



On the Perils of Race Neutrality and Anti-Blackness: Philosophy as an Irreconcilable Obstacle to (Black) Thought

TOMMY J. CURRY¹ and GWENETTA CURRY²

ABSTRACT. Race-neutral philosophies often depend on the illusion of a universal humanist orientation. This philosophical position, while common, often misses what is concretely at stake in the diagnosis and analyses of anti-Black racism in the United States. This article argues that racism is part of a deliberate strategy of academic philosophy to keep the discipline white. When one considers the demographic underrepresentation of Blacks compared to other groups in the academy, the use of universal pretenses to negate the experiences of racial minorities, and the sociological realities of race and racism in America, academic philosophy emerges as one of many ideological stratagems used to deny the realities of death and dying in our society. The authors argue that race neutrality and colorblindness cloak the societal consequences and disciplinary practices that allow segregation, violence, and anti-Black death to continue unabated.

¹Professor of Philosophy at Texas A&M University. Research interests: 19th- century ethnology, Critical Race Theory, and Black Male Studies. Editor of *The Philosophical Treatise of William H. Ferris: Selected Readings from The African Abroad or, His Evolution in Western Civilization* (Rowman & Littlefield 2016), author of *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Temple University Press 2017), and *Another white Man's Burden: Josiah Royce's Quest for a Philosophy of Racial Empire* (SUNY Press 2018). Editor of a book series, *Black Male Studies: A Series Exploring the Paradoxes of Racially Subjugated Males* (Temple University Press). Email: tjcurry@tamu.edu

²Assistant Professor in Gender and Race Studies at the University of Alabama. Current areas of study include Africana Womanism, Black Family Studies, Black Male Studies, Medical Sociology, and Food Insecurity. Previous research investigated the relationship between educational attainment and body mass index among Black women. Email: gcurry@ua.edu

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Introduction

We begin with the first author's reflections on philosophy and its recurring problem of denying the realities of race and racism, reflections that have arisen as a Black (male) philosopher whose life has been threatened for doing Black philosophy. The experience of confronting death, being fearful of being killed doing my job as a critical race theorist, and being threatened with violence for thinking about racism in America has a profound effect on concretizing what is at stake in our theories about anti-Black racism. Whereas my work on race and racism in philosophy earlier in my career was dedicated to the problems created by the mass ignorance of the discipline to the political debates and ethnological history of Black philosophers in the 19th and 20th centuries, I now find myself thinking more seriously about the way that philosophy, really theory itself—our present categories of knowledge, such as race, class, and gender, found through disciplines—actually hastens the deaths of subjugated peoples in the United States. Academic philosophy routinely abstracts away from—directs thought to *not* attend to the realities of death, dying, and despair created by—anti-Black racism. Black, Brown, and Indigenous populations are routinely rationalized as disposable flesh. The deaths of these groups launch philosophical discussions of social injustice and spark awareness by whites, while the deaths of white people direct policy and demand outrage. Because racialized bodies are confined to inhumane living conditions that nurture violence and despair that become attributed to the savage nature of nonwhites and evidence of their inhumanity, the deaths of these dehumanized peoples are often measured against the dangers they are thought to pose to others.

The interpretation of the inferior position that racialized groups occupy in the United States is grounded in how whites often think of themselves in relation to problem populations. This relationship is often rationalized by avoidance and by the denials of whites about being causally related to the harsh conditions imposed on nonwhites in the world. Philosophy, and its glorification of the rational individual, ignores the complexity of anti-Black racism by blaming the complacency, if not outright hostility, towards Blacks on the mass ignorance of white America. To remedy this problem, Black philosophers are asked to

respond by gearing their writings, lectures, and professional presence to further educate and dialogue with white philosophers in order to enable them to better understand anti-Black racism and white supremacy (Curry 2008, 2015). This therapy is often rewarded as scholarship. Philosophical positions that analyze racism as a problem of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and ignorance (philosophies predicated on the capacity of whites to change) are rewarded and praised as the cutting edge and most impactful theories about race and racism. Reducing racism to a problem of recognition and understanding allows white philosophers to remain absolved of their contribution to the apathy that white America has to the death and subjugation Black Americans endure at the hands of the white race.

To some readers, speaking about races as different groups with opposite, if not antagonistic, social lives seems to run contrary to the idea that there are no real races, just people, only the human race. This is the core of race-neutral theory in academic philosophy. Race neutrality asserts that while race, class, and gender may in fact differentiate bodies, the capacity for reason—the human essence beneath it all—is what is ultimately at stake in the recognition of difference. While this mantra has been offered to whites since the integrationist strategies of the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1950s under Chief Justice Earl Warren, it has had little effect in restructuring the psychology of white individuals or remedying the institutional practices of racism that continue to exclude or punish Black Americans. How are Black scholars to speak about racism, specifically the violence and death that seem to gravitate towards Black bodies if the rules of philosophy and the fragility of white Americans insist that racism is not the cause of the disproportionate death Black Americans suffer and race is not a significant factor in Black people's lives?

This article is an attempt to debunk the seemingly neutral starting point of academic philosophy. For decades, Black philosophers have attempted to educate white philosophers and reorient the philosophical anthropologies of the discipline. Black, Brown, and Indigenous philosophers have dedicated their lives and careers to educating white philosophers and students, with little to no effect on the composition and disposition of the discipline. While it is not uncommon for philosophy departments to say they support diversity, the reality is that

many, if not most, Black philosophers continue to write about the problem of racism, their experiences of marginalization, and the violence they suffer from white colleagues, disciplinary organizations, and universities. This article should be read as an attempt not to amend the Western metaphysical tradition but to reveal the obstacles that indicate its perennial failure. It is the position of the authors that many of the demands for disciplinary change are often expressed as politics, when in reality there are issues of metaphysics (the concerns of being) and philosophical anthropology (the concerns about the (non)being capable of thinking) that are unaddressed in much of the current literature. Section I of this article describes what Black philosophy has taken to be the problem of racism in academic philosophy more broadly. Since the 1970s Black philosophers have criticized, attacked, and attempted to reform the discipline with little effect. This section interrogates why that is the case. Section II argues that the failure of philosophy to change is a problem of metaphysics or the illusion that Blackness is compatible with the idea of the white human. Section III presents the social scientific evidence demonstrating the seeming permanence of anti-Black racism and the dangerous nature of colorblind ideology, which does not recognize that societal organization and racism determine the life chances of Blacks. This article ends with a suggestion of what Black philosophy would look like if its primary mandate were not to persuade whites to remedy their own racist practices, but to diagnose and build strategies against the present problems of racism in philosophy before us.

Black Demographics and the Problem of Racism in white Philosophy

There is a long and well-documented history of Black Americans resisting and critiquing the racism and disciplinary marginalization of Blacks in philosophy. For decades, white philosophers, both white men and women, have suggested that the larger human questions take priority over the more mundane political questions of inclusion, diversity, and race. This should not be surprising as white individuals make up the majority of the academy. Because academic philosophy does not attend to the actual demographic changes of academia at

large and has only recently begun tracking the demographics of the field, philosophers often have a skewed idea of what actual diversity would look like (Botts, Bright, Cherry, Mallarangeng, and Spencer 2014). While Black professors amount to roughly 110,000 persons in universities throughout the United States, white professors constitute 1.2 million with white women accounting for 620,000 of that group. So while Black people are being constrained into artificial “race markets” to allegedly pluralize the discipline of philosophy, there is an institutionalized practice in the academy that fails to divest white professors of their majority hold in American universities. Stated differently, because white women, who comprise almost half of American university professors, are said to be minorities like Black people, efforts to increase their representation on par with that of Blacks within the discipline only results in a more disproportionate representation of whites overall. Micro-level gender disparity within philosophy departments is being used as a macro-level indication of white women’s underrepresentation, which is manifestly false and intentionally misleading.

Academic philosophy houses roughly 5,000 female philosophers out of the 23,000 academic philosophers in the United States (Norlock, 2011). Black philosophers (and this includes Blacks working on philosophy without a Ph.D in the field) number around 120. Despite this huge disparity, there are many more opportunities to recruit women, who are disproportionately comprised of white women, than Blacks or Latinos in the discipline. While no Black philosophers (to our knowledge) deny the underrepresentation of women in the discipline of philosophy, there is a grave mistake in asserting that racial diversity can be improved by attending to race and gender. Philosophy often asserts that the need to diversify faculty is the same across race and gender. Yet most of the institutionalized programs for diversity focus on women, specifically white women, not racialized minorities and certainly not racialized men. The National Center of Education Statistics (2012) reported that Black men have received less than 40 percent of the associate, professional, and doctoral degrees awarded to Black Americans since 2000. Unlike the white majority, Black males are actually outnumbered by their female counterparts as professors and students and have been for several decades (Curtis

2014; Kaba 2005; McDaniel et al. 2011). How do diversity strategies that assume the same underrepresentation of white women to white men in philosophy and the larger American university system apply to the gender gap amongst Blacks where Black men may outnumber Black women by several dozen in the discipline of philosophy, but Black women outnumber Black men by several tens of thousands in the academy? Philosophy is unwilling to learn and purposely propagates race-neutral theories that deemphasize racial and ethnic differences in favor of gender theories that make white women viable, or even likely, diversity hires. Previous research suggests that the pattern of hiring of white women often reproduces rather than ruptures the exclusive racist practices of many disciplines in the academy (Hall 2006). In other words, gender diversity has allowed the content of courses to remain static, whereas racial diversity would challenge the scope of many disciplines (Kai and Critzer 2000). All underrepresentation is not equal. There is considerable evidence showing that white women and white men are the least progressive race/sex groups on gender, women's rights, and racial justice (Junn 2017). Nevertheless, philosophy departments espousing the need for diversity and philosophical plurality continue to use white female hires as their diversity candidates. Black men, the group that has consistently been shown to be among the most gender-progressive and egalitarian groups, alongside Black women, remain among the least preferred candidates in the discipline (Simien 2007; Harnois 2014). Despite the evidence, the racist stereotypes suggesting that Black men are misogynistic and dangerous to others prevails in hiring decisions concerning Black men.

Since the 1970s, Black philosophers have dedicated their lives and careers to the diversification of the discipline. These thinkers often spend decades writing articles that few people will ever read, delivering talks most (white) philosophers will never attend, and recruiting Black and Brown students the discipline rarely ever recognizes. When these philosophers retire or die, there is no fanfare for their work or for their contribution to the profession. Those honors are generally reserved for whites. The reality is that no matter how important the contributions of a Black philosopher are to his or her field, by studying race and dedicating yourself to the problems created by anti-Black racism, your career and work drift closer towards obscurity. William

R. Jones (1973: 120) once wrote in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*:

The cancer of racism that infects American life and history has also etched its mark on the discipline of philosophy. Years of neglect have created disabling conditions that cannot be erased immediately, especially where the will is lukewarm.

Over four decades ago, Jones accused the discipline of not valuing the contributions of racial diversity, and perpetuating the systemic racism of the society within the discipline. Despite this critique very little has changed.

Black philosophy has had to strive and survive within a discipline of indifference and amongst the condemnation of colleagues. For white philosophers, any Black philosopher who moves too quickly—insisting on institutional change or outright rejecting the established traditions of the discipline—is labeled a radical, an ideologue, or, worst of all, *controversial*. Because the ideas of philosophy are geared towards reformism, there is a need for Black philosophers to constrain themselves and censor their own work. This means that while outside fields like sociology, evolutionary psychology, epidemiology, and economics can concretely demonstrate new findings about racism or sexism that complicate how we understand the political behavior and attitudes of white women, or the paternalistic benefits of sexism that women garner in a society compared to outgroup males, philosophy enforces a moratorium on such work because it disrupts the long-standing narratives of white (female) disadvantage and the idea that discourse and education remedies racism. Lucius Outlaw (1976: 29) has argued that Black professional philosophers “need to be grounded in the historical struggles of our people, in particular, and the struggles of people toward more reasonable forms of existence, in general.” What happens when the struggles of Black people have historically diverged from or conflicted with the cherished movements of the discipline? Liberals, feminists, and reformists have historically worked against the realization of Black liberation. Historians have well documented how the language of humanism or gender has been used to displace race-conscious policies and politics addressing

white supremacy. Despite this research, it has had little effect on the ideological force and disciplinary framing of diversity broadly within the discipline.

The neglect of racial diversity and the blatant disciplinary disregard for the realities that determine the intellectual problems and course of Black philosophers have been structurally linked to the racial violence of the past in America. Leonard Harris (1995: 133, 137) provocatively suggested that “the Ku Klux Klan secretly created a profession: American Philosophy”:

American philosophy can be said to maintain an appropriately honorable status, peopled almost exclusively by whites, a fact to be explained not by the antecedents of rape, murder, child abuse, exploitation, racial elitism, nepotism, xenophobia, nativism, provincialism, cultural chauvinism, or the treatment of minorities as exotic instantiation of inferior natures but by intelligence and support of the right canonical figures.

As an academic enterprise, philosophy does not simply ignore the realities of America’s racial past, but creates a consensus-based system of reward and recognition that demands Black philosophy not stray too far away from the established canonical traditions and figures of the discipline.

Philosophy’s disciplinary legitimacy rests on convincing its practitioners that the problems created by the peculiar tendencies and dispositions of white civilizations are in fact the perennial conundrums of humanity. In *Blackness Visible*, Charles Mills (1998: 9) argued that “the universalizing pretensions of Western philosophy, which by its very abstractness and distance from vulgar reality seemed to be all-inclusive of human experience, are thereby shown to be illusory.” By describing the universal tendencies of white philosophy to be illusory, Mills indicates the impossibility of confronting the philosophical project as it now stands. Whereas other forms of knowledge advance, change, and adjust to new information, philosophy prides itself on its resistance to change or new forms of knowledge. Its stasis is its crowning achievement within the chaos of human life. Consequently, philosophy must then assert, contrary to fact, that the conflicts found in the narrowly selected texts that comprise the canon of philosophy

serve as the metrics of the conflicts and problems that arise in any society and exhaust the corporeality of the human. This reduction of human nature to the descriptions of white experience is fundamentally at odds with how Black philosophers are tasked with understanding their realities.

The peculiar features of the African-American experience—racial slavery, which linked biological phenotype to social subordination, and which is chronologically located in the modern epoch, ironically coincident with the emergence of liberalism's proclamation of universal human equality—are not part of the experience represented in the abstractions of European or Euro-American philosophers. And those who have grown up in such a universe, asked to pretend that they are living in the other, will be cynically knowing, exchanging glances that signify "There the white folks go again." (Mills 1998: 4)

Black philosophers are well aware of the illusory claims and delusional character that accompany the philosophical project. It is an endeavor that treats all racialized experience as inconsequential. The abstractions of white or European philosophy mask the racial contingency of canonical philosophy through appeals to a shared philosophical anthropology and the metaphysical structure of the world. The test of good philosophy is not in fact the evidence that can be accumulated to support the theory proposed but, ironically, the consensus of white philosophers as to whether a particular argument or account of reality resonates with their original illusory claims. Academic philosophy maintains that race is a social construct that has no real consequence to the foundational nature of the human being. It then proceeds to designate scholarship that de-emphasizes the presence of racism amongst individuals and the consequences of racism institutionally as cutting edge and correct. To simply say the game is rigged is an extreme understatement, and it does not do justice to the eloquence expressed by the writings of Black philosophers over the last several decades.

The coercive force of this disciplinary disposition has consequences on the type and tone of Black scholarship produced in philosophy. Because works are designated as good or bad based on their closeness to the race-neutral program of the discipline, the overall tendency of Black philosophy tends towards humanist and reformist orientations.

Discourse, education, and dialogue are the dominant modes of remedy amongst philosophers of race.

The most popular works in African American philosophy, those works that set the standard of “Black philosophical rigor” and dictate theoretical advancements in the field, are marred by an unfailing humanist inclination and anti-essentialism seeking to fulfill the unrealizable goals of integration, namely the recognition of Blacks’ humanity by whites and the eventuation of a peaceful racial coexistence in America. (Curry 2011a: 316)

Blackness as an identity and historical positionality is routinely decentered. Any pro-Black or nationalist philosophy is condemned as essentialist, decadent, and a gross folly. Black speakers who take up such an identity are considered by white colleagues as woefully mistaken about their individuality and the core of their humanity. Ironically, such charges are not waged against other identity categories such as sex or gender.

For the liberal white philosopher, race is the category to be problematized by gender, queerness, and class analysis. Rarely, however, do we see an analytic reciprocity whereby racism problematizes gender (such as feminism or queerness) or political economics and class dynamics. Even in the deployment of critical analysis, race is made into a decadent positionality in need of remedy and conceptual clarity. This process involves said Black thinkers recognizing themselves as more than Black. However, such demands are not placed on feminists, queer theorists, Marxists, or on the liberal white philosopher’s normative whiteness or humanism. Their conceptual representations of the woman, the poor, the queer as forms of being an outsider are generally welcomed platforms of theorizing about the world. Blackness is not (Curry 2017: 5–6). These political dynamics guide and direct the unannounced forces that are arrayed against Africana philosophy and race theory and that more generally deradicalize the potential critiques waged by Black philosophers against white colleagues, majority white departments, and various institutions and communities of higher learning. Within disciplinary discourse, the civility of Black critique is emphasized over the substance and verifiability of Black philosophers’ theoretical claims. Consequently, theories of race and

racism are gauged by the comfort whites generally have with how the terms of race are expressed and whether the Black philosopher's analysis of the consequences of racism personally implicates or absolves whites generally. This interference of the white interpreter limits how the concepts of and evidence for racism are studied and theorized. Previous scholarship has referred to this as a problem of under-specialization (Curry 2010).

Because African-American philosophy is mainly praised for its ability to point out the inadequacies of European thought, there has been relatively little scholarship that articulates the actual historical positions that many Black authors held outside African philosophers' criticisms of European thinking. (Curry 2011b: 140)

This problem is not isolated to the methodological disagreements concerning how one does Black philosophy. Jobs are decided on this very basis. Since Black philosophy has no set constellation of key texts or curricula that indicate that one is in fact a specialist in Black philosophy or Critical Race Theory, such decisions are often made by the closeness the particular Black candidate has to the research already conducted by white philosophers or the desirability of the political ideology the Black candidate holds or how it serves the department. On search committees evaluating Black candidates, it is not uncommon for white philosophers to actually disregard Black philosophy as a field or area of specialization altogether. Recollecting one such meeting, when it was brought up that a particular applicant did not have any classes in Black philosophy, the reply of a senior faculty member suggested that such knowledge was not necessary for a tenure-track position at a research one institution and that "the candidate could learn that shit when they get here." The aversion white philosophers have to the problems tackled by Black philosophy often manifests in how white departments screen out more radical candidates, and prefer minority hires who appear to be less specialized, less controversial, and more integrationist in orientation.

African-American thought is consistently relegated to the status of a "sleeping dictionary," where the lessons learned through its melaninated corporeality is surrendered to gain audience with their oppressors—both

past and present. This new lexicon, created by the surrender to European anthropology in the effort to gain entrance into the canonical halls of the discipline, is thought to be self-justifying, since the extension of already established philosophical techniques to the historical problem of racism not only philosophically improves (humanizes) Blacks' reflections on their oppression, but validates the universalism of Europe's philosophical anthropology. (Curry 2011a: 140)

To question the universalism of white philosophy not only means disciplinary marginalization, but it could result in unemployment as a Black philosopher. The controversial Black philosopher who violates the humanist underpinning of race-neutral thinking or the Black thinker who takes race a little too seriously is seen as unfit for philosophy. Depicting race and racism as forces that contour the capacity of the philosophizing Black subject has consequences for the universal narrative of white philosophy, so Black men and women who hold such views are not granted entrance into philosophy graduate programs, not given top (R1) faculty positions, and are not cited by mainstream philosophers. This resentment of race-conscious philosophy ultimately dooms such writings, and the theorists who produce them are ostracized.

Black Philosophy as a Critique of the Human: Understanding Racism

Far too often, the Black philosopher is charged with making sense of the irrationality of white America's erroneous perceptions of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. The histories of terror, death, rape, and murder are often said to be remnants of the past. To speak of anti-Black racism as an ever-threatening doom—a looming threat of death and dying—after the presidency of Barack Obama seems heresy to many white Americans. Despite the horrors that now confront the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump, it is often very difficult for Black speakers to convince white audiences of the divergent worlds codified by anti-Blackness. Black philosophers, especially Black men, often try to persuade academic audiences, who fear being in the same room as them, of their humanity through the academic endeavor. Because this Black person is a professor, there is, standing in front of the white audience, evidence that Black people

are not *all* criminals, and that Black males specifically are not *all* violent or dangerous. In performing what a human being is thought to be by whites, the Black philosopher imitates that human for whites in hopes of being interpreted as human and consequently heard. To be a Black philosopher is to assert that the perilous nature of being Black is outside of the human. Whereas white philosophers often share a similar language with other whites, namely, that all people are human beings and rational individuals, Black philosophers who study race often speak in terms of their negations: non-being. Harris (2018) refers to this as “necro-being.” Curry (2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b) speaks of the *Man-Not*. Wilderson (2009) writes of the slave.

To be Black is to render the very grammar of the academy delusional. To speak of impending death and sub-personhood and explain the experiences of violence and dehumanization that accompany this position to white individuals who *only think* of their existence in terms of *always being* human and persons is ineffable. Perhaps the theorist Calvin Warren best captures this problem in his book *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Warren (2018: 2) argues:

The human being provides an anchor for the declaration, and since the being of the human is invaluable, then Black life must also matter, if the Black is a human (the declaration anchors mattering in the human's Being). But we reach a point of terror with this syllogistic reasoning. One must take a step backward and ask the fundamental question: is the Black, in fact, a human being? Or can Black(ness) ground itself in the being of the human? If it cannot, then on what bases can we assert the mattering of Black existence?

The consequence of attending to the problem of Blackness and the realities of death is that the theories that emerge to account for what is taken to be the accidental positionality of whites who are thought to be human, individuals, citizens, and persons must make sense of a reality where to be Black is to be nonhuman, savage, alien, and reified and consequently subject to violence and wished dead. As the late Critical Race Theorist, Derrick Bell (1997: 23) once said:

We have never understood that the essence of the racism we contended against was not simply that we were exploited in slavery, degraded by

segregation, and frustrated by the unmet promises of equal opportunity. The essence of racism in America was the hope that we who were Black would not exist.

Instead of racism being defined as a set of attitudes or beliefs about racial groups held by biased individuals, the authors prefer to understand racism as

a complex nexus, a cognitive architecture used to invent, reimagine, and evolve the presumed political, social, economic, sexual, and psychological superiority of the white races in society, while materializing the imagined inferiority and hastening the death of inferior races. Said differently, racism is the manifestation of the social processes and concurrent logics that facilitate the death and dying of racially subjugated peoples. (Curry 2017a: 4)

Racism is a social process that demands the extinguishing of Black life. Racism craves death. It is constructed, then legitimized through cultural and individual complacency. When a young Black boy is killed, the instruments of the state, the authority of the police, and the vulnerability of the Black male body converge in the ultimate expression of violence that results in death. The public then rationalizes this exercise of state violence and the individual will of the police officer who killed the Black boy through empathy. The white individual who sees the dead Black male body understands the need to kill the Black boy because Blackness socially expresses criminality, danger, and the possible death of a white life. This fear of Blackness creates empathy for the officer who killed the Black boy. He is thought of by the white interpreter who is watching the dead Black male body as a corpse. The fear shared between the officer and white onlooker is legitimated by the state because the state offers its society security from this Black male threat. This is how populations feared by the society are simultaneously constructed and destroyed.

This brief example describes the depth of the problem involved with racism. Black philosophers are not simply objecting to the thoughts individuals hold about different groups of people, but how the thoughts that white individuals hold can be supported and expressed in violence against Black men and women in the world.

Because a white supremacist world supports the fears of the white racist, the individual racist's anti-Blackness is aspirational. It is expressed as a will for there to be no Black bodies there. As such, the human becomes an untenable account of Black life, given this disposability. The world is simply not organized in such a way that allows Blackness to not be seen, perceived, and dehumanized in relation to whites. No amount of evidence or argument seems to be able to displace the faith philosophers have in education, dialogue, and mutual understanding between Blacks and whites as the remedies of racism (Curry 2008). Generations of nonwhite philosophers have spent their careers and research showing the discipline the horrors of racism, xenophobia, and ethno-nationalist thinking, but there has been little to no change in departments or the discipline at large.

For many philosophers, the idea that racism is permanent is unthinkable. Despite the words and works of Black political theorists like the lawyer Robert F. Williams or Dr. Huey P. Newton, or even more canonically established Black figures like W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Frantz Fanon, or Derrick Bell, philosophy as a discipline and philosophers more generally refuse to acknowledge that racism remains the core and most determining aspect of America's social processes. Enamored by the stories of Blacks suffering, many scholarly conversations about Blackness and racism focus on the harm that Black individuals suffer at the hands of whites or the discipline of philosophy. Relatively few works actually analyze racism structurally or beyond identity at all. Philosophical analyses do not revolve around death or the material consequences of anti-Blackness. Instead, the fear and anxiety that Black philosophers and graduate students share with whites become more worthwhile topics.

The Sociological Basis To Reject Colorblind Philosophical Anthropologies

It is now accepted fact that scientists have been able to demonstrate that race does not exist on a biological level, but instead was constructed by society. Classifying race as a social construct conveys that there is a "process of endowing a group or concept with a delineation, name or reality" (Delgado and Stefancic 2012: 155). Race has a reality

to it, a substance given by the historical and cultural projections of the specific society within which it is birthed. While philosophers commonly entertain, at least at the theoretical level, the idea that race does not have any real consequence, that is a pernicious supposition. Tessman and On (2001: 5) suggest that “an analysis of racialization as the process of the social construction of race can lead theorists away from the possibility of race-conscious strategies for struggling against racism.” If the issues surrounding race and racism are not addressed, minorities will still fall victim to unfair treatment in education, housing, and the court systems.

Although the concept of race is socially constructed, the populations most affected by racialization and racial disparities agree that there are still real consequences to race because of its embeddedness within practically all facets of American society. Race consciousness is necessary to diagnose the function and effects of racialization in law, policy, and social interactions. As the sociologist Michael Banton (2001: 164) argues, some elements of the racial idiom are still needed in law because “the concept of a racial group is the price to be paid for a law against indirect discrimination.” Contrary to the idea that race is mere societal rhetoric, Banton argues that the language of race is needed in law to combat prejudice and discrimination against victim groups. This point is made extremely clear by the data presented by Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow: Colorblindness in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. She argues that racism is a driving force behind social organization—an architecture around which social hierarchy and disparity accumulate. Racism explains why the penal system is filled with Black men who are incarcerated and how labeling them as felons, primarily due to the criminalization of drugs, causes them to lose their basic civil rights. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, passed by Congress as part of the War on Drugs, called for strict lease enforcement and eviction of public housing tenants who engage in criminal activity (Alexander 2010: 142). In the spirit of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, the Clinton Administration sought to strengthen the law in 1996, adding the “One Strike and You’re Out” legislation whose goal is to prevent people with criminal records from being able to live in public housing. This measure to “crack down” on crime has had a debilitating effect on the family lives of people of color living in public housing units.

America is organized around the subjugation, death, and political suppression of racialized people's voice. Even under the ethno-nationalist regime of Donald Trump, there is a reactionary consensus that has reemerged, namely, that a truly white supremacist society is colorblind. This follows a similar logic as the dissent of Justice John Harlan in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896):

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty. But in the view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.

Notice how the assumption behind Harlan's words asserts that the law guarantees equality, while the disparities in society are due to the racial superiority of the white race. In this sense, race is irrelevant in law, but undergirds the dynamics that produce inequality in the society. Harlan believed that white supremacy was natural. He suggested, like many white liberals and conservatives today, that race should not matter in policy and the law, and that the social consequences that befall racial groups are the result of their superior or inferior racial traits.

Not even a decade ago, white America celebrated being post-racial. The election of President Barack Obama seemed to be a great leap forward and evidence that the United States, as a majority white country, had indeed moved to a place where race did not indicate the capacity of an individual. However, racial progress is interpreted differently by the oppressed populations. Racism has always existed in American society and continues to be a major problem for many people of color who live in the United States. The recent election of President Donald Trump showed that there are always going to be consequences for disrupting the grand narrative of white supremacy. Perhaps the best way to understand this backlash that resulted in the election of Trump is through a measure of covert or overt racism. While many philosophers maintain that it is desirable to live in a

colorblind society where race does not matter, social science research has vehemently rejected this notion. Joe Feagin's theory of systemic racism is beneficial for race analysis because it places white agents at the front of racial oppression. Feagin (2012: 937) refers to systemic racism as "the foundational, large-scale and inescapable hierarchical system of US racial oppression devised and maintained by whites and directed at people of color." Racism is seen from a structural view and negatively impacts people of color because whites dominate the structures that dictate the order and organization of society. Systemic racism, as described by Feagin (2006), consists of six parts: the patterns of impoverishment and unjust enrichment and their transmission over time; the resulting vested group interests and the alienating racist relations; the cost and burdens of racism; the important role of white elites; the rationalization of racial oppression in a white-racist framing; and continuing resistance to racism. Feagin challenges Harlan's explanation for white supremacy: instead of whites being inherently superior, they rely on institutional racism to produce social structures that reward and elevate whites.

Racialized Social Systems

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010: 15) explains that colorblind racism emerged as a new racial ideology in the late 1960s concomitantly with the crystallization of the "new racism" as America's new racial structure. Whites could no longer get away with the overt racist practices that were used before the civil rights movements but instead depended on more subtle ways to maintain their racial dominance without using race. In today's society, there are very few whites who outwardly consider themselves to be racist, but they will still support systems that create inequalities among minority populations.

Bonilla-Silva's (1996) account of racism leads him to develop the idea of racialized social systems, a term that refers to societies where economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories. Bonilla-Silva theorizes that the racialized system incentivizes how racialized persons develop their identities within racist structures. Race is not simply imposed on bodies but is psychologically invested in by individuals

in terms of how dominant racial groups identify themselves in relationship to the groups and individuals they construct as inferiors. For some groups assimilation is possible. This is the case for ethnic groups like the Irish and the Jews because their skin color is closer to that of whites, but it would be impossible for Black groups to similarly disappear. Colorblindness could exist in theory, but in reality, people see skin color, and in America, white skin stands for superiority.

Racial segregation has been a mainstay of the American race problem since the beginning of slavery. Assigning the places that Blacks belonged, whether it be in the fields or as the “house Negro,” has been one of the primary ways that racism has been enforced against Blacks. Even after the end of slavery, Jim Crow was established to terrorize Blacks into staying confined by their segregated spaces. We would argue that even today, the established racial dynamic in America maintains racial segregation. In *The Hidden Cost of Being African American*, Thomas Shapiro (2004: 152) has shown how whites have been able to move into the neighborhoods with the better schools and resources with the help of their inheritances. Many of the people he interviewed about their housing location stated that they did not look at race when deciding to move to certain neighborhoods but rather they focused on the lifestyle and “standards” of the people. Most stated that “it just happened” that there were no African Americans at the school their child attends. These understandings of “standards” and lifestyle are nested in the notion that white culture defines the norms and standards. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s concept of “white habitus” explains the tendency whites have for racial segregation, namely, their preference for moving to all-white neighborhoods and the effects this practice has on African Americans.

Shapiro’s work parallels the findings of Bonilla-Silva’s theory of white habitus. Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006: 233) describe “white habitus” as a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters. The most pronounced effect of white habitus is that “it promotes a sense of group belonging (a white culture of solidarity) and negative views about nonwhites.” In these all-white spaces, whites become the standard or norm while anything or anyone different becomes unnatural or problematic. White habitus

promotes minorities being viewed based on stereotypes and generalizations perpetuated by the media or through other second-hand sources. The greatest irony of Bonilla-Silva et al.'s interviews was their finding that "whites do not interpret their racial isolation and segregation from Blacks as something racial." This qualitative project shows that even when whites are communally segregated from Blacks, they do not interpret this as a racialized or racist environment. The absence of Blacks is thought to be compatible with how white Americans think about colorblindness. The idea of white superiority, or white-only neighborhoods, is not understood by many white Americans as racist. In one of Shapiro's (2004: 152) interviews, the participant states that she has "Black friends." However, Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006: 248) point out that when whites claim to have Black friends, they usually are referring to formal activities such as sports or classroom work groups. Once the activity is over the relationship ends; the so-called Black "friends" are not actual neighbors or friends who live within their social environment. Academic philosophy operates similarly.

The Defensive State of Black Philosophy Today

Conversations concerning race and diversity in philosophy routinely focus on the error of perceptions that whites hold about specific areas of philosophy like Africana philosophy, Critical Race Theory, or Black feminism, and how those attitudes—once liberalized—can accept specific bodies amongst them that represent the aforementioned perspectives. Within these conversations, very little is said of the disposition of the white majority who effectively assume the role of the employer, since it is their majority consensus that determines the basis by which individual Blacks are hired. Diversity is often framed as an accumulation of specific bodies that offer evidence of racial representation as compared to peer departments.

Black philosophers are hired primarily in jobs marked as Africana, philosophy of race, or Black feminist in their advertising. These positions are in some sense separated from the more routine designations of philosophy. The effect of this marking is two-fold. First, it segregates the area of the hire as different from mainstream philosophy, creating a market in which Black philosophers, knowing they will not

likely be hired for their work in Continental or American philosophy, are forced to claim interests in race to obtain employment. Second, because such positions become the designated minority market, it forces Blacks to compete for positions against each other—creating various rationalizations of relative disadvantage to persuade white decision-makers of their greater need for such positions. This artificial designation effectively prevents the pluralization of departments because the mainstream philosophy positions are for whites, and Blacks or other minority applicants will be hired in their designated slots. In these zero-sum constructions, Black men and women fight over positions that never displace the white majority in these departments.

Black philosophy's success is not going to be found in its ability to change the disciplinary programs of knowledge. Mainstream philosophy, the white majority in the discipline, is not going to miraculously change after almost 50 years of being confronted with its anthropological limitations and illusory concepts. Under the Trump Administration, universities are caving in to the pressure of white supremacists. Diversity is being rolled back, and Black scholars are being attacked for discussing, studying, and conducting research that criticizes American racism, the presidency, and the platform afforded white supremacists by institutions of higher learning. In this political situation, there is little that can be done to motivate philosophy departments to reconfigure their curricula, their institutional practices, or the institutional racism that has incentivized the exclusion of racial minorities in the past. Under the regressive racial politics of the academy, institutional racism is rewarded since the absence of Black philosophers means that departments, colleges, and universities will not be targeted by white supremacists who are critical of the liberal political orientation of many, if not most, research institutions.

**Revisiting the Derelictical Crisis of Black Philosophy:
Constructing a Relevant Black Philosophy**

The debate about what constitutes or is real philosophy continues to dominate the discussions concerning race and racism. Drawing from the inclusion/exclusion or integrationist/segregationist paradigms, the problem of race and racism in philosophy is routinely understood as

what is allowed to stand within or excluded from the discipline. The integrationist or post-civil-rights understanding of racism in philosophy routinely misses that racism involves a complex and denaturing dynamic regarding the thought and perceptions of oppressed groups. This is a paradigmatic and methodological problem introduced by Curry (2011a, 2011b) as signs of Black philosophy's "derelictical" crisis. As Curry (2011a: 144) explains:

At its most basic level, philosophy is an activity of inquiry into the world which is supposed to guarantee its practitioners some level of assuredness in the ways we interpret the realities before us. If we take African American philosophy to be philosophical activity, then we should expect, by necessity of being philosophy, that African American philosophy should result in the same methodological rigor—some assuredness in the ways that African American people have used to interpret their realities. Unfortunately, the present day crisis of African American philosophy makes this simple formulation an impossibility. By making the methodological rigor of African American philosophy dependent on its popular acceptance; its closeness to the political dogmas of our racial era, we condemn our area of study to under-specialization whereby our works of philosophical genius, past and present, will be judged solely by the degree to which they extend the universalizing character of Europe and her theories. To the extent that African American philosophy chooses to abandon the genealogical patterns of Black thought for philosophically privileged associations with white thinkers, it remains derelictical—continuing to neglect its only actual duty—the duty to inquire into the reality of African-descended people as they have revealed it.

We begin with the premise that racism permeates the discipline of philosophy. We are attempting to bring attention to the ways in which authentic Black philosophy has been revised and denatured into a form that whites in the discipline accept as philosophical. Whereas all disciplines have norms or rules of scholarly rigor, philosophy demands that Black thinking and thought tend towards specific political ends in order to be considered philosophy. Whether or not the thought and texts of Black philosophers are correctly interpreted, understood, or even read ultimately becomes irrelevant to the larger political orientation of the discipline.

Black philosophers are read as extensions of white thought. A Black philosophical figure is relevant only to the extent that he or she can be understood as the unrealized intentionality of canonical white figures. Black historical figures are made philosophical by the extent to which their voice can be imagined as what Dewey, Hegel, Addams, or Foucault would have said if they thought more seriously about race and racism. Consequently, writes Curry (2011b: 141):

Black thinkers function as the racial hypothetical of European thought whereby Black thought is read as the concretization of European reflections turned to the problem of race, and Black thinkers are seen as racial embodiments of white thinkers' philosophical spirits. In this vein, the most studied Black philosophers are read as the embodiment of their white associates; W. E. B. Du Bois is read as the Black Hegel, the Black James, the Black Dewey, and Frantz Fanon as a Black Sartre, or Black Husserl. This demonization of Black thinkers by the various manifestations of the European logos as necessary to the production of African-American philosophy is a serious impediment to the development of a genuine genealogy of the ideas that actually define Africana philosophy's Diasporic identity.

The insistence that Black philosophy parallel white philosophical traditions, such as pragmatism, feminism, and Rawlsianism, and arrive at integrationism as the concluding political goal suggests that the study of Black philosophy is little more than a disciplinary ruse. Critical Race Theory is consistently revised away from materialist interpretations of racism and racist institutions towards a focus on the history and racism of particular white European thinkers (Curry 2017b). This derelictical demand is so powerful that Black philosophers are rarely asked to verify, empirically or historically, their theories about racism. Instead, they are evaluated on the basis of the extent to which white philosophers can or do agree with their position. Said differently, the racism of philosophy is so overwhelming and severe that the question of whether or not a claim or statement about racism or Black people is true or false is arbitrated by whether or not there is a white consensus supporting or rejecting the claim. Often, manifestly false statements about Black people are made by white and Black philosophers that are taken to be fact because white philosophers and the discipline at

large agree to act and think as if the statement is true. These debates often concern easily verifiable facts of underrepresentation, the use of discourse and education to solve racism, and gender dynamics both intra- and inter-racially.

The problem of dereliction emphasizes the point that philosophy is constructed with a white audience and public in mind. The admission of Black, Brown, and Indigenous students into graduate programs across the country is not meant to fundamentally change or reorient the discipline. As a matter of professional survival, racialized minority students are being professionalized to accept that their work must focus on global problems and sustain the supposed universalism of reason, ethics, and dialogue, even while they rhetorically claim they reject such an orientation. Ensuring that young Black philosophers fear being labeled as too radical, or having their work designated as controversial or unsafe, is reason enough to self-censor and revise the original thinking of Black scholars. As such, Black philosophy becomes a discipline accepted as philosophy by the extent to which it mirrors, or Blackfaces, the insights of white thinkers and theories. Philosophy departments have ensured that conversations go unattended that concern the permanence of racism and the histories of trauma and bidirectional violence amongst Blacks (Hernandez et al. 1993; Cascardi and Avery-Leaf 2015; Curry and Utley 2018c). They have also ignored the imperialism and colonial heritage of feminism and the paternal benevolence that white women receive from patriarchal power and sexism, despite decades of research that documents the truth of such positions in the social sciences and history (Newman 1999, 2007; Glick and Fiske 2001).

Black philosophy is forced to interpret the world in the most elementary terms of white theory. Ellen Pence, one of the founders of the Duluth model, admitted that she simply made up the idea that patriarchy and sexist attitudes are causally linked to intimate partner violence, but Black philosophy commits itself to propagating this theory despite countless studies showing this is not true in white culture, and has never been the case amongst Blacks (Pence 1999; Mills 2009; Caetano et al. 2005). The intellectual repression of Black philosophers is so severe that popularly held opinions and majority (white) consensus can dictate the interpretations of race, class, and

gender amongst Blacks. Many of the theories proposed by Black philosophers concerning racism, intimate partner violence, classism and privilege, underrepresentation, and sexism are routinely found to be out of line with, if not outright rejected by, the scientific accounts of the very same social problems. The social sciences, history, and epidemiology have shown that the causes of social problems in white communities often have very different causes when analyzed in Black or Brown communities. In philosophy, however, there are no distinctions in causation. All social ills stem from ignorance, patriarchy, or some incredibly general theory that often lacks cultural specificity or racial nuance. To appear legitimate, these categories simply mimic the already established thinking of whites and in doing so gain the appearance of truth. No matter the empirical findings or authoritative literatures by experts in other disciplines, all conversations about racism and Black folk that run contrary to the endorsed whites are effectively banned by social stigma and punished through professional ostracism.

Black philosophy has a responsibility to engage the Black experience as a genuine site of existential reflection and epistemological tool making. The idea that Black experience and reality must be accounted for by white theories of causality or aim towards the same ends of white philosophy is delusional. Black philosophy must engage in radical theorizations that can be traced back to the problems tackled in the texts and debates of Black thinkers. The social prognoses suggested by Black philosophers should also have some accountability to the realities that Black people are facing in the United States, if not the world. There is no time for idle thought that simply attempts to imitate white theories of causality and canonical traditions in order to be accepted. How can we demonstrate the importance of Black philosophy, if not for what we observe and verify in the lives of Black people in the world? Its ability to express the full complexity of Black life and death in theory at the most abstract levels of thought is what is at stake in the Black philosophical project.

Conclusion

Discussions of race and racism are increasingly becoming perilous academic endeavors. The political climate represents a potentially life-threatening backlash against Black scholars who write, lecture, and educate against white supremacy. For Black philosophers, this is a watershed moment. The discipline of philosophy has seemingly remained unaffected and unpersuaded of its need to change and include Black and other nonwhite philosophers in departments and visible representative roles in the American Philosophy Association. Black scholars are rarely cited by white philosophers generally, and now public discussions and research into the complexities and seemingly permanent nature of anti-Black racism can cost Black philosophers their jobs, if not their lives.

This political environment has dire consequences for how Black philosophers and Black graduate students in philosophy will choose to focus their future research and energies. Given the potentially lethal consequences of speaking about the structural advantages of whiteness, systemic discrimination, and the deliberate strategies of white supremacy that depend on violence and Black death to constantly reorganize society, theories diagnosing the complacency of white individuals in consenting to these racist processes are increasingly less tolerated by departments, colleges, and universities across the country. This means that political pressure and disciplinary consensus will de-radicalize the most insightful and direct analyses of anti-Black racism produced by Black philosophers. Black philosophers will now have to focus on being safe, noncontroversial, and reformist. This unspoken mandate will force Black philosophers to abandon the actual political and philosophical contributions Black Americans and Africana peoples have made against capitalism, white social organization, the state, and the white race itself.

Black philosophy's contribution to knowledge cannot continue to be evaluated by the extent to which white philosophers accept or endorse the work of Black philosophers. Often, Black philosophers are rewarded for their work primarily based on the endorsement from white philosophers who are completely removed from research in Africana traditions or tangentially familiar with conversations

concerning race. In a previous article, Curry (2009: 29) explained that “whites trained in areas outside of race theory can make themselves experts in the field almost overnight based solely on their new-found interest in and compassion towards race questions.” Without specialization, Black philosophy remains little more than a voicing of the political ideology of the day regarding race and identity. There is a need for Black philosophers to designate the specific texts and genealogies that constitute an actual knowledge of and area of specialization in Africana philosophy and Critical Race Theory. This is the only way to make sure the concrete analyses and recurring problems that are announced by Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, William H. Ferris, Huey P. Newton, and others are made foundational and relevant to the study and production of Black philosophy.

However, given the racism of philosophy as a discipline and the ethno-nationalist intimidation tactics of the alt-right, the authors have very little faith in the potential of philosophy to organize and change in favor of nonwhite groups beyond the occasional tokenism or gesturing towards diversity. Philosophy is institutionally constructed around the preservation of white texts, white theories, and the shared references of white experience under the guise of humanism and racial neutrality. Such a position ignores the concrete and repetitive manifestations of anti-Black racism in departments, within colleges, and throughout the discipline. Moral suasion, the best argument on behalf of Black folk, or the endless calls to bring attention to the contradictions in the language and values of white society, are not going to change the discipline. As such, Black philosophy exists as a subversive intellectual tradition that is at its best in its ability to diagnose and refute the caricatures of white universalism. But it will perhaps need to retreat from the frontlines of conflict within the academy to survive and protect the lives of the scholars who claim Black thought as their own.

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