuel oppressive practices from sham trials to lynxings, the existence of those practices does not manage to "construct" race as something real. Fields and Fields thus part ways with the standard social constructionist line in philosophy of race, according to which social practices involving race lend race a social rather than biological reality. Racism and race are both "social constructions" in some sense, but they belong to different classes. While racism is a "social construction" in the same way religions, murder, and genocide are, race is a "social construction" in the way witches and the causal power of the evil eye are. The former are concrete human social practices, but the latter's "existence" is a mirage sustained by the widespread acceptance of particularly destructive myths.

For Fields and Fields, it is the failure to recognize this distinction, and the assumption that race is in any sense real that generates racecraft: the various sleights-of-hand by which the causal power of something real (racism, power, violence) is taken as evidence for the causal power of something which is in no sense real (race, the objects of myth.) In Afropessimism, this sleight-of-hand appears in Wilderson's confidence that the historical contingency of what was and is done to Black people becomes something that essentially defines Black people. Forever entrapped within social death, Black people become "structurally inert props," "implements," "slaves," "objects," beings with no "self to be violated."

It might be possible to tell a plausible story about how historically contingent anti-Black practices manage to construct an ahistorically subsisting abject structural position for Black people. Yet, Wilderson nowhere succeeds in doing so in the book. Consider one attempt. As his "mind abstracted in ever-widening concentric circles," Wilderson concludes that, since nineteenth-century courts often did not recognize Black slaves' right to bodily and personal property, Black people everywhere "are a species of sentient beings that cannot be injured or murdered, for that matter, for we are dead to the world" (198-99). Between premise and conclusion is a dizzying series of nonsequiturs. Of course, we shouldn't expect this argument to work. What a nineteenth-century court thought about Black slaves couldn't be less relevant to whether or not enslaved humans are actually injured when they are tortured or actually murdered when they are unjustly killed. What a nineteenth-century court thought is even more obviously irrelevant to whether or not Black people could be injured or murdered in the fourteenth century, or can be in the twenty-first. Wilderson's racecraft often transforms historical contingencies of racism into the ontological necessity of race.

Finally, even if you are antecedently convinced of Wilderson's uncompromising claims, the narrative structure of Afropessimism shows what unfortunate aesthetic consequences you should be prepared to live with. Packaging Black people in all their diversity under the ahistorical rubric of Slaveness gives Wilderson license to draw dramatic analogies between his own experiences and mythic paradigms of anti-Blackness. A moment when young Frank accidentally draws blood from a chubby, unpopular white playmate in an affluent Minneapolis neighborhood becomes the Fanonian moment in which the denigrated Black colonized subject shatters the illusion of the white colonizer's omnipotence. A presentation poorly received by a room full of non-Black academics becomes akin to a lynching, in which Wilderson is expected to suffer horribly while absolving his tormentors. A contentious relationship between Frank, his lover, and a cloying, unstable white
neither becomes an extended meditation on how Frank his lover bear essentially the same relationship to the neighbor as did Black slaves’ constant vulnerability to the violent pleasures of their masters. (In fairness, while the analogy still strikes me as fraught, this last episode is the catalyst for a nightmarish cycle of anti-Black racism, conspiracy, and fugitivity which Wilderson relates at length across some of the book’s most compelling pages.)

In light of the aforementioned moral deference non-Blacks often owe to Black people, these are especially tricky criticisms to make. Perhaps I morally err simply in making them. Yet, sometimes a philosophical view fails to add up not because it is logically incoherent, but because it bends under the weight of its unreasonable implications. If being Black itself necessitates the lived experiences characteristic of social death, practically every moment of suffering, as long as it is experienced by a Black person, can license a comparison to horror in extremis. Early on, I took Wilderson’s frequent comparisons between comparatively mundane experience and paradigmatic anti-Blackness to be a bit of wry irony, the kind of self-consciously hyperbolic gallows humor that is the sweetness around the bitter pill of pessimist wisdom. The gradual revelation that Wilderson is a narrator too earnest for such small pleasures represents, at least to this reader, another shortcoming of the book.

5. THE POLITICS OF AFROPESSIMISM

Finally, it is worth discussing the political upshots of Afropeessimism, and how the book “reads” within our current political moment. Wilderson’s own political stance is clear enough in its broad outlines: Black liberation requires the total destruction of the existing relation between Slaves and Humans. In one of the book’s more hopeful moments, Wilderson grants that “social death,” like class and gender, can be overcome, since it is ultimately “constructed by the violence and imagination of other sentient beings.” Overcoming social death, however, is necessarily apocalyptic: “The first step towards the destruction is to assume one’s position . . . and then burn the ship or the plantation, in its past and present incarnations, from the inside out” (103). Afropeessimism proposes a political ethic for those outside politics, whose engagement with the political would signify the end of politics as we know it.

Wilderson’s political vision is a “grenade without a pin” or a “looter’s creed” which strives to bring about the Fanonian “end of the world” (174). Yet, if your politics requires you to “burn the ship or the plantation . . . from the inside out” with yourself inside, you should be extremely sure that this politics is rooted in a true and comprehensive vision of Black people’s situation in the world. Pinless grenades and looter’s creeds can fall into anyone’s hands. They can harm countless bystanders. Their volatility makes them unpredictable. What if the theoretical conceits of Afropeessimism not only fail to bring about the end of the world, but give succor to projects dedicated to making an already awful anti-Black world worse? Ironically, those with reactionary anti-Black politics, or those in thrall to the magic of whiteness and convinced of the subhumanity of Blackness, should appreciate the work that Wilderson accomplishes here. In Fascist hands, a claim like “it is absolutely necessary for Blacks to be castrated, raped, genitaly mutilated and violated, beaten, shot, and maimed” (219) in order for non-Blacks to achieve “confirmation of Human existence” is just the sort of work a society running on the myth of Black inhumanity and subpersonhood requires.

More predictably, Afropeessimism takes aim at leftist coalition, solidarity-based, and intersectional politics. It is not just that historically existing forms of socialism, feminism, and multiculturalism have left Black people out (which they often have). Rather, in Wilderson’s mind, these forms of politics terrortize Black people simply by positing analogies and similarities among diverse forms of Black and non-Black oppression (220). The monolithic view of Blackness Afropeessimism presents seems to have little room for the idea that Black people are lots of things besides Black, and that their interests and concerns are often formed in ways similar to non-Blacks’ interests. To be sure, we should mark a distinction between Wilderson’s politics and misappropriations of his vision. Yet, if Black people are literally terrorized by working-class struggle, multicultural coalitions, immigration rights, feminism, and other forms of counter-hegemonic politics, one might wonder why Black liberation strategies should bother accommodate the stated interests of people who are, in addition to Black, queer, religious, anti-capitalist, female, poor, immigrant, working class, indigenous, and/or incarcerated.

Those sympathetic to Wilderson might suggest that Black people have little to lose by abandoning solidarity-based politics. Yet, not-so-ancient history suggests that there may be higher stakes here. As Paul Ortiz has recently demonstrated, many of the material, political, social, and symbolic gains for Black and Latinx people throughout the eighteen and nineteenth centuries were generated by an emancipatory internationalism that drew explicit analogies between Black and non-Black freedom struggles. The United States’ interest in slavery, of course, first and foremost oppressed Black people. Yet, because slavery was so deeply interwoven with the oppression of non-Black people as well (in the form of Indian removal and extermination, violent expropriation of Mexican land in a war to expand slavery, etc.), Black and non-Black abolitionists were able to engage the problem of Black oppression not in isolation, but with a view to how it undergirded a more generally unacceptable social order. Of course, just because solidarity was a useful tool for achieving those political goals doesn’t mean it will work now. Nevertheless, in a time when Black oppression has once again become one of the clearest symptoms of a more broadly unacceptable social order, perhaps it is wise to remember this emancipatory spirit.

Finally, one wouldn’t think that a political imaginary that at first seems so radical would be so amenable to the status quo. Wilderson suggests that his view of the fundamental distinctiveness of Black suffering extends “the critique of neoliberalism,” and registers surprise that leftists do not welcome his perspective (182). Yet, it is just as easy to see Afropeessimism’s performative transcendence of the political as embracing a neoliberal class politics. The book’s simplistic social ontology and monolithic conception of violence makes each Black person into All Black People, thus aiding a crucial neoliberal elision: even
if Wilderson draws no essential distinction in station and suffering among Black people, the market certainly does and will continue to do so. Afro-pessimism’s Sturm und Drang is often a pleasure to explore, but it fits right in with a masochistic cultural moment that cedes the floor to public proclamations of suffering and rituals of deference to it while simultaneously cordoning off these performances from any political will to eradicate the causes of such suffering in the first place. Performing catharsis itself may be a political act, but it is increasingly one whose relation to subversive strategies is not always clear. Whether had by feminists, anti-racists, anti-capitalists, or Afro-pessimists, the small pleasures of lamentation do not threaten. One imagines the dominant social order quoting Nietzsche to itself: “What are my parasites to me?, it might say, ‘may they live and prosper: I am strong enough for that!”

In a final irony, perhaps Afro-pessimism is not pessimistic enough. We occupy a suffocating political moment whose routines have been so corporatized that even avowed anti-racists must negotiate racism roughly the same way a human resources department must negotiate an unruly employee: correct, cancel, or cash in, depending on what the cost-benefit analysis says. As a result, self-congratulatory anti-bias training, identification with the “right side of history” (on which side of course can be found the most “socially conscious” brand-name corporations), underclass tourism, performative wokeness, cyclical rituals of call out and contrition, and perhaps a “diversity initiative” here and there seem to be the only intellectual and practical tools current institutions are willing to raise against the nexus of racial and socioeconomic oppression. Wilderson of course recognizes that racism is a deep feature of the social order, and so is rightly pessimistic about the efficacy of the usual “anti-racist” tools. But he may be right for the wrong reason: pessimism about the end of racism isn’t warranted because Black suffering necessarily anchors the world; it’s warranted because it is nigh-impossible to imagine a future world so thoroughly reorganized around the well-being of the dispossessed that racism and anti-racism themselves have ceased to be useful strategies for consolidating and protecting elite power and wealth. Perhaps this is the source of the unsettling feeling that Wilderson’s tools might simply be retrofitted to the neoliberal apparatus. The content of Wilderson’s version of Afro-pessimism makes it a stranger cousin than most, but its uptake in the mainstream may signal neoliberal politics as usual: a lucrative but politically impotent brokerage relationship between elites willing to monetize Black suffering and its supposed antidote, and the audiences happy to consume both.

6. CONCLUSION
The Spanish pessimist Miguel de Unamuno once pointed out that “the baneful consequences of a doctrine may prove, at best, that the doctrine is baneful, but not that it is false.” It is indeed an admirable feature of pessimisms the world over that they are bold enough to entertain the notion that the darkest, most alienating, most anti-human possibilities might be true, baneful consequences be damned. Afro-pessimism is no exception, and readers should be grateful for Wilderson’s deep, sobering perspective. Yet, in this critical discussion, I have tried to show that the consequences of Wilderson’s view are baneful, and that the view itself is undermotivated and very likely false. Precisely because Afro-pessimism’s possibilities are so baneful, the argumentative stakes are high. Extreme claims require considerable substantiation, and Afro-pessimism fails to accomplish that work.

But yet again, perhaps I should be more pessimistic about my own ability to engage these views. As a non-Black reader, I am simply not part of the audience Afro-pessimism is really meant to address. Wilderson claims that the lifeblood of Afro-pessimism is “the imaginations of Black people on the ground, and the intellectual labors of Black people in revolt,” and that his own work is merely a theoretical articulation of what “Black people at their best” already know (173). In a cinematic retelling of a poorly received presentation in Berlin, Wilderson tells a room full of non-Black academics: “I’m not talking to anyone in this room. Ever. When I talk, I’m talking to Black people. I’m just a parasite on the resources I need to do work for Black liberation” (187). Toward the end of the book, he listens as a young Black woman tearfully describes how his class has given her a vocabulary to account for the resentment she holds for her white mother and Asian-American boyfriend: “they are all embodiments of capacity, and capacity is an offense” (333). Passages like this effectively establish choir and preacher, and the choir probably didn’t get to where they are because someone gave them a convincing argument.

The rest of us may console ourselves with Wilderson’s often poignant narrative, but otherwise there’s no way in. Perhaps it is for people better placed than I to pick up what Wilderson is putting down. Perhaps many of Wilderson’s readers will already know something I don’t, by virtue of walking a path I could never walk. Perhaps the fact that people like me just don’t get it is one of the highest compliments that can be paid to this book. Yet, if you are one of the many readers who does not already experience the truth of Afro-pessimism in your bones, Afro-pessimism simply shouldn’t change your mind.

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NOTES

1. Some terminological clarification is in order. The italicized “Afropessimism” denotes Wilderson’s book. From here forward, the non-italicized “Afropessimism” will denote Wilderson’s own theoretical commitments. Unless explicitly noted, my summary and criticism of “Afropessimism” should be understood to be about Wilderson’s particular views as they appear in Afropessimism, and not the philosophy of Afropessimism as it has been developed by other thinkers.

2. To this extent, readers seeking a more theoretically straightforward introduction to Afropessimism would be better off with Wilderson et al., Afro-pessimism: An Introduction.


6. For more on the problem of elite capture of counter-hegemonic political strategies and goals, and on the political possibilities within this matrix, see Olúfemi O. Tuówó’s excellent recent pieces, “Identity Politics and Elite Capture,” and “Power over the Police.”

7. Quoted in Dienstag, Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethnic, Spirit, x.
REFERENCES


FROM THE EDITORS

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We are happy to welcome readers to the fall 2020 issue of the APA Newsletter on Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges. This issue features one article on teaching by Kenneth Pike of the Florida Institute of Technology and Glendale Community College.

Pike begins by noting that the value of the philosophy professor has been challenged in the past, but this challenge is particularly acute today. For while the readings we assign and the information we present are undoubtedly useful, we do not represent the only source of such knowledge—libraries and the internet are other sources. If assigning and presenting information is all that we do, we are redundant, and ultimately will be rendered redundant. Pike answers this challenge. Philosophy professors do have value. We do not just profess philosophy (that is, have students gain knowledge from us); we do philosophy. What really makes us valuable is that we “model, scaffold, and inspire” the doing of philosophy. However, Pike notes that the environment in which we teach can variously affect such doing. Interaction online differs from face-to-face interaction. Not only are there obvious barriers to the effectiveness of pre-recorded lectures on Canvas or Blackboard, podcasts on SoundCloud, and of live-streaming on YouTube or Zoom, but also, in contrast to the centuries that philosophers have engaged in face-to-face interactions, online teaching is a nascent medium. It has a lot of catching up to do.

While we have all been forced into online teaching for the time being, due to COVID-19, Pike notes that online teaching is here to stay and we need to adapt. He offers compelling and sometimes surprising advice on what he takes to be best online practices, and offers them along three principles of teaching: modeling, scaffolding, and inspiring. In terms of modeling the doing of philosophy, Pike offers two related, but distinct pieces of advice. To return to the written word in both expressing one’s ideas and responding to the ideas of others is the first recommendation. He speaks of the power of writing to engage students in ways that go beyond mere dialogue. Second, he recommends actively engaging students and critiquing their arguments in open discussion forums: “Online philosophy instructors can perhaps best model doing philosophy by actively engaging their students and critiquing their arguments in open (to the class) forums.” This is controversial advice, however, because it is now common practice to let students discuss among themselves while the instructor merely observes and (sometimes) monitors. In the absence of sufficient empirical evidence one way or the other, such common practice is often justified by the worry that instructors will intimidate students causing them to be less willing to engage. But Pike is unconvinced that instructor involvement in open discussion is inherently self-defeating. Instructor involvement can be detrimental, but it does not need to be. For just as faculty learn how to speak with students in the classroom in ways that invite rather than stymie discussion, they should learn how to write in discussion boards so that it has a similar effect. Direct faculty participation in online discussion is a skill that must be developed, but the benefits are worth it.

Scaffolding refers to structuring the class so that there is progressive and cumulative learning. One assignment builds on the other by connecting older concepts to new ones. The aim here is greater independence in the process of learning. To optimize scaffolding, Pike emphasizes that we must not let the medium of online learning dictate our approach to teaching. For instance, we must resist the temptation in educational software programs to go the “click” route. Using a multiple-choice, true and false quiz for testing reading comprehension is certainly tempting because it can be used over and over again. But it is important to find ways to increase time and engagement with the material rather than to decrease engagement—in other words, the doing of philosophy. Assignments that require writing, whether in essay form and in discussion posts, are therefore crucial.

The final topic Pike discusses is inspiration. What is our unique role as philosophy instructors? Pike answers: to help students think for themselves. What inspires students the most when it comes to thinking for themselves? Instructor involvement is Pike’s answer. But how is this achieved in an online, “virtual” environment where no one is physically present with the other, where students cannot go to office hours extemporaneously just to visit, or chat before and after class? Optional discussions do not work. Again, the answer, Pike argues, is regular instruction interaction, especially in the assigned discussion boards. This calls for something of a renaissance in written communication. And Pike sees a real danger if we do not: our redundancy.
Teaching online is something I approach with trepidation. When asked why, I will usually explain that research shows face-to-face instruction is simply more effective—at least in some subjects. This may be partially due to the number of distractions students face even when live-streaming lectures. Like student demographics and enrollment numbers, the seemingly inherent perils of online learning are not up to me, so one way I can serve my students is by making sure they know they are more likely to get a quality education in a classroom than in front of a screen. But I recognize it doesn’t hurt my enthusiasm that the data I’ve seen is comfortably compatible with my own personal preferences. I enjoy face-to-face instruction.

When the threat of COVID-19 forced me (and everyone else) to rapidly move my in-person classes online, I was frustrated and disappointed. For those of us who thrive on the time-honored tradition of face-to-face discussion, who are lately called upon to do less of that, I would like to offer a framework that might prove helpful in thinking about how to translate to our virtual classrooms at least some of what we commonly aim to accomplish in person.

Central to my thinking is a distinction and a conviction that will doubtlessly raise some eyebrows from the epistemologically inclined. The distinction is that there is a substantial difference between learning about philosophy, and doing philosophy. The conviction is that doing philosophy should be our goal as philosophy instructors, and that this will result in greater learning about philosophy. I will not particularly defend either distinction or conviction here. I will acknowledge that educational and epistemological theorizing from Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics down to at least Bertrand Russell’s famous “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” does all the heavy philosophical lifting in the background of what follows. There are also similarities in my prescriptions to the well-known medical school pedagogy of “see one, do one, teach one.” Beyond that, I hope it will suffice to admit that what I’m after here is not Truth-seeking in the grand tradition of my intellectual forebears, but only a slightly ad hoc narrative concerning what it is that we, as professional philosophy instructors, have to contribute—what it is that we really do.

Of course, should an administrator attached to purse-strings pose the question, the boilerplate response that we “teach critical thinking” is ready at hand and commonly accepted. This is especially interesting given the popularity of the witticism that we can lead our students to knowledge, but cannot make them think. The prima facie disconnect can be resolved by pointing out that, while not every student can be induced to cognitive effort, modeling critical thinking gives students something to imitate; scaffolding that thinking provides opportunities for practice; and inspiring students to rise to the occasion is not the sole province of feel-good family movies. These are all things we do, as instructors, to induce our students to do philosophy (and not merely learn about it). Helpful as it can be to know what certain great minds have thought, and when they had those thoughts, and what influences might have inspired their thinking, rare indeed is the student who will retain that information, or to whom it will ever prove of more than trivial importance. I do not wish to gainsay any of the paeans to the humanities or philosophy that have been penned since Aristophanes first put Socrates in The Clouds, but it must be admitted that whatever intrinsic value knowledge about philosophy has to humans generally, most of it will go forever unrealized by the bulk of our pupils. Rather, we model for, scaffold with, and inspire our students in hopes of habituating certain habits of thinking. To bowdlerize Aristotle, especially in community colleges, where students are less likely to major in philosophy or pursue careers in academia, our students do not study philosophy in order to know what philosophy is, but in order to become better people.

Some of the ways we pursue this are the same whether our courses are face-to-face, online, or otherwise. Whether our students read Plato on paper or on a screen makes relatively little difference in itself (particularly given the number who will not do the reading in any event). Rather, empirical findings seem to suggest that insofar as even ostensibly educational “screen time” interferes with learning, it may be because people do not come to their screens with the same learning mindset they bring to more tactile alternatives. For better or worse, most of our students are thoroughly conditioned to recognize classrooms and lecture halls as places of learning, and their electronic screens as places of entertainment. I have sometimes opined that keeping students engaged inside the classroom can feel less like an afternoon at the Academy and more like Saturday night at the Improv. By analogy, even pre-recorded lectures with the tempo of TED talks may fall short of engaging students more accustomed to streaming Netflix, YouTube, or Twitch. There is an understandable temptation, I think, to respond by imitating the market-optimized, attention-grabbing tactics of popular entertainment (and, regrettably, news) media. On one hand, the information we present to our students—the learning about philosophy that must take place—might well be enhanced by engaging celebrities narrating high-production-value presentations. On the other—and it is not popular to say so, but I think it must be said—if we as faculty do not provide pedagogical value beyond what is already provided, gratis, by YouTube, then our communities probably should eliminate our positions and enjoy a property tax reduction at our expense.

In fact, we do provide tremendous value, but it is not particularly in the readings we assign, nor in the information we present—both of which are widely and often freely available to anyone with a library card, much less a smartphone. The value we provide, in other words, is not in those portions of our pedagogy for which online versus face-to-face instruction makes no difference of approach. We provide value by modeling, scaffolding, and inspiring...
the doing of philosophy, in order to develop certain habits of thinking, and these are things that cannot always be done online the same way they are done face-to-face. For example, pre-recorded lectures cannot be interrupted for questions, depriving students of opportunities to participate in the process of working through a challenging problem. This might be alleviated by live-streaming lectures, but then the process of interruption must be sufficiently clear to students that they are comfortable using it. Raising one’s hand to speak in a classroom setting is not yet a gesture with a universally established analogue in live-streamed lectures (though at least one software company, Zoom, has implemented a somewhat skeuomorphic icon that can serve the purpose). But innovation of this kind still fails to fill the niche of responding adaptively to facial expressions and body language; how many of us have given the floor to a student who seemed to want to say something, but for whatever reason could not bring themselves to take the affirmative step of actively volunteering?

This is but one example of the many ways in which standard approaches to online education can interfere with the use of pedagogical tools philosophers have been honing for centuries. Having at least partially identified the challenge, is there anything we can do about it? After all, regardless of whether online education is ultimately better than, worse than, or merely different from face-to-face education, it is here to stay, and likely to become even more common in the future. In answer to this question I can only offer my own anecdotal and, inevitably, incomplete advice, in hopes that if we cannot prevent all the harm done by sending academia into digital diaspora, we can at least mitigate it along the lines of the value we, as philosophy faculty, furnish.

Modeling: Have you ever attempted to imitate a linguistic dialect or accent different from your own habitual speech patterns? There are a variety of contexts in which this might be done (most notably, in the context of “code switching,” which has accrued a vast and fascinating body of related academic literature I will not resort to here), but psychological research suggests that we might have very good reason to mimic the accented speech of others: it improves our ability to understand them. Imitation is the mother of learning and comprehension, and analytically, there can be no imitation without a model. Whatever our students are to learn, be that “critical thinking” or “philosophy” or otherwise, the quality of their education will depend in part on the quality of their model. Inside a classroom, our own meta-model is, traditionally, Socrates; the “Socratic method” of raising questions and engaging in dialogue to draw out hidden assumptions has been the gold standard of academic education since before there was an Academy. As philosophy instructors, we model asking questions by posing them to our students, and we model answering questions by responding to theirs. By interpreting their questions charitably, we model charity. By answering their questions thoughtfully, we model careful thought. The material we assign them for class preparation is important, but primarily in the context of facilitating the discussion that follows.

Inside a classroom, dialoguing follows naturally from the medium of exchange. College students almost always arrive with at least some grasp of how to participate in a class discussion, even if they prefer to avoid it when they can. Online education, in my experience, tends to shift emphasis away from discussion, toward focus on the presentation and memorization of certain facts. This is often a very important part of education, but one reason online education tends to move this direction, I suspect, is that it is easy to automate. If I write a comprehensive syllabus, record sixteen weekly lectures, write sixteen weekly quizzes and a couple of exams with radio-buttoned answers, not only can I recycle my course next semester with minimal effort, I can “teach” a theoretically infinite number of students at any time. Indeed, my employer may well wonder why they should continue to pay me, if I no longer do any work! Intellectual property and the automation of education are topics that well exceed the scope of this essay, but are related in the sense that the norms of online education tend to obscure the unique value of instructors. As Neil Postman observes in his prophetic Amusing Ourselves to Death, What is peculiar about [the] interpositions of media is that their role in directing what we will see or know is so rarely noticed. A person who reads a book or who watches television or who glances at his watch is not usually interested in how his mind is organized and controlled by these events, still less in what idea of the world is suggested by a book, television, or a watch.

The metaphor of the video-screen is consumption. Students cannot challenge a pre-recorded lecture; they may accept or reject what is offered, but they cannot interrupt for clarification or synthesis. Live-streaming a lecture and putting participants on camera ostensibly overcomes this hurdle, but how quickly did the first rule of Zoom Club—mute your microphone—percolate through our COVID response channels? The idea that instructors exist to present information dominates the idea of online education, even though that has never been our primary value. The presentation of information is not what we want to model. What we want is to show our students how to think with a philosophical accent. We accept the prevailing metaphor at our own vocational peril.

If we are to avoid this peril, we must think about what it means to model doing philosophy. I see at least two ways to do this while accommodating demand for online education. The first is simply to find ways, by hook or by crook, to reinvigorate the Socratic method for the age of virtual consumption. Pre-recorded lectures, if they are used at all, should not be the center of our pedagogy. Live-streamed lectures, too, must be handled with care; “classroom management” must persist even when there is no longer a classroom. Depending on class sizes, demographics, and available technology, some hurdles to encouraging dialogue may prove insurmountable. At these points it must be remembered that doing philosophy is not an activity that has been limited to the Socratic method since Plato put stylus to wax. Philosophical writing, both to express our own ideas and to respond to the ideas of others, is equally ancient, and arguably more important. Historically, community college instructors have not been called upon to write very much, but if we are going to model philosophy for our students outside a classroom
Setting, a return to focus on the written word may be our best approach.

Discussion boards are already routinely included in online education, but the common standard is for students to discuss matters amongst themselves. I suspect this is insufficient. Online philosophy instructors can perhaps best model doing philosophy by actively engaging their students and critiquing their arguments in open (to the class) forums. This may be especially uncomfortable for some, given the number of students who may have more experience than their instructors with online forum posts as a medium of exchange, but if ever there was a time to adapt—we are living in it. It might also be objected that instructor participation in discussion boards actually hampers learning, for example, if the instructor’s perceived authority intimidates students or otherwise chills their willingness to express themselves. Empirical research into this particular difficulty appears to be ongoing, but it may be worth noting that we already deal with analogous challenges inside the classroom. As with speaking, writing in a way that invites, rather than stymies, further discussion is a skill that requires practice. Faculty who lack experience with polite, professional, productive online discussion may be well-advised to seek out quality forums to hone their abilities.

Scaffolding: Naturally, having a model to imitate is only the first step to learning; eventually our students must actually do the imitating. This is another area where the on-screen model of education-as-consumption can interfere with philosophical training. As with the process of asking and answering questions, encouraging students to practice what they have learned is something the classroom setting often facilitates. This is less true of the enormous lecture halls beloved of some universities, but in community colleges where courses are ordinarily kept to a manageable size, small group discussions are easily arranged, as are individual research presentations. Of course, it would be a little strange, and likely totally ineffictual, to ask students to focus on whatever seems philosophically interesting to them at the moment, so these approaches to having our students do philosophy commonly come with a sort of “scaffolding.” We give students a topic and ask them to present their experiences in various ways. In theory this is all possible with live-streaming technology, but arranging the timing of such events is a logistical nightmare given a small number of students, and with a large number of students there are simply not enough waking hours in a day to give them each adequate attention.

Here the typically smaller class sizes offered by community colleges put them at a distinct advantage over universities cramming hundreds of students into a single section. The medium of online education encourages questions that can be answered with a mouse click—or better yet, a touchscreen. In the past few years I have had a growing number of students try to do all their coursework on a smartphone because they did not have easy access to a larger screen, much less one with a keyboard. Testing our students’ knowledge of historical facts is good pedagogy and should absolutely be done, but clicking responses is not, I submit, doing philosophy. We must create opportunities for our students to think carefully about problems and respond thoughtfully to them, even though this may present interesting challenges for those who attempt to pursue their education through a handheld device. Again, I suspect that discussion forums should play a central role, and term paper assignments remain as important as ever. Guided individual and group presentations can also continue to play a role—and these might be pre-recorded by students and shared to the class, “flipping” (if I may steal and revise a popular pedagogical term for my own use) the model where faculty make videos of themselves while their students remain faceless. While technology inhibits some traditional forms of modeling, it may ultimately enhance opportunities for scaffolding by giving students more ways to respond thoughtfully to interesting questions. But realizing these enhancements requires that we successfully resist the “click culture” educational software platforms like Canvas and Blackboard tend to channel us toward. If we want our students to learn philosophy, they must do the work of philosophy. Most of them live in a world that actively discourages this and gives them as little time or opportunity as possible to think carefully about anything. We can give them those opportunities, but only by resisting the temptation to let the medium of online education govern our approach.

Inspiring: Having modeled philosophy to our students and erected scaffolding within which they might imitate us, the last step is not up to us. In the end, our students must still choose to do the work. They must now, in many cases, make this choice while sitting at home, in front of a screen that is much better at giving them hits of serotonin than it is at engaging their reasoning abilities. This is discouraging, but it is also an opportunity.

Once or twice a year I hear from students expressing gratitude for how much my class changed their life for the better. Early in my career, I found this somewhat alarming; to have the course of one’s life changed by an introductory philosophy course, of all things, seemed like evidence, at best, of catastrophic failure in our public education system! But a certain mentor of mine pointed out that, for most people, an opportunity to spend several weeks thinking about big, important, meaningful questions, then talking them over with someone who has dedicated years of their life to the love of wisdom, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Our students are surrounded every day by influences telling them what to think; our unique undertaking is to help them think for themselves. Not every student needs this particular lesson, but many do. Pre-recorded lectures and radio-button exams are no help here. Reading and writing are some help, and should be emphasized. But it is instructor involvement, first and foremost, that inspires students to take the hand they’ve been extended. A student who stays after class to ask extra questions, or visits office hours “just to talk,” cannot do these things online. There are no easy analogies; I have tried, for example, providing “optional discussion” threads in my online courses, but these almost always go entirely unused. I have had a few email conversations with particularly dedicated students, but young people seem less inclined than my generation to rely on email for thoughtful conversation. One thing that does seem to inspire my students is my actively
participating in their assigned discussion boards. Regular instructor interaction might seem like a large investment of time for little obvious payoff, but in the end it is the thing that distinguishes our courses from a YouTube lecture series. It is our attention, more than anything, that inspires our students to do the work, to use the scaffolding, to imitate what we model.

Or so it seems to me. On this particular point I have no empirical literature! I personally find it much easier to be inspiring in a classroom, where I can respond immediately and adaptively to shifting moods and topics of conversation. Those brilliant moments when students stop talking to me and start talking to each other, start really doing philosophy together, I live to create. Replicating those moments online seems, to me, far more challenging—but no less worth the effort. In practical terms, I think this will require something of a renaissance in written communication; if we cannot be Socrates, we must be Plato. If philosophy instructors follow the pedagogical trend of pre-recorded lectures and click-friendly exams, we will make ourselves entirely redundant. Even more interactive approaches, like live-streamed lectures, must be approached with an eye toward modeling our particular expertise, providing students with opportunities to imitate us, and inspiring them to really engage the course materials. This is the essential work of philosophical instruction, the portion that cannot be automated or outsourced. The present pandemic means that many of us must learn how to interact with our students in new or sub-optimal ways, but we are equal to the task. So long as we bear in mind that those interactions, not the content of course material, constitute the value we offer our students, it remains within us to succeed.

NOTES


8. One tendency in this literature has been to call for the development of “clear standards” for optimal instructor participation. See, for example, B. Jean Mandernach, R. M. Gonzales, and Amanda L. Garrett, “An Examination of Online Instructor Presence via Threaded Discussion Participation,” MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching 2, no. 4 (2006): 248–60. My concern with this literature is that it may be a way of sinking further into the online metaphor, where every interaction is aggregated for analysis. The problem is that measures of this kind tend to be transformed by administrative forces into targets, rendering them vulnerable to what is sometimes called “Goodhart’s law”—that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA committee for philosophy in two-year colleges invites papers for inclusion in the spring 2021 issue of the APA Newsletter on Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges.

Papers should be devoted to topics of particular interest to two-year and community college faculty, and graduate students who are considering a two-year or community college career path. These include but should not be construed as limited to the following: lower division teaching pedagogy; text and textbook selections including the use of open-access resources; cross-disciplinary initiatives; student demographics and advising; student learning evaluation; program evaluation and program growth initiatives; faculty credentialing and hiring, including concerns for women and minorities, and the status of adjunct faculty; faculty scholarship opportunities; issues dealing with program administration; and topics of general philosophical interest. Co-authored papers are welcome.

Submission Deadline: December 1, 2020

All submissions should be sent electronically to the co-editor of the Newsletter, Aaron Champene, at achampene@stlcc.edu. Papers should be attached as Word documents.

All paper submissions should adhere to the following guidelines:

- Papers should be in the range of 1,500 to 3,000 words, including endnotes. Exceptional papers that fall outside this range may be considered, though this is not guaranteed.

- Papers should be prepared for anonymous review. Papers should contain nothing that identifies either the author(s) or her/his/their institution, including any such references in the endnotes. A separate page with the author’s name, paper title, and full mailing address should also be submitted.

- Authors are advised to read the APA publishing guidelines available on the APA website. Please pay close attention to all APA formatting restrictions.

All papers will undergo anonymous review and evaluation by an editorial committee composed of current and/or past Two-Year College Committee members. This committee will report its findings to the co-editors of the Newsletter, and the co-editors will make all publishing decisions based on those anonymously refereed results.