

## Loving Wisdom and the Effort to Make Philosophy “Unsafe”

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### Philosophy and White Spaces

As a black embodied philosopher, there is a peculiar sensation that one gets while walking through academic spaces dominated by white bodies. I have especially felt this peculiar sensation while attending philosophy conferences – the American Philosophical Association variety. There is the complex and multifaceted sensation of being drowned in a sea of whiteness. In every direction, there are white bodies moving and discoursing with ease, with no particular sense of being out of place or not at home. The motif of “home” is an important and germane one as it suggests the sense of familiarity, safety, and being among those with whom one shares something intimate, something familial. Within such a context, one feels relaxed and unperturbed. One might say that the spaces at such conferences, for white bodies at least, are inviting and alluring. To be white within such spaces is perceived as commonplace. One is fully engaged, pre-reflectively so, with the mannerisms and etiquette of white social bonding. But what is the frame of intelligibility that creates the conditions for the possibility of white bodies inhabiting such spaces, owning such spaces – spaces that go unmarked as white?

Part of the structure of this white *lived* space is that it is precisely structured by whiteness, a norm that has a transcendental feature. Whiteness is the historical transcendental normative framework that renders phenotypic whiteness invisible, unremarkable, mundane, and unnoticeable; it “magically” reconfigures white skin into a site of *the* human as such. As Sara Ahmed writes, “There must be white bodies (it must be possible to see such bodies *as* white bodies), and yet the power of whiteness is that we don’t see those bodies as white bodies. We just see them as bodies.”<sup>1</sup> The historical transcendental normative status of whiteness is *productive* of monochromatic sameness, a sameness that does not call attention to its monochromaticity.

Whiteness is *productive* of white identity formation, shaping how one sees and how one *does not* see the world; it is the background orientation according to which whites come to construct what is meaningful, meaningless, epistemologically credible, beautiful, sinister, etc. Yet, whiteness simultaneously covers over or obfuscates the problematic ways in which it functions as a site of power and hegemony. Whiteness is not only productive of conditions of exclusion, excluding people who look like me, but productive of the very conditions for racial difference. What this means, then, is that so-called benign philosophy conferences, places where predominantly white male philosophers come to do philosophy, to pontificate about matters that *they* deem epistemologically and metaphysically important, are actually social spaces that have been socially constructed for them. The space “calls,” as it were, to them like my computer keys “call” to me to tap on them, to complete the operation of typing. My fingers are mobilized by my glance toward the keys. The point here is that there is a dialectical transaction that is smooth and uninterrupted vis-à-vis my computer. My body and the computer feel like they are made for each other. We complete each other. So, too, within the context of predominantly

white philosophy conferences, white bodies move with ease, they complement and complete each other, they bond with each other. Their bodies are mobilized by the entire scene: tweed jackets, bow ties, pipes, white hair, white skin, books on white philosophers like Kant and Hegel written by other white philosophers for white consumption, contorted white faces deep in reflection, looks of perplexity, slight hints of wine and cheese breath, and strained eyes red with intensity. The entire philosophical performance, with all of its props, constitutes a site of effective (white) history, a history that points to a continuous chain of white men “jerking off” with wild gesticulations, hands flailing while delineating some supposedly grand philosophical distinction or while articulating a philosophical system that eventually comes to elide its human face. Trained to do philosophy within the context of such normative spaces, young white philosophers (men and women) come to inhabit academic spaces without question, without critical self-reflexivity, without readjusting their white gazes.

I have often received uncomfortable looks, perhaps looks of incomprehension, from white philosophy graduate students when I share with them that I personally feel ill at ease at predominantly white philosophy conferences. It is at this point that I attempt to unsettle their sense of themselves by asking them to reflect critically and honestly on the fact that they have never felt ill at ease at such conferences. The objective is to use that fact as a teaching moment, a pedagogical point of intervention. There is often a pause, perhaps an uneasy, indeed, unsafe, moment of self-revelation, a newly configured neuronal link that their white bodies are *not* prepared to undergo. However, I want them to begin to feel strange to themselves. I want them to reflect on the *absence* of any feeling of alienation at predominantly white philosophical conferences and to treat that absence as having a deeper meaning. I want them to question their sense of feeling safe within that space, their sense of being wanted within that space, their sense of being complicit in creating that space.

Finally, we come to the collective agreement that their sense of being at ease has a great deal to do with their white bodies. What was previously axiomatic, a mere given, has become dubious, fraudulent, and unstable. They come to understand that their sense of being at home at predominately white philosophical conferences is a function of their status as normative. Once the admission has been made, there is no return to the chimera of white innocence, though there is always the seduction of bad faith, of eliding what one has now come to understand about one’s social reality. For the moment, though, they begin to feel the gravitas of their raced (white) existential predicament, the reality that their fleshy white bodies are agents and vehicles of white power. This revelation deepens their sense of themselves *as white*. They begin to feel their whiteness as a weight, a burden to dismantle. Seeing themselves as Cartesian subjectivities, self-transparent identities, there is suddenly a feeling of loss, a feeling of dispossession. Why dispossession? They have thought of themselves as being in possession of themselves, of knowing who they are. Imagine what this is like. It creates vertigo and self-doubt, but not the sort of self-doubt or “dispossession” that Rene Descartes felt as he systematically doubted his existence and the external world. Rather, my white students’ sense of dispossession drives home precisely the reality of the external world, the reality of white others, the reality of a world and a history of continued white violence, a world that has

already claimed and constituted their identities. They begin to feel opaque. This feeling of opaqueness is precisely a manifestation of an awareness that whiteness (as the transcendental norm) is the condition of their formation, is the condition of dispossession, is the condition that links them to heteronomous white networks and matrices.

**Part of what I have been able to create is an unsafe space. Why “unsafe”? And why would anyone want to create spaces within academia that are unsafe? Part of the problem is how we think about the notion of “safety” within academic contexts. Safety can signify a lack of courage on the part of teachers and students to question the presuppositions of their area of inquiry, to challenge the maleness, or whiteness, or western-centric dimensions of such areas.** The creation and maintenance of safe spaces within such contexts results in a form of intellectual disservice. Such safe spaces perpetuate chains of power and control that truncate the potential for developing radical imaginations within students. Such spaces also militate against the possibility of creating radically subversive democratic spaces of critical dialogue. Given the whiteness of the field of philosophy, we need troublemakers, those who are engaged in challenging the safety of not asking certain questions of philosophical texts, the safety of philosophical classrooms, and the safety of philosophical spaces where white bodies gather. Unsafe, then, within these contexts, partly involves *marking* whiteness, calling it out, rendering it strange, and creating spaces where white students feel unsafe. In short, safe spaces within academic classrooms can function as barriers against calling whiteness into question. The mutually reinforcing power of whiteness and the valorization of such a *whitewashed* conception of safety can function as an act of violence against students of color. After all, they need to raise certain questions about whiteness. Not to raise critical questions about whiteness, its power and privilege, that is, not to co-create a classroom space that is unsafe, has detrimental implications for Black students’ understanding of the world, their epistemic integrity, and their very lives. Within this context, then, safety for whites implies being unsafe for students of color. As Zeus Leonardo and Ronald K. Porter note, “This does not *equate* with creating a hostile situation but to acknowledge that pedagogies that tackle racial power will be most uncomfortable for those who benefit from that power.”<sup>2</sup>

My objective is to make important links between the power of taking risks and how this belies safe academic spaces. Safe academic spaces create an atmosphere of fear that often results in the atrophy of critical imagination. **Philosophy ought to have as one of its goals the formation of troublemakers, those who refuse to make a pact with mediocrity. Teaching at a predominantly white university, I want my white students to undergo a deep existential state of *aporia* (or perplexity), not just the ability to recognize formal contradictions.** I dare them to put their white selves on the line, to rethink the conditions of their formation – even as this project cannot itself be completed. In this way, their membership in the field itself is subjected to critical questioning. Raising such significant meta-philosophical questions helps my white students to map complex ideological coordinates that link them to historical forces that they may never have come to interrogate. Loving wisdom, doing philosophy, becomes a risky endeavor. To love wisdom within academic spaces that are microcosms of empire building requires living the life of a gadfly, an irritant that refuses to engage in psychophantic worship,

disciplinary purification (for example, keeping one's field white and male), and the valorization of scholarship that is bereft of what Cornel West might say is "the funk of life."<sup>3</sup> Yet, the funk of life is filled with danger.

### **Being a Black Philosopher, Playing with Danger, and Doing it My Way**

The funk of life defines who I am. I am a Black philosopher who lives within the belly of white America. I am a Black male who might one day reach for his wallet and be killed in the wink of an eye by some white police officer eager to serve his country against my Blackness. To be Black in America is always already to play with danger. This is what it partly means to live a funky life. It is a life grounded in the everyday. It is a life that refuses not to see the ugliness of human existence, its brutality, its smell of putrefaction, deep disappointments, and existential malaise. This, after all, is the story of Black life in America. It is a life fused with a blues sensibility, one that keeps track of the tragic and yet moves forward, seeking a tomorrow that is never guaranteed, and carving out a space of survival through the sheer power of hope.

For bodily survival and psychic integrity, Black people have had to walk on the precipice of danger. Doing philosophy in Black is one site of danger. The field itself can cost psychic integrity. In fact, for some, it may very well cost them their identities as Black. In a world in which Blackness is still thought of as bestial and continues to signify intellectual inferiority, some Black philosophers may opt to be white. Refusing to explore race philosophically, even denying its *philosophical* relevance, they lose themselves at philosophical conferences, attending those sessions where the "real" philosophical stuff is being discussed, avoiding those who look like them, and always feeling that sense of pride granted by white philosophers who have come to see them as honorary whites. My point is that given western philosophy's historical and current status as white, the act of loving wisdom, for some Black bodies, may carry a seductive yet deadly fascination that ends in profound acts of self-loathing.

Black philosophers are also dangers to others, to those who would attempt to maintain the "purification" (whiteness) of philosophical spaces, philosophical texts, philosophical styles of engagement, and philosophical modes of pedagogy. When I challenge my white philosophy graduate students to think about race, racism, and whiteness, I have already begun to instigate danger and risk. **By calling the whiteness of philosophy into question, as I have argued above, one is attempting to show how white power and privilege work. Showing how one's white students are complicit with white power and privilege can ignite a flood of white denial, defensiveness, white charges of hating white people and all things white. After all, one is not dealing with Platonic Forms or philosophical conceptions of space and time or the mind/body distinction.** One is calling upon white students to examine, and to do so unflinchingly, the implications of past and current philosophical practices on their innermost selves; one is asking them to take a long and hard look at how their own practices perpetuate the racist silences and assumptions in a field that they have hitherto constructed as "divine." Like religious zealotry, philosophical zealots can be dangerous.

Against the backdrop of philosophy's whiteness, I have had to define my career and my identity. I have been warned with "good intentions" *not* to do African-American philosophy for fear that I become too narrow. What about all of those philosophers who focus their philosophical energies on logic? Aren't they engaging in myopia? One soon discovers that warnings of this sort were not necessarily about my being pegged, but about the perceived "fluff" of African American philosophical thought. As a Black philosopher dealing with issues around invisibility, power, white supremacy, oppression, embodiment, racial identity, sociality, questions of race and epistemic authority, etc., one is always already linked both to a disciplinary matrix and yet linked to a *lived* history in terms of which Black bodies have actually suffered under the pain of white oppression, endured white supremacy, been denied epistemic authority, and rendered invisible. African American philosophy grows out of the crucible of Black existential struggle and resistance.

As a Black body in philosophy, I am already met with certain challenges. To what extent do my white students take me seriously? Do they see me as a fake? Am I an anomaly, perhaps a freak? How do they reconcile a Black man who has taken it upon himself to comprehend and teach material that is so difficult that they find it nearly beyond comprehension? Do I stand before them as "off-Black," as not too Black, as not really Black? In my case, many of my white students have *never* had a Black teacher in their lives – let alone one with a Ph.D. in philosophy. Indeed, they have never witnessed a Black body in *any* position of authority. One can only imagine what they have to do to accommodate this new reality, this "empirical absurdity." If one combines this with the fact that many of my white students come from small towns where they have never had close and enriching relationships with people of color or where there was only one Black family or two Black students in the entire graduating class, this creates a powerful context for racial fantasies, myths, and curiosity saturated with a dose of transfixed amazement—sort of like looking at a monkey ride a bicycle.

In many ways, Black philosophers have to do things *their way*. As I became more critically reflexive and cognizant of the paucity of works dealing with themes that grow out of the Africana life-world, the need to create philosophical texts that were steeped in this life-world and that spoke to this life-world became all the more urgent. This situation calls for agency. *Doing it my way*, then, is about daring to think in ways that locate intellectual gaps, ways that can instigate a desire or an ambition on the part of Black students to study philosophy or on the part of white students to rethink their philosophical commitments and sensibilities. I know that I have been successful when younger Black philosophers approach me and are thankful for some edited book that I conceived and helped to place within the universe of ideas. I remember once being approached by a young Black philosopher who, with great sincerity, said how he was absolutely convinced to study philosophy only after reading one of my books.<sup>4</sup> I also recall a young Black male who wanted to study philosophy with me. We talked about his options. I was impressed. As we ended our conversation and I began to walk him out of my office, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a copy of my book, *Black Bodies White Gazes*. Imagine. He was sitting there talking with me for about an hour with my book (263 pages if you count the index) stuffed in his pocket. "Oh, Dr. Yancy, will you sign

this book?" The emotional impact was hard to contain. The fact that he had stuffed the book in his pocket was all the more powerful. The act signified how important the book was to him. *He held it close.*

The upshot of this is that I must do philosophy *my way*. However, it is not just about creating intellectual capital. It is about making one's presence felt in the world in the realm of ideas and *lived* bodies. Seeing the impact of this on others, one comes to appreciate the result, especially when the impact changes a life. As a result, the stakes have been raised in ways that I could not have imagined. But even if only a single life is to be touched and changed through one's writing and pedagogy, does this not encourage the very best that we can offer, the most critical, honest, and insightful that we can be?

My pedagogy and my writings are dangerous and risky. I recently discovered this when one listener to a local radio station, a white male, heard me talk about whiteness and decided to write to the Archbishop of the city of Pittsburgh. He complained that I should not be allowed to teach at a Catholic University. Challenging whiteness is a risky and dangerous business. He wanted my livelihood. He thought that I was unfit to teach white students. Yet, the fruits of fearless speech can have incredibly liberating effects. There are times when fearless speech, accompanied by fearless listening, can move the proverbial mountain. *For now, I will continue to do things my way.*

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2\\_2004/ahmed\\_declarations.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm) (accessed 10/10/10).

<sup>2</sup> Zeus Leonardo and Ronald K. Porter, "Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian Theory of 'safety' in Race Dialogue," *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 13, No. 2, July 2010, 139–140.

<sup>3</sup> Cornel West, "Afterword: Philosophy and the Funk of Life," in George Yancy, ed. *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publisher, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See George Yancy, *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations*, New York: Routledge, 1998.