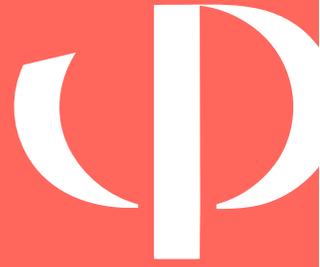


Philosophy and the Black Experience



SPRING 2020

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

Philosophy and the Black Experience

STEPHEN C. FERGUSON II AND DWAYNE TUNSTALL, CO-EDITORS

VOLUME 19 | NUMBER 2 | SPRING 2020

FROM THE EDITORS

Stephen C. Ferguson II
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

Dwayne Tunstall
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

As co-editors of the newsletter, it is with a deep sense of sadness that we announce the death of the Black philosopher Kenneth Allen Taylor (1954–2019), the Henry Waldgrave Stuart Professor of Philosophy at Stanford University. From 2001 to 2009, Taylor was the chair of Stanford's philosophy department. He was the first African American to chair a philosophy department at an Ivy League institution. While individuals such as Alain Locke, Eugene Holmes, Richard McKinney, Thomas Freeman, Jesse Taylor, Samuel W. Williams, and Francis A. Thomas served as chairs of philosophy departments, few had reached the heights that Taylor had. Since 2005, Taylor co-hosted a national syndicated radio show/podcast *Philosophy Talk* with John Perry. After serving as chair, Taylor became the director of the Symbolic Systems Program at Stanford, which blends computer science, psychology, linguistics, and philosophy, in a "study of the mind." Taylor's body of work, mainly in the fields of philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, include three books: *Truth and Meaning: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*; *Reference and the Rational Mind*; and *Meaning Diminished: Toward Metaphysically Modest Semantics*. While Taylor wrote relatively little that was immediately connected to the philosophy of the Black experience, we should not take it to mean that he didn't have determinate views on the philosophy of the Black experience. One of the co-editors (Ferguson) remembers a spirited discussion I had with Taylor in April of 2019 while visiting at Stanford University. Taylor and I went back and forth for about forty minutes about whether race was metaphysically real. Taylor was a defender of Anthony Appiah's Argument from Illusion or racial eliminativist argument; Appiah was coincidentally at Stanford—only a few tables away—when we were engaged in our spirited conversation. After our discussion, I remember his wife, Claire Yoshida, saying to me, "I'm glad you are challenging him on his views about race and racism." She further explained that their son, Kiyoshi Taylor, had also been raising questions about the validity and veracity of Ken's views on race and racism. We hope in the future to dedicate an issue to Taylor's philosophical legacy. If anyone is interested in contributing an article on Taylor's philosophical contribution, please contact either myself or Dwayne Tunstall.

For this issue, we begin with our annual "Footnotes to History" spotlighting Joyce Mitchell Cook—the first African American woman professional philosopher—who passed away in 2014. Next, we have a contribution from Anwar Uhuru (Monmouth University). Uhuru's essay-review of Anthony Neal's 2019 book *Howard Thurman's Philosophical Mysticism: Love against Fragmentation* explores Neal's reading of Thurman's philosophical mysticism and its place in African American philosophical history. Next, we have a philosophical dialogue between Michael L. Thomas and Alfred Frankowski on the relationship between lynching, extra-State violence and genocide. And our last contributor, Dr. Leonard Harris, is, of course, no stranger to us; he is a former editor and book review editor of our newsletter. Harris's article, "Purdue University and President Mitch Daniels: Confession of a Rare Creature," offers "philosophical musings" about what it means to be a Black philosopher in the academic world in the twenty-first century.

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:

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 90.

See Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

And while at Yale working on her doctorate, Cook studied with a range of well-known philosophers such as Wilfrid Sellars, F. S. C. Northrop, Rulon Wells, John Smith, and Paul Weiss.

Her dissertation focused on the American philosopher Stephen C. Pepper's Theory of Value. Yancy explains: "It was Wilfrid Sellars who assisted Cook in formulating her dissertation prospectus before he left Yale to teach at the University of Pittsburgh, and then Paul Weiss stepped in as Cook's dissertation director. In the end, however, it was under the directorship of philosopher Rulon Wells that Cook wrote and completed her dissertation."¹

In 1966 she began teaching in the philosophy department at the "Capstone of Negro Education," Howard University. The distinguished historian David Levering Lewis notes that Howard and Harvard were the most misogynistic universities in the country.²

Cook also taught for one year at Wellesley College (1961–1962) and two years at Connecticut College (1968–1970). In terms of other work experience, for about a year and a half, Cook worked for the State Department, where she worked as an analyst covering the affairs of various African countries. After leaving the State Department, she worked for the now defunct Office of Economic Opportunity. She left governmental work in 1966 to pursue a career in academia.

In the early 1970s, during the formative historical period when only a small number of Black philosophers were working on the conceptual parameters of what constitutes the field of Black philosophy, Cook was actively involved in a number of significant panels and conference discussions dedicated toward that end. This is paradoxical given Cook's tendency towards what Yancy describes as a "race transcending cosmopolitan spirit." In November of 1970, at a conference on philosophy and the Black experience, at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, Cook delivered a paper entitled "A Critique of Black Experience." Later, in February of 1976, at the John A. Johnson Foundation in Madison Wisconsin, Cook, along with Black philosophers William R. Jones and Robert C. Williams, engaged in an extensive and insightful conversation about the nature of Black philosophy.³

Unfortunately, Cook was denied tenure at Howard University. Under the dark cloud of racism and sexism, many of the early Black women philosophers face unbelievable hardships. As Anita Allen observes: "Angela Davis was unlawfully fired by the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1970 for her radical politics; Joyce Mitchell Cook was denied tenure at Howard University, a historically black institution. LaVerne Shelton, now an inspiring poet, was denied tenure at Rutgers University and left academia in 1996. Adrian Piper, who got her PhD the same year I got mine, was denied tenure at the University of Michigan, and after a series of other good jobs in philosophy, continued to an enormously successful international career as an artist."⁴

After being denied tenure, Cook worked for four years (1977–1981) at the White House under President Jimmy

FOOTNOTES TO HISTORY

Joyce Mitchell Cook (1933–2014)

Until the recent explosion of Black women professional philosophers, there were relatively few women in the field. There are the well-known names such as Anita Allen, Angela Davis, and Joy James. But before these women, there was Joyce Mitchell Cook. In 1965, after receiving her doctorate from Yale University, Cook became the first African American female professional philosopher. This was the same year that Malcolm X was assassinated at Manhattan's Audubon Ballroom. Cook's road was not an easy one—given the vampire of sexism at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in addition to predominantly white universities and colleges.

Cook was born on October 28, 1933, in Sharon, Pennsylvania, and died on June 6, 2014. She was the ninth of twelve children of Reverend Isaac William Mitchell, Sr., and Mary Belle Christman. According to a recently published essay by George Yancy, her father was affiliated with the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)—a non-denominational sect of the "holiness Christian movement" with roots in Wesleyan pietism and also in the restorationist traditions.

After graduating from high school, Cook attended Bryn Mawr College. She graduated from Bryn Mawr in 1955 with a degree in philosophy. [It is worth noting that in 1940 the Asian-American activist and philosopher Grace Lee (Boggs) received her doctorate from Bryn Mawr.] Cook later received a bachelor's and master's degree from Oxford University in 1957 and 1961, respectively, with a double major in psychology and philosophy. While at Oxford, she became acquainted with some of the prominent analytical philosophers of her day. She studied with renowned philosopher Peter Strawson, attended lectures by John Austin, and was tutored by Mary Warnock and B. A. Farrell.

Carter as a speech writer and correspondence editor.

George Yancy has noted: "Cook, while not participating in the sphere of professional philosophy, had never abandoned philosophy. Philosophy was her vocation, her calling. She was brilliant, a prolific reader and possessed a remarkable memory for details. Her knowledge of the history of western philosophy was impressive in its breadth and depth."⁵

Ironically, she received the 2004 Alain Locke Excellence Award in Africana Philosophy presented at Howard University. I say ironically because Locke (who was also gay) was one of the most misogynistic men of his era.

Yancy reports that Cook was an avid pianist and loved the work of Frederic Chopin.

Her general areas of expertise were value theory and social and political philosophy. At the time of her death, she had been working on a manuscript on the concept of the Black experience.

When the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers was formed in 2007, Cook was honored for her contribution to the advancement of Black women in the discipline of philosophy. However, the recognition of Cook's contribution has not resulted in any articles or books discussing her philosophical legacy or contribution. George Yancy, who is the executor over her books collection in addition to her published and unpublished papers, is the only person to have written about her.

SELECTED WORKS BY OR ABOUT JOYCE MITCHELL COOK

George Yancy. "Joyce Mitchell Cook: Autobiographical and Philosophical Fragments." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 41, nos. 3-4 (2017): 105-18.

Joyce Mitchell Cook. "The Nature and Nurture of Intelligence." *The Philosophical Forum* 9, nos. 2-3 (1977-1978): 289-302.

"Joyce Mitchell Cook." In *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*, 263-86. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Joyce Mitchell Cook. "Black Scholars in Philosophy." A Panel of Black philosophers in a radio broadcast sponsored by the Johnson Foundation. Wisconsin, February 1976.

Joyce Mitchell Cook. *A Critical Examination of Stephen C. Pepper's Theory of Value*. Diss., Yale University, 1965.

NOTES

1. George Yancy, "Joyce Mitchell Cook: Autobiographical and Philosophical Fragments," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 41, nos. 3-4 (2017): 110.
2. See David Levering Lewis, "Internationalization of African American Politics and Culture (African American Past, Session 6)," National Museum of American History, Washington, DC, May 21, 2016. It was part of the Future of the African American Past co-sponsored by the American Historical Association (AHA) and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and

Culture (NMAAHC). <https://youtu.be/Th0jdRPZcVE> Last accessed: March 1, 2020.

3. For a fuller discussion of the significance of this meeting, see John H. McClendon III and Stephen C. Ferguson II, *African American Philosophers and Philosophy: An Introduction to the History, Concepts, and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 93-117.
4. George Yancy, "The Pain and Promise of Black Women in Philosophy: Interview with Anita L. Allen," *New York Times* June 18, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/opinion/black-women-in-philosophy.html> Last accessed: March 25, 2020.
5. George Yancy, "Joyce Mitchell Cook," 106.

ARTICLES

Textual Mysticism: Reading the Sublime in Philosophical Mysticism

Review Essay: Anthony Neal, *Howard Thurman's Philosophical Mysticism: Love against Fragmentation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2019).

Anwar Uhuru

MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY

I would like to begin this essay with a quote by philosopher Blanche Radford-Curry. She states, "philosophers should not acquire analytic or linguistic skills for their own sake, but as a means for solving existential problems to make life more worth living."¹ Making life more worth living is what I believe is Anthony Neal's intervention and reason for reading Howard Thurman. Neal's book is not a mere attempt to intervene; it actually does the work. His book *Howard Thurman's Philosophical Mysticism: Love against Fragmentation* goes beyond the intersections of time (the historical timeline of Thurman's writings) and disciplinary boundaries.² The goal of this essay is to critically read Anthony Neal's work as a case for critically reading mysticism, and why it matters in Africana philosophy. My response to Neal's reading of Thurman answers the question: Why should we read it? We should read it because, as I argue, not only is Neal arguing for the imperative to read philosophical mysticism and the contributions of Africana philosophers in the field of mysticism, but also how that work is a contemplation of what is the sublime. For Neal reads Thurman's take on the sublime as not being just a mere moment of ecstasy, abundance, and bliss, but it is achieved when reading and engaging with texts. I would argue that in Africana philosophy and the way Neal reads Thurman is that the sublime is achieved when reading and engaging with texts. Hence those moments of engagement while reading, thinking, and responding are what I call textual mysticism.³

Currently, scholars working in Afro-Diasporic thought and intellectual history are working through the ideas of recovery⁴ and re-memory.⁵ The work of recovery is what scholars in Africana Intellectual History are working through and at the same time abiding by and honoring the limitations of fragments and missing histories of people of African descent. Yet, working to rewrite histories and narratives that go against the dominant approach, which is

to paint people of African descent as victims, dispossessed, and melancholic, to portray them instead as survivors and thriving against those odds.⁶ I borrow Toni Morrison's term of re-memory, but I expound on that concept because to remember is a protest of whiteness that forces those who are racially and historically marginalized to forget. What Morrison and I would agree on is that memory is uncomfortable, disruptive, and forces those who benefit from "forgetting" to reckon with that memory and do the work to repair. In thinking about recovery and re-memory it is revisiting moments in history that have become canonical and hyper-formulaic. Consequently, that methodology of thinking has created a narrative of erasure and excuse. Erasure of the complexity of Black life before, during, and after the Third Wave of the Civil Rights Movement—the first being 1866, the second being 1875, the third 1964, and fourth 1968.⁷ Prior to this moment in political legislative victory for Black/African Americans, we only had the philosophical contribution of Alain Locke. He states,

The Negro has been more a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem.⁸

Moving to a telos of whole being and moving beyond a problem for white folks is how and why the reading of Thurman's work is essential to contest white social constructions of a Black/Negro as "the problem." Therefore, there is no Negro problem; there is only a problem with Negroes.

The telos of whole being and absolving one's self of being a problem is why it cannot go without being mentioned that Neal's work is an in-depth undertaking of doing the work of recovery and re-memory. It also creates a different framework for those who look at after-life⁹ studies to actively engage in countering the narrative of canonized figures within the movement. Because for Thurman, it is the philosophical teachings of his grandmother Nancy. Examples of the experiential as philosophy are texts that are often read as narratives such as the writings of Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Maria Stewart, David Walker, Ottobah Cugoana, and Phillis Wheatley. Their experiences are philosophical questions that are first approached through contemplation and then further explored through the written form. The textual and inter/textual mystical experience that Thurman writes is why Neal reads the onto-epistemology of Blackness in Thurman's writings. Neal states, "The study of black(ness) as a type of consciousness or being in the world, not the color of a person's skin, but that which is rooted in the experience of blackness, particularly in the American context, is the fundamental aim of my investigations."¹⁰ As a philosopher, Neal reads Thurman from the perspective of the experiential instead of the social construction of Blackness, largely because Thurman bears witness to his grandmother's accounts of having been enslaved. By doing so, Neal's reading complicates the argument that Blackness in America begins

and ends with slavery. Yet, Neal sees Howard Thurman's grandmother Nancy as the absolute point of origin on how Thurman philosophizes but also proves that Blackness is before and after being enslaved. The discourse on theology and mysticism is removed from the period as being both a philosophical guide and strategy that informs thought and ideologies. Instead, discourse on theological and mystic approaches are relegated outside of the movement and are siloed to thinkers such as Kierkegaard,¹¹ Weil,¹² and Stein.¹³

How does mysticism from the perspective of a non-Catholic and non-white thinker inform philosophy but, more importantly, inform others? As Neal claims, "I have no intention of placing all of Thurman's events on a canvas, presenting but never firmly establishing justifications for texture, tone, and scheme. I am a philosopher."¹⁴ Instead of a biographical or a mere insertion of a non-white theologian in the canon of mystics, Neal's work is a hermeneutic undertaking in which he reads Thurman as a philosopher. Yet, he cannot ignore Thurman's Blackness. I argue that Neal purposes what I call "textual mysticism" as his inclusion of the hermeneutic and the mystical. Textual mysticism is the transformative process in which a person engages with texts as a process to obtain enlightened bliss. Yet, for Thurman, his bliss is not just from nor is textual mysticism obtained from printed texts. It is the sonic and oral texts that Thurman and Black philosophers encounter. What better way to grapple with the experiential than by reading the mystical? How can our experiences challenge how we live in the world? By thinking through those experiences of living in the world, who better to philosophize than a Black American who, as Neal notes, is "a thinker who has some religious, some poetic, and some philosophical works"?¹⁵

One cannot begin to philosophize the Black experience without those three elements: the poetic, which I argue is the personal; the religious, which I argue is humanity's attempt at explaining the unexplainable; and philosophy as a set of ideas that are used to conceptualize the self and society. Neal further notes,

when forming frameworks and contextualizations, I have ignored the words of those who could only speak about blackness as other, and not as self. What could I say about the experience of being white without first having someone else who experiences it.¹⁶

I would add that this is from the vantage point or perspective of seeing but not knowing through experiential ties. Thinking about Blackness as the site and genesis of thought and not as the problem is already an anti-racist and Black-affirming methodology, partially because Neal doesn't philosophize from the perspective of contextualizing and correcting the Western Canon. However, in placing Blackness of embodiment and philosophizing, it is necessary to acknowledge the influence in its duality, which is the positive and negative impact that white philosophers have on African American philosophy and the way that African Americans philosophize. During his time at Columbia University, Thurman was able to experience the impact that John Dewey had on the department and the ways philosophers approached how they philosophized. Neal notes,

philosophers, particularly at Columbia University, were employing the techniques of philosophy to achieve solutions to the social and moral problems of their day. This philosophical aim was rooted in the propensity of the department at Columbia towards metaphysics. In this citadel, Thurman would be invested with the tools to struggle with and solve many of the issues which thwarted the very existence of the multitudes of blacks in the United States causing Thurman to refer to the bleakness of black existence as *the Luminous Darkness*.¹⁷

If Thurman considered himself a philosopher, what did he consider a philosopher to be? More so, what was Howard Thurman thinking about especially when he defines Blackness as

“the Luminous Darkness”?¹⁸ Instead of seeing Blackness as the absence of light, he sees Blackness as the absolute source of light. For Thurman and the way in which Neal reads his body of work, that Blackness is the sublime. His mysticism or textual intervention is an articulation of Blackness as the sublime.

Despite his personal experiences and bearing witness to or tertiary absorbing those experiences of the social state of Blackness, Thurman does not see Blackness as bleak or a void but the point of illumination. That brings us to the question of what was Thurman thinking? Neal posits that Thurman was thinking of three things:

1. What did it really mean to be human?
2. Is there a best way for humans to live together?
3. Is there any significance in personal experience?

I will begin to answer the questions that Neal asks in his reading of Thurman. First, what did it really mean to be human? Neal himself begins with this statement:

On one level, it can be said that African American philosophy arises from the American moment and is rooted in the denial of the foundational ideal of freedom to enslaved African bodies, but on another level African American philosophy can be said to have arisen from the rejection of the lived experience created by slavery/oppression and an affirmation of the desired experience which extended from the minds of these black bodies as they ushered in their own Modern Era.

Despite being born in 1899, which is three years after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling (1896), Thurman’s personal and inherited legacy situates him in what Neal argues as going beyond philosophy as “white-only” and being the only “human perceptual framework(s).” Neal notes,

African American philosophy rejected the white-only as human perceptual frameworks. The very relevance of African American philosophy is derived from the context of slavery. Therefore for Thurman as philosopher establishes not only his humanity but anyone who has autonomy and the ability to imagine.¹⁹

Neal’s second question is, Is there a best way for humans to live together? To answer this, Neal reminds us that Thurman read Plato’s *Republic* and referred to it throughout his life. Plato was required reading, and still is, I may add, if you are a student at Columbia University. The utopic structure of Plato’s *Republic* is what plants the seed of thinking as to what are the best ways for humans to exist amongst each other. Second, in the structure of a utopia, Thurman would be able to contemplate the state of Blackness. Third, Neal also notes that the mysticism in Plotinus’s revival of Plato would influence how Thurman would read *The Republic*. For example, Neal points out that Thurman feels that “Plotinus felt, taught, thought that all of life, all creation was in God.”²⁰ Hence, Plotinus’s intervention of Plato’s work allows Thurman to see utopic formations of a society as being an ideal place for humanity. Just like Plato and Plotinus, Thurman used philosophy to work through his concerns about finding the best means for humans to live together. Is there any significance in personal experience? I would say in thinking through Thurman, absolutely. To not think through primary, secondary, or tertiary experience is to think from a limited and Western, Vitruvian²¹ perspective. By thinking through the complex non-monolithic elements of experience is to unify the self, community, and the cosmological from a non-Western perspective. As for philosophy and what it means to philosophize is to think through modes of being that do not center the white gaze (Vitruvianism) or seeing Blackness as monolithic. It would also mean seeing texts and those who respond to texts as having continued moments of the sublime.

NOTES

1. Blanche Radford-Curry, “The Reality of Black Philosophy,” *The Black Scholar* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 146–51.
2. Anthony Neal, *Howard Thurman’s Philosophical Mysticism: Love against Fragmentation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2019).
3. I argue that mystics such as Soren Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, Edith Stein, etc. speak of moments of the sublime as a moment bigger than humanity’s ability to measure. However, in thinking through African discourse and mysticism, the ability to read, interpret, and write that moment is the sublime, especially when Blackness and being are under constant contestation in opposition and overcoming whiteness.
4. The African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS) is a scholarly organization that aims to foster dialogue about researching, writing, and teaching Black thought and culture through scholarship, interdisciplinarity, inclusiveness, public engagement, and media.
5. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).
6. Nathalie Etoke, *Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).
7. <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Data/Constitutional-Amendments-and-Legislation/>
8. Alain L. Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation, 1925* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
9. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 1–14.
10. *Ibid.*, 6.
11. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Denmark, 1846).
12. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: HarperCollins, 1966).
13. Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Germany, 1916); and *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning*

of Being (Germany, 1936).

14. Neal, *Howard Thurman's Philosophical Mysticism*, 5.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 18.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 22
20. Ibid., 32.
21. Leonardo da Vinci's 1490 image "Vitruvian Man," in which he centers man (white man) as the central being and image of humanity. This image is constructed two years before Christopher Columbus sails across the Atlantic Ocean. The image foreshadows Europe's Global Conquest and the globalization of whiteness.

Spectacle Lynching, Sovereignty, and Genocide: A Dialog with Al Frankowski

Alfred Frankowski
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Michael L. Thomas
SUSQUEHANNA UNIVERSITY

A common refrain in the Critical Philosophy of Race is that Black people are always already in a context of violence. This refrain is mystical to those who view the history of racial violence as distinct from its contemporary manifestations. It is nonsense to those who believe that claims of violence are overstated and only apply to particular instances of physical harm. In his work in the philosophy of race, Al Frankowski argues that this reception is guided by forms of sensibility that fail to make sense of the history of violence in the United States and its connection to the violence in the present. In his first book, *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization* (2015), he analyzes how our memory of racial violence is post-racial; it disarticulates the violence of the present as it acknowledges the violence of the past. This form of sensibility reproduces a common public refrain around past descriptions of racial violence in the U.S. that it's "about the past, but *feels* like it *could be* about the present." That obscurity of feeling is the result of a post-racial logic that requires this form of sensibility to make sense of the world by making the connection between the present and the past insensible. In his recent article, "Spectacle Terror Lynching, Public Sovereignty, and Antiracial Genocide (2019)," Frankowski analyzes how spectacle terror lynching serves as a form of political assembly that establishes the sovereignty of anti-Black violence as a feature of those sites. In this interview, I discuss this recent article with him to elaborate on its central concepts, discuss their connection to the sense of violence we currently experience, and explore the political potential for marking this violence as anti-Black genocide.

Michael L. Thomas: To get us started, could you give us some background on how this new work bridges from your previous book project, *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization*?

Al Frankowski: I was working on a piece thinking about genocide and anti-Black violence and how framing things in terms of genocide gives us a different way to think about political violence. At the same time, I was also shifting to thinking about architecture and spatiality and histories of racism spaces of violence, and places of racism. So, moving away from memorials, which we tend to think of as being located in space, but remarkably as public sites of memory and history, that gave me a way of thinking about things temporally, but I was thinking about special location and exploring what could be thought of in terms of not just pasts or history, but spatial workings of histories of racial violence. So I'm looking at the history of anti-Black racial violence as a type of architecture, as a racialized terror issue, that occupies that sort of space. Another way of thinking about the background is that I was thinking about spectacle terror lynching as not only continuous with the history of slavery, but something discontinuous with it. One of the things that troubles me is that when people talk about anti-Black violence or white supremacy in the United States, they talk about a sort of continual trajectory from slavery to Jim Crow to Mass Incarceration. There's something right about that. I think that's the right context. But what seemed peculiar to me was that spectacle terror lynching marks a different type of racialization, a different type of public violence than slavery. So, I'm trying to be attentive to those differences.

MT: To build off of that, I've been thinking about the notion of violence at work in your previous book. There's a conversation happening about sensibility in which it can reify itself. Reading this piece, it seems that what's at stake is not a particular form of historical sensibility, the issue is types of violence and atmospheres of violence. Where are you on thinking of what those forms may look like? After the first book, we can think about historical sensibility, of how post-racial sensibilities disconnect a sense of the violence of the past. One way to combat that would be to cultivate a sense of historical violence. But you seem to be saying something different.

AF: The memorial work tries to locate a type of present violence that is historicized or a historical sense of violence that animates why it's important to think about a historical sense of violence. What post-racial memory seems to do is to cut in the wrong directions. It seems to historicize a type of violence that is still present. It specifically doesn't remember exactly what it claims to be remembering. So, its present is one that continually reenacts certain types of violence. What may have gotten lost there or what I hadn't anticipated and am trying to be more attentive to is that the spaces which we occupy are not simply cleansed of violence just because they're historical. Our present occupation of spaces, the present experience of spaces is highly politicized in direct relationship to the types of racial violence that don't necessarily disappear just because racial violence has been in its past. Lynching spaces are particularly prone to this. If we think architecturally, there are spaces in the south and north that had large African-American communities. Once a lynching happens, everyone moves out, and you have the creation of a white space. That's an architectural feature of that space. So, what you would have currently is people who have lived

in the fact of white spaces, that have been architecturally constructed as white spaces. Those white spaces were only made possible through this severe anti-Black expression of political violence. So it's no longer really a question of what do we remember and what do we forget, it's now a question of do how we live in the spaces that we occupy.

MT: You begin your article with a discussion of the narrator of Ellison's "Party down in the Garden." Particularly, in the narrator's experience, there's a tension between the public and the private dimensions of those spaces, which opens us to thinking of the public and private dimensions of people. In this case, it seems the spectator is an outsider to lynching but an insider to white supremacy, meaning they are foreign to our direct experience of violence, but at home with anti-Black violence in the U.S. Is this how you're interpreting that experience?

AF: What's complex about the Ellison character is that he's clearly white and being invited into this event, where he becomes an insider. What strikes him as odd isn't the absence of Black people or what's happening to this particular person. There is a weird transformation of his own sensibility that is laying claim to him. So, he is not an outsider to white supremacy, he's an outside to a very particular aestheticization that is being made public. I quote one of the characters who says, "there are no Christians here, Only Americans," and at this point there is a dropping of the façade. "Let's not fool ourselves anymore, we're all here. This is what we're here for. We're only American." There's a sense where that's what's being made public. That's what makes [the narrator] sick. He's literally being turned inside out. But, it's not a sickness to the violence being cast on the Black body.

So there's something interesting about the revealing of the political through public space. It's a revealing that can only take place in that particular square. So we lose something when we talk about the generality of each lynching. Yes, they're really highly scripted. Yes, they're very routine. But each one is attached to a very particular place.

MT: So, you're emphasizing that this is a place of public assembly. We tend to think of spaces in abstract terms, as vacuous. What role does the public play in constituting the space? How do we move from space as the abstract place where things happen and that space where this public gathers to mark it for itself?

AF: We think of spaces as being abstract so that we don't think of them as places where the political is operative. In her work on assembly, Judith Butler is emphatic about the fact that the ability to publicly assemble *is* the work of the political. There's no reason to believe that the places that we assemble and the reasons why we assemble have to be good or bad. But, acknowledging that spaces actually don't exist unless they are potentially sites of the political is important for understanding why something like a protest or why police presence is important. Think of what's going on with Walmart or college campuses where you are confronted with the fact that these places of assembly are places of the work of the political. What goes on there is also a type of working out of the political.

MT: What does sovereignty, a concept central to your article, mean within that political space of assembly. What does it mean for that to be a white supremacist space?

AF: One thing I find problematic when looking up terror spectacle lynching is that public spaces seem to be redefining themselves politically not simply as white supremacist spaces. They are redefining themselves as they are redefining what is possible through anti-Black forms of assembly. If we go back to the spectator in Ellison's work, the spectator is becoming something. It's not that he's radically changing his whiteness, he's becoming something different. It doesn't mean that after seeing the lynching he only understands himself as white supremacist. The lynching becomes a sort of boundary. It's always an extreme. The fact of its possibility and that it operates in a space as something the state can't legislate against. It means that the public performance is also a reconstruction of a sovereignty that isn't finished or terminated in the lynching. It becomes real in the displacement of the people. It becomes real in the people who occupy those spaces normatively the next day, weeks later, or months later. It becomes real in their children. It becomes real in the way in which that public space is configured around that event. Through erasure, through downplaying it, through putting up markers. It becomes real after that. It becomes real for us in the way that it's only a dream or a promise for the folks who attend the lynching. This is how Arendt talks about sovereignty and the general will.

MT: In the article, you trace an evolution of the idea of sovereignty from Rousseau, through Schmidt, to Arendt. What happens in that movement between the three?

AF: For Rousseau, what is sovereign has to do with the question of the General Will as a type of agreement. He has a bare bones notion of the limit of the political. Schmitt rightly capitalizes on that particular point, that the General Will is needed by the state to understand itself politically. Without an expression of absolute sovereignty, don't have state power, you have potential state power. Just like, without the absolute expression of God's will breaking all of God's own rules, you don't have divine power of any sort, you just have potential. The state has to be able to dispose of its people at will, for any reason or no reason at all in order for it to embody sovereignty.

Schmitt means this literally, that it has to be able to send people off to die. Some people have to die in a war, or it has to dispose of them as an expression of its sovereignty. That has to be a real possibility. In religious terms, it has to be possible for your God to be able to tear you down. Otherwise, it's not really a God. If God can only work to do the good, then I have no fear of my God, and I can't really stand in awe of its power. Schmitt is working on something similar there.

Arendt takes up the same notion of sovereignty between the two because she's pointing out that it's in the public gathering of the General Will that any sovereign action is never completed in the gathering. It's always a promise at the same time. This doesn't have to be for bad or for good. Whatever relates us, what organizes that public affect,

is not just an act or an event, it's also a promise that can be completed later on. That's true of those revolutionary politics which we are much more comfortable. It's also true of the white supremacy of spectacle terror lynching. It's in the destruction of the Black body that we see the architecture of a future form of white supremacy that's being made public.

MT: This helps make sense of the example of Brandon McClendon, who killed in Paris, Texas after being dragged to death behind a car. You seem to claim that this murder is a lynching despite lack of a gathering or a public being present. There is still an extent to which lynching is more than the noose. What is specific about it as a form of anti-Black violence?

AF: It's a form of anti-Black violence that signals a type of gathering that it doesn't have to have. It doesn't have to follow the same patterns. So, when people say we no longer lynch, well, yes and no. It depends. Maybe that's not the most important question. The more important question we need to ask is, "What form of sovereignty are we continually reinscribing as a public?"

MT: It seems that what makes lynching look exceptional to many people is that it is a ritualized form of violence. How is that ritual aspect still present?

AF: We have to be careful about what's embedded in our everyday rituals. If the public gathering is neither automatically good nor bad beforehand, if we pay more attention to how our habits are relating to types of public reenactments of anti-Black violence. If those haven't changed, then there's no reason to think of them differently. Take the example of twitter activism [where "dragging" is metaphorically used for publicly shaming users who post racist, homophobic, or other forms of violent tweets]. The stakes aren't if it's effective, the importance is what's being reinscribed there. A lot of it has to do with signaling a public and getting them enthusiastic around a particular type of violence or destruction.

MT: When we discuss the ritual aspect, there's a habitual aspect, where our everyday practices reinforce what's been promised to us in those spaces. There's also a ritual aspect in the sense used by Durkheim and Bataille of the affect that holds the space together which holds that space together. Is that right?

AF: Yes. Plus, if it's a promise, then we don't really know how we're completing or moving against it. We shouldn't be so confident that we know that our way of participating of political action is moving against that promise or working towards fulfilling it. When we think of our agency, various technologies give us a type of agency that we didn't have before. How much do we know about that agency? How inquisitive are we about those particular methods? Those are all things that we should be cautiously questioning.

What we get out of looking at terror spectacle lynching as a type of promise of a particular formation of public sovereignty as opposed to it being white supremacist or specifically anti-Black is that we have to think more

carefully about practices of genocide. This is why framing it as genocide is necessary. It may be true that all forms of anti-Black violence ought to be framed as genocidal practices. But I'm not sure that they all establish the same type of genocide.

MT: Are we thinking about genocide in its codified definition, or is there something more there?

AF: There's something more there. I don't want to discount what's been said of genocide's legal definitions and the cautions about expanding the term beyond its general meaning. If we're being careful about how we're defining something, we have to notice that there are clear ways that genocide is always referring to cultural practices. In Limpkin, there is a way that he could not think about genocide without thinking about colonialism and without thinking about how its affected interactions between the colonizer and colonized and what cultural effects it's had over time. He's right up to the point of talking about it as being embodied in one's affective relationship with forms of political violence, whether or not that entity has any real investment in destroying people or not. This is particularly in his references to Native Americans, but you also see it when he talks of Germany's relationship to Africa.

I'm perfectly fine with saying there is genocide and there are genocidal patterns of violence. I'm also fine with saying you can't have an anti-Black society and think that it's just about discrimination of individual groups without also thinking about how that type of discrimination has coded in it the language of genocide.

MT: Could you say more about the connection between anti-Black violence, discrimination, and the language of genocide? How is the language of genocide encoded in that language of discrimination?

AF: If we think about colonialism as not just an abstract set of political relations, but one that was enabled by slavery, and not just slavery abstractly, but African slavery, we have to think about it as a practice that brings in the world anti-Black practices. Those practices aren't just making possible a world that disadvantages Black people, it's a world that is anti-Black in its most essential sense, which is the elimination of Black people. It's a world in which Black people aren't just a second tier, or third tier, or an absolute bottom, as Derrick Bell will say. It is a world that is antagonistic to Blackness. It has a tense relationship to slavery because you need the slave, but the slave is completely disposable. This is why I would say that there's a discontinuity. Because that tension is one that is particular to slavery that's lost in Jim Crow. You don't distinctly need the labor of the slave, what's needed in Jim Crow is the disposability of the Black body. Sovereignty is only made real through that particular form of anti-Blackness. So we can say slavery is genocide, but then we have to then acknowledge that Jim Crow is genocidal in a different way. That may tell us a lot more currently about the status of these various types of violence and their relationship to the political that we couldn't see as genocidal without that difference.

MT: Recent footage emerged (on 9/20/19) of a Black woman being gang beaten by four men at a Pittsburgh gas station. Apparently, it started when she knocked over a display of chips *after* the owner refused to transfer her payment from a broken pump to a working one. The owner was not white, but it raised the question for me of what could animate that sense of violence as a legitimate form of recourse, particularly against the body of a woman. This seems to help explain that event. You've already presumed a certain sovereignty over the situation in a social order that makes this sovereignty possible.

AF: These are all spatial relations, so it's about property. She knocked over the chips. She's occupying space in a way that makes an immanent claim. The history is almost irrelevant, because they're occupying the space of rights, of that political sovereignty. You have to believe that there's a type of relation that goes into that. It dispenses with the idea that they're white supremacist, or they hate Black people, or they have an encoded doctrine working underneath everything. It's a form of relation that is present when they're able to exercise that sense of the public. Maybe on it's the small scale, it's when you're the owner of a convenience store, but it's also present at Trump rallies. This is why he's accurately describing them as a movement of love. It's a movement of White love, predicated on anti-Blackness.

MT: I explained to my wife that when I say, "it hasn't felt this way for a while" during the Trump presidency, I'm referring to the fact that there's an affect that's present which had dampened since I was young and in Louisiana. As soon as I stopped moving and changing jobs to settle in a place, this rhetoric up, and I feel it again. There's a present immanent threat that I'd thought I'd avoided.

To conclude, why is it important to use the language of genocide to make these connections?

AF: The term genocide neatly reframes the way we think about these things so that we're not thinking about a particular type of violence that is associated with the United States or with a particular racial relationship that lends itself to the language of sovereignty. You can't really talk about lynching without also thinking about a practice deeply wedded to colonialism, not an abstract colonialism, but anti-Black colonialism, and not just American form, which would particularize it. There are the acts that form our colonialism globally. They are also commensurate with the sensibility of that colonialism.

A world in which lynching practices are possible as they are in our world is a world in which they make sense. It's the sense of framing them as genocide that I'm trying to antagonize. We're shocked by lynchings because they're extreme. That's such a mediated relationship to something that allows us to be shocked by lynching, and that's how we make sense of it. When we start to frame it as genocide, that's what antagonizes the sense that we're making of them. That's the difference of taking an aesthetic approach to the problem rather than the rational. We're looking at what's going on at the level of the sensate. It cuts across that. It's not that people who are talking about lynching as

genocide are stretching the definition, we're hitting at the sensual level, at what doesn't make sense to them.

Purdue University and President Mitch Daniels: Confession of a Rare Creature

Leonard Harris
PURDUE UNIVERSITY

On July 5, 1852, the abolitionist Fredrick Douglas wondered what a July 4 celebration of American independence and democracy meant to America's enslaved or freed slave population. Facing a new year, I wonder what the past 150 years of my university's Great Leaps and contributions to intellectual life means to me?

I can never hope to be a named or endowed chair at my 150-year-old Research One University. I am a scholar. I am not an administrator nor a grantsman with a track record of receiving major awards from the government or private foundations. There is a trait that I have which guarantees I will not be seen as a rare creature, that is, an African American scholar. I am an African American scholar. This trait is undeniable. I have been graced with a lifetime achievement award for scholarship and academic leadership and awards for promoting American philosophy, Africana philosophy, and numerous recognitions bespeaking my contribution to *litteria humanitas*. Seven books to my name. I may not be qualified to be a named or endowed chair, but I would be like to believe it is possible based on my merits. Others, whether of African, Japanese, Indian, Chinese, or of white heritage, have been awarded named and endowed chairs for scholarship. What once were termed "honorary white" people in apartheid South Africa, (Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese, and Chinese) is a designation that eludes me: I am invisible in a world where the exotic 'other' can be granted status but the native, in this case, African American, must be a singular racial kind and fit the appropriate stereotypes. It is only African Americans at my university that must be an administrator, in addition to meritorious scholarship, that have been awarded a named or endowed position. Wealthy African American slave owners were occasionally treated as honorary whites in the ante-bellum south (Negro, but not really, a sort of honorary white for convince); white women slave owners were occasionally as vicious, ruthless and powerful as men and accorded special status at slave auctions or in court (women but not really, a sort of honorary male for convenience). If I were the absolute best in my field I might have a chance. I cannot just be great, like my white and honorary white colleague, I must be really rare. Sometimes I think I am invisible because I am not sufficiently productive. If I suffer from a multitude of micro-stresses that draw my mind away from scholarship and add to my likelihood of early onset high blood pressure or ulcers, none of this can be neatly establish and can never be compensated. My shortfall in productivity gains me nothing but additional invisibility. Even if I am not a rare creature, I am not sufficiently unique. Despite the fact that there are, by any count, very few tenured African American Professors in Philosophy (4.3

percent in 2016), no matter how rare or accomplished, my kind in any field have only been awarded at my university a named or endowed chair if they have two jobs: in addition to any scholastic or academic merit, they must also be a senior administrator. For all the money, promotion of the university as a leading institution of higher learning and dedication to enhancing its image by the alumni of my university, I, nor anyone of my kind, in 150 years, have ever received a dime or the benefits of honors for their scholastic endeavors *par excellence*, simpliciter.

During a conversation with African American student the President of my university, Purdue, Mitch Daniels, on November 20, talked about recruiting minority faculty and told students that "At the end of this week, I'll be recruiting one of the rarest creatures in America—a leading, I mean a really leading, African-American scholar." My president has since apologized (December 4): "I retract and apologize for a figure of speech I used in a recent impromptu dialogue with students," Daniels wrote in a letter sent to the NAACP, Purdue's Black Caucus of Faculty and Staff, Latino Faculty/Staff Association, the Black Student Union and the Latino Student Union. "My reference was in praise of a specific individual and the unique and exciting possibility of bringing that particular individual to Purdue," Daniels wrote. "The word in question was I chosen and imprecise and, in retrospect, too capable of being misunderstood. I accept accountability for the poor judgment involved."

I have every reason to believe his comment was made without malicious intentions and that his apology was sincere. So what if the president's intentions were honorable and apology sincere? Unintentional consequences are consequences, nonetheless. The spread of stereotypes perpetuates harm. They cause emotional distress that too often influences loss of hope, depression and thereby increased blood pressure and onslaught of ulcers.

I wanted my picture to be on the front cover of my book, *A Philosophy Born of Struggle: Leonard Harris Reader* (Bloombury Publishing Company, 2020). The publishing company refused. After three months of arguing, and their willingness to compromise and put my picture on the back of the book, I relented. One reason they had for not wanting my picture on the cover was compelling: potential buyers would assume that a Black face meant the contents were for, about, and ultimately only created by an essential racial type, a Black being. If the cover had a white person's face, buyers would assume that the contents had a general application and an impartial source. The marketing department had, in fact, done their homework. Stereotypes cause financial, personal and social harm. Stereotypes are not innocent images. Their authors are not innocent.

I teach the same number and types of courses as first year assistant professors in my department. I have access to the same support for research, travel or contribution to the university as other teachers. I do not get to be considered innocent and I do not get to be considered an exemplary teacher if I use degrading, demeaning or insulting stereotypes to characterize my students in my class when I use examples of ethical problems. I get reprimanded and I am not likely to get a substantive salary increase despite

whatever other accomplishments I may achieve.

Another dollar to the university's division responsible for promoting diversity will never fix the problem. Only senior administrators, professors, named and endowed chairs decide who will be named and endowed chairs. The white and honorary white people decide. Their decisions, for 150 years, have been pretty predictable.

I teach a course in philosophic anthropology that features concepts of racism by African American and Third World philosophers. The authors proffer different and competing concepts of racism. Racism is defined by J. Garcia and Anthony Appiah, for example, as malicious intentions, ill-wills toward the well-being of others or irrational reasoning. Angela Davis and Tommy Curry define racism by social structures and ill-wills or the interplay of class and prejudice. I define racism as a form of necro-being. Racism, on my account, is a way of killing and forcing persons to live egregiously facing death, preventing persons from being born and stealing assets needed to sustain healthy living. Intentions are nearly completely irrelevant on this definition. All the definitions of racism, however, consider it misguided to promote undue stereotypes, especially by authorities that are responsible for leading all of us all. When the authority falters, it is not like the failure of persons without public personas and responsibility. Their failure is especially egregious. To whom much is given, much is expected.

The slave and freed slaves in 1852 could only hope that the future would be radically different than the past.

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