This year, Corbin Covington, Karina Ortiz Villa, and Alexandre Vachon joined the PLUSS organizing committee alongside Bianca Waked. Their experience as former participants of the PLUSS 2020 cohort offered helpful insight into changes which could ameliorate the program. Moreover, due to a number of external factors, Joel Sati stepped down from the organizing committee of PLUSS, so this year’s program looked slightly different from the inaugural iteration.

While we had initially hoped that the state of the pandemic would allow us to host the summer school in person, we did not feel that this was a responsible decision in light of the complicated travel restrictions, concerns with quarantine, and the inaccessibility which such a decision might compound. Therefore, this year’s PLUSS 2021 program largely followed in the footsteps of last year’s program. The program occurred via Zoom and we were fortunate enough to have two keynote speakers join us during the week: Dr. Brandon Hogan of Howard University and Dr. Ashwini Vasanthakumar of Queen’s University Law School.

This year’s reading list focused on critical race legal theory, especially the works of Derrick Bell. Other topics covered included race and legal reasoning, illegality and borders, solitary confinement and disabilities, colonialism’s phenomenological impact, and the philosophy of violence. Frequently leading to lively and nuanced conversations, the seminar discussions were deeply rewarding and our participants often drew connections and shared interests after the discussions ended.

Our participants also had the opportunity to meet our keynotes, two foremost scholars of color working in the field of philosophy of law. They had the opportunity to discuss both academic work with the keynotes as well as discuss their path through graduate school and the unique challenges they faced as black and/or people of color in the field of philosophy. The only use of funding for this year’s summer school was used to compensate our keynote speakers.

We additionally altered the Ph.D. workshop this year and created “small groups” composed of 5 or so participants and led by one of the organizers. Each participant received detailed feedback from their small groups as well as detailed feedback from the organizer overseeing their small group. We hoped that a more intimate group for the writing sample workshop might be less intimidating, and I think it was successful. A number of participants also chose to rewrite their writing samples entirely, so we are looking forward to reading their developed samples over the next few months.

Finally, we had morning coffee sessions in which participants joined a more intimate discussion of intimidating topics, including imposter syndrome, funding and costs of living, applying for external fellowships, and what to do if you are not admitted to a graduate program. These conversations were among the most meaningful, I think, because so many of the participants were vulnerable and supportive of each other’s vulnerability.

Our original evaluation plan considered the following: demographic information, application success of our participants, surveys providing insight into the summer school, the
Yield rate, and the institutional support garnered from the relevant universities and/or departmental programs.

Demographic Information: Half of the participants identified as women or a gender minority and half of the participants identified as members of the LGBTQ2SIA+ community. With only 2 white-identifying students, an overwhelming number of participants identified as people of color (with a third of participants identifying as Black/African American). Disabilities were also represented in the participant population, as were non-native English speakers. Finally, half of the participants identified as first generation college students. Only two participants held a bachelor of arts degree from private universities, with one participant enrolled in a private liberal arts college. The overwhelming majority of our participants hailed from public and state institutions, including HBCUs.

Application Success: Previous participants (PLUSS 2020) who applied to doctoral programs were immensely successful, securing positions at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the University of Pennsylvania (joint JD-PhD), the University of California--San Diego, and the University of California--Los Angeles. Others chose to apply to Master’s programs and secured full funding from the University of Victoria and Western Michigan University. Other participants have chosen to begin law school across the United States and Canada.

We anticipate that this year’s cycle will be equally successful and we will continue to work with participants throughout the application process.

Post-PLUSS Survey: Responses to the survey were generally positive. In asking our participants to provide evaluations, we sought to assess the efficacy of our logistical and programmatic changes. Though respondents received our choice of topics well, they still recommended more topics, which we will consider when developing next year’s summer school.

Yield Rate: A happy consequence of the online modality was the fact that we were able to extend admission to 20 participants, as we were no longer beholden to the costs of housing and feeding participants. We were therefore able to increase the number of students who benefited from the program, although two participants were forced to drop out at the eleventh hour due to external circumstances. Moreover, the ability to participate online ensured that we could accommodate the work schedules and/or other commitments of our participants, which made the program even more accessible.

Institutional Support: In addition to the APA funds, we secured generous donations from the Sage School of Philosophy, Cornell’s Ethics and Public Life Program, and Cornell Law School. Insofar as PLUSS 2021 was once again held online, the majority of the APA funds (along with all other additional funds) remain untouched and will be used for PLUSS 2022, which Cornell University has generously agreed to host once again. We have also reached out to the Marc Sanders Foundation and applied for financial support, although we have yet to receive a response. In addition to financial support, faculty members and the administrative staff members were generous with their time and efforts in bringing this project to fruition. Cornell University’s
Sage School of Philosophy was especially supportive and deserves noted thanks, including but not limited to Dorothy Vanderbilt, Pamela Hanna, Margaret Nichols, Theodore Brennan, Andrei Marmor, and Kate Manne.

All in all, the PLUSS 2021 program was another success and we look forward to the next iteration of the program.

Respectfully,
Bianca Waked on behalf of the 2021 Organizing Committee