
Presidential Address

RACE: THE CRITICAL SPECTRUM OF CONSCIOUSNESS
IN MODERN PHILOSOPHY

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First, I ask, evoke, and invite the spirit of the ancestors specifically, Anna Julia Cooper, Asa Hilliard, Carter G. Woodson, David Walker, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Fannie Lou Hamer, Fountain Hughes, Franz Fanon, Frederick Douglass, Harold Cruse, Harriet Tubman, Henry Highland Garnet, James Baldwin, John Henrik Clarke, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey, Martin Delany, Mary McLeod Bethune, Muhammad Duse Ali, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nat Turner, Ossie Davis, Patrice Lumumba, Sekou Toure, W.E.B. DuBois, my surrogate father Wilfred E. Little, Zora Neale Hurston, and Malcolm X to this place and space. We ask that they join us, continue to support us, to “super-vision” us and counsel us with their ancestral wisdom□ as we educational philosophers search, re-search, struggle, and fight to find the sincere, serious, committed, dutiful, decent, and intelligent answers to the question of the denial of race and racism in educational philosophy in these United States, and the world.

Second, I specifically greet you with the Eastern greeting, Namasté, which is a Hindi, yogistic, and spiritual greeting which means that I revere that place in you wherein resides your love, your light, your uniqueness, your intelligence, and your peace. In addition, indeed, if you are in that place that is in you and I’m in that place that is in me, then we/us recognize the oneness of our existence. Simply said, I am asking that you please accept that *the Divine in me greets the Divine in you; that is, the Spirit in me greets the same Spirit in you*. Moreover, as philosophers, that’s all we are: ontologists, if you will, on a human journey, trying to figure it all out and delivered here in different phenotypes.

Third, I wish to thank the program committee: Jaylynn Hutchinson (Chair), Leslie Sassone, Kip Kline, and Richard Quantz, for their serious, committed, and devoted efforts in making this year’s conference what it has become as they reviewed between 45 and 50 proposals. By the number of proposals submitted and papers/panels presented, this conference is a resounding success. I sincerely thank all of you for the work that you’ve done for this conference and I further thank all of the presenters, who have come from around North America.

Fourth, I thank all of the students that I advise, advised, and continue to advise: Lindsay Smith, a former student of mine as an undergraduate (who is now a classroom educator in Chicago and has joined us here for the first time), Akil Houston, and Jennifer Seelig, for being here to participate and to present. I

thank our other Ohio University graduate students Mito Takeuchi and Pittaya Paladroi, who've come in support of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society and our conference as presenters to dialogue, learn, search, and research in order to find the right answers. Indeed, I thank all of you for making the issue of race *the* critical spectrum of consciousness in modern philosophy. Finally, I'm pleased as well to be here, obviously, and to be old enough and secure enough not to be concerned if people disagree with me because I choose to tell the truth.

This year brings, to a degree, as every year does, the anniversaries of some significant historical events:

- The four-hundredth anniversary of the settling of Jamestown (1607), to which the first Africans were brought to what became the United States, in 1619.
- The two-hundredth anniversary of Britain's abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in 1807.
- The one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Dred Scott decision in 1857.
- The fiftieth anniversary of the independence of Ghana in 1957.
- The thirtieth anniversary of the Supreme Court's argument concerning the landmark affirmative action case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1977 (the case was decided in 1978); that is effectual today.
- The thirtieth anniversary of Alex Haley's (Malcolm X's amanuensis) landmark television epic "Roots."
- The fiftieth anniversary of the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, by the "Little Rock Nine," in 1957.

Indeed, history has much to do with philosophy just as philosophy has to do with history, with philosophy positioning itself with the ability to improve the human and historical condition. In *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology in Decolonization*, Kwame Nkrumah (the first prime minister and later president of Ghana) suggested that in understanding and developing strategies for improving the human condition, "philosophy calls for an analysis of facts and events, and how they make up [the] human experience. In this way, philosophy, like history, can come to enrich, indeed define, the experience of [humankind]." Nkrumah questioned the veracity of modern philosophy and those whom he referred to as the "the university philosophers," people like Plato, Aristotle, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, George Berkeley, David Hume, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz—the

philosophy they presented and how they are both presented and facilitated in academy to what he called the “colonial student.”¹

Philosophy has to do with critical ideas and ideas that run the world. I should point out that by *critical* I’m referring to a mode of critique directed at comprehending and transforming the ways in which we say, think, know, and do.² Those who have ideas reflect and think about the world and, therefore, share in the caring of the world and themselves. Indeed, if one cannot think on and in the world, they’re positioned as not having the ability to think on and in the world. Resultantly then, they cannot devise ideas, nor can they share in the caring of the world. When this happens, it means that some outside agency must care for you and it is here that racism breeds in the form of colonizing hegemony of mind and intellect.

As part of the philosophical and historical DNA of the United States, racism presents a psychic and philosophical impediment resulting in the human inability to publicly “take account” of race. Indeed, race and racism have become the “third rail” of social, polite philosophical and educational discourse. While we can speak of films like *Crash*, we have not addressed race and racism philosophically, as it seems that such films present Hollywood’s version of the “illusion of inclusion” and Rodney King’s proclamative question of “can’t we all just get along?”³ Thus, when race or racism is mentioned in these polite philosophical and educational discourses not just a “chill” but a “freeze” comes over the philosophical and educative environment. The existence of the topic, painful as it might be, is either denied and/or excluded from the discourse, as though it doesn’t exist or hasn’t existed. An associative diagnosis of self, that is, knowing and being in tune with one’s existence, tells us that protracted pain means that indeed, something is wrong and needs medical attention before it gets worse. This is, perhaps, what compelled author, novelist, and critical social theorist James Baldwin to say that “people who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns [her/himself] into a monster.”⁴ To speak of the denial of race and racism in modern philosophical and educational spaces is a daunting effort indeed, because it’s the historical bedrock of the United States. We need only study what is referred to as critical social history, which understands history as the inclusiveness of the past in the present and the inclusiveness of the past of the present. Critical social history recognizes the past and the present as always conflict, with the resolution being the future.

With the Enlightenment Period (1651–1794) and its motto “dare to know,” modern philosophy was born with the emergence of many of the philosophers who shaped the field that is studied today. In the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe, the concept of or, even, the word race was used to mean the descendents of a common ancestor, emphasizing kinship linkages rather than phenotype (hair type, skin pigmentation, facial features). It

was only in the late 1700s did race come to mean a category of human beings with distinctive phenotypes transmitted by descent and set in a racialized hierarchy. It was during this period that a social stratification of distinct groups came to be widely accepted, with Europeans at the top while darker-skinned people from African societies were relegated to the bottom. Kant's use of the German phrase for the "races of mankind" in the 1770s was one of the first explicit uses of the term "race" in the modern sense of biologically distinct, hierarchal categories of human beings.⁵ In 1795 John Blumenbach, a German anatomist, established a racial classification system that emerged as the influential typology. At the top within his hierarchal typology were the Caucasians, followed in order by the Asians (labeled as Mongolians), Ethiopians (labeled as Africans), Native Americans, and the Malays (Polynesians). Indeed, Blumenbach was the first to use the term "Caucasians," because he felt that the Europeans in the Caucasus Mountains of Russia were "the most beautiful of men."⁶

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) (the only book that he would write), Chapter XIV, entitled "Laws," Thomas Jefferson wrote:

Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions they which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of one or the other race.⁷

Alexis De Tocqueville who, in 1835, came to the United States, in his notable *Democracy in America* chapter 18 entitled, "The Present and Probable Future Conditions of the Three Races that Inhabit the Territory of the United States," wrote:

Three races, naturally distinct, and I might almost say, hostile to each other, are discoverable among them at the first glance. Almost insurmountable barriers had been raised between them by *education and law*, as well as by origin and outward characteristics; but fortune has brought them together on the same soil, where although they are mixed, they do not amalgamate....Among these differing families of men, the first that attracts attention, the superior in intelligence, in power, and in enjoyment is the white, or European, the MAN pre-eminently so called; below him appear the Negro and the Indian. These two unhappy races have nothing in common....Both of them occupy an unequally inferior position in the country they inhabit; both suffer from tyranny; and if their wrongs are not the same, they originate from the same authors.⁸

In 1903, in his *Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois wrote at the beginning of chapter two, entitled “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line[] the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”⁹

In 1978 Associate Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun, in his Separate Opinion to 438 U.S. 265 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, wrote: “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way.”¹⁰

In the preface of the second volume (of three volumes), entitled *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963[]1965* (1998), Taylor Branch said to us now in the first decade of the twenty-first century:

Almost as color defines vision itself, race shapes the cultural eye—what we do and do not notice, the reach of empathy and the alignment of response. This subliminal force recommends care in choosing a point of view of a history grounded in race.¹¹

So here we are living and breathing in the twenty-first century. A century that could from its beginning be spoken of as DuBois wrote as the beginning of the twentieth century rolled over: “The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the color-line[] the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men and women in Asia and Africa, in the Americas and the islands of the sea.” It appears that we will have to do what E. Victor Wolfenstein suggested in 1969. Wolfenstein said that in order to attempt to solve the problem, we have to first ask, as educational philosophers, how does race and racism colonize the critical spectrum of consciousness of the “racially” oppressed, creating dysconsciousness? and second, how do we as educational philosophers assist the “racially” oppressed free themselves from both the colonization of their consciousness and the racial hegemony of their practical activity?¹² Within the discourse of critical social theory, dysconsciousness is suggested to mean the systematically distorted education and resistance to corrective learning from everyday lived experiences.

Here we are physically in the twenty-first century, and it is my hope that this conference will ensure that our minds have arrived with our bodies. I conclude with the words of Albert Einstein:

Your ancestors dragged these black people from their homes by force; and in the white man’s quest for wealth and an easy life they have been ruthlessly suppressed and exploited, degraded into slavery. The modern prejudice against Negroes is the result of the desire to maintain this unworthy condition....I believe that whoever tries to think things through honestly will soon recognize how unworthy and even fatal is the traditional bias against Negroes.¹³

Thank you, and Luta continua (the struggle continues).

NOTES

1. Kwame Nkurmah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology in Decolonization* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 2[3].
 2. G.J. Sefa-Dei, *Anti-racism Education: Theory and Practice* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishers, 1996).
 3. Crash, dir. Paul Haggis (Los Angeles: Bob Yari, 2004); Rodney King, on Los Angeles race rebellion 1992.
 4. James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948[1985]* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 89.
 5. Quoted in Joe R. Feagin and Clairece B. Feagin, *Racial and Ethnic Relations*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall), 4.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 138.
 8. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 332 (emphasis added).
 9. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989, 1903), 13.
 10. *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*.
 11. Taylor Branch, "Preface," in *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963[1965]* (New York: Touchstone Simon and Schuster, 1999), xiv.
 12. E. Victor Wolfenstein, *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).
 13. Quoted in Fred Jerome and Rodger Taylor, *Einstein on Race and Racism* (New York: Rutgers University Press).
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