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Not for the Faint of Heart:
Becoming an Antiracist Philosopher in a Society Polarized
by Critical Race Theory

Abstract:

This paper examines the polemical nature of anti-racist education and discourse in America today. On one side of this issue are those who think of the efforts toward inclusion, diversity, and the pursuit of social justice in academia as serving positive ends. On the other side are those who oppose and vilify such efforts as evidence of the destructive ethos of liberal education. This has led to a situation where universities and schools across the country have seen professors and teachers, including philosophers, experience backlash for speaking seriously and courageously about confronting the problem of racism in society. One recent example of this anomaly is the kind of faux outrage or moral panic that drives the hysteria against Critical Race Theory, an inquiry that examines the intersection of race and law in the United States, as well as unearthing the reality of structural racism in America, often disguised in the mainstream liberal approaches to racial justice. This faux moral panic has been used by legislatures across the country, as the *raison d'être*, to pass bans and enforce policies or rules that restricts how professors (including philosophers), and teachers can talk about race, systemic racism, structural oppression, or the problem of racial injustice in the classroom. In this paper, I explore how this polemical situation creates significant challenges and unique possibilities for the discourse of philosophy, especially for those who are interested in becoming antiracist philosophers, in the context of such legal rules and restrictions. This is not for the faint of heart.

Keywords:

anti-racist philosopher, Critical Race Theory (CRT), diversity, philosophy, racism

Introduction

In contemporary social discourse, there is a raging debate concerning the relevance of raising questions about the reality or problem of racism in educational contexts and whether the legacy of racism in the United States should be taught in schools. Apart from the fact that this debate has further deepened the division within the social fabric in the United States, it has also unearthed the most grotesque forms of bickering across ideological lines that, in certain contexts, snowballs into the normalization of hate as rhetoric in public spaces and physical altercation. It is a signification of the pulse of Americans as it pertains to shaping the trajectory of history and unraveling the complex problems of the present moment. The hysteria over Critical Race Theory (CRT) aptly demonstrates the level of the polarization on the question of the relevance of social justice effort in society today. A notable example, in this respect, is the polarizing position held by advocates of the 1619 project and the 1776 project. The 1619 project is a political and educational project by *The New York Times* that is designed to frame America's history in the context of the original sin – slavery. It is designed to support educators who are concerned that key facts about slavery and its impact on the U.S. have largely been glossed over, minimized, or omitted altogether in school curricula.¹

It is primarily focused on educating people on the consequential nature of slavery for both economic, social, legal, and political progress in America, while centering on the contributions of black Americans in this narrative. The 1619 project propagates one of the central tenets² of CRT, the notion that the legal system in the United States has not lived up to the principle of equal protection under the law, especially for black Americans. Rather, it continues to ensure their persecution and mass incarceration. The project is both concerned with the emphasis of this CRT tenet as a fact of American history and a commitment to ensuring that the teaching of this historical fact is not expunged from curricula in educational settings in the United States. This project has been widely criticized by those who are of a different political orientation, and disagree that the history of racism in America, from the institutionalization of the political economy of slavery to the present, should be taught within educational settings across the nation. It is both an attempt to brazenly deny the reality of the racial dehumanization and genocidal violence against African Americans, and other communities of color in the United States, and a denial that the teaching of this historical fact has any educational value whatsoever. This is the inspiration

1) López, Molnar, Johnson, Patterson, Ward, and Kumashiro, "Understanding the Attacks."

2) I consider it important to expand on the tenets of CRT here further. Since I have only emphasized the tenets I judged to be directly relevant to the focus or theme of my paper. Those who are CRT scholars subscribe to a number of tenets that Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, identify as hallmarks of CRT such as: the belief that racism is normal or ordinary, not aberrant, in US society; the view on interest convergence or material determinism as the major force driving conversations about equal justice initiatives; the view that race is a social construction with significant implications for the materiality of non-white people in the United States; and the voice or counter-narrative of members of marginalized groups as a framework for imagining racial/social justice (Ladson-Billings, "What it is not"). Cabrera expands on this, arguing that beginning with law, the first tenet (racism as normal) considers racism as a structured part of everyday life in the U.S. as opposed to an anomaly or a function of a few racist individuals (Cabrera, "Where is the Racial Theory in Critical Race Theory?: A Constructive Criticism of the Critics."). So, it is not about individual persons, but about the entire social fabric or social system. The second tenet which has to do with interest convergence argues that the interests of non-white people will only be advanced to the extent that they also advance white interests. Put differently, the interests of non-white peoples will always be sacrificed in place of white interests. The third tenet argues that race is socially constructed and therefore should not be essentialized (i.e., that there are no inherent inferior/superior characteristics of any racial group). There are two other tenets that are sometimes included in CRT legal analyses. The permanence of racism tenet argues that racism is an endemic, permanent feature of society, especially when one considers how the historical structures of inequality in America are still reinforcing the systems of inequality in the present. Additionally, Whiteness as property, is a two-fold thesis. First, the U.S. legal system is founded upon property rights. Second, Whiteness has historically, and continues to, function as a form of property that benefits whites over and above non-white peoples in the United States.

that drives the 1776 project, a right-wing political action committee, established with the sole aim of offering a counter-narrative, albeit a dubious and fallacious narrative of American history that whitewashes the reality of racism. The advocate of this project describes its main goal as focused on reforming the public education system by rejecting any claims about the existence of racism, both historically and contemporaneously, while promoting “patriotism and pride” in American history. They are also clear about their objective to “abolish Critical Race Theory and The 1619 Project” from the public-school curriculum across the United States.

The attempt to expunge discussions of racism or strategies from public school curriculum, as catalogued in the 1776 project, is not a mere theoretical exercise without any implications for public policy. Today, conservative state legislatures across the country have invented laws to ban CRT from being taught in public schools because they have bought into the narrative that its central goal is to demonize white people as bigoted and portray America without its all too familiar garb of patriotism, flawlessness, and exceptionalism ideals. Republican-led legislatures in states such as Arkansas, Idaho, Tennessee, Texas, and Oklahoma have passed bans, with some restricting the teaching of critical race theory in public colleges, in addition to lower-level classrooms.³ In response to such laws, which are contrary to the spirit of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas, many institutions are now cancelling classes on race theory, including those that critically engages with the problem of structural or systematic racism in America.

Despite the rhetoric and anti-CRT policymaking, few of those (including the law makers) supporting these policies and extreme measures, likely have any understanding of what CRT actually is. This is not surprising, because the arguments made are not actually about critiquing CRT; they are about controlling public discourse and the devising of false narratives to achieve nefarious political ends. Historically, race based right-wing attacks and anti-intellectual denial of America’s racist history such as these have a clear political purpose. The contemporary attacks on CRT and the 1619 project represent an effort to make CRT and pedagogical approaches to social justice, a fear-inducing symbolic foil to help stoke division and to galvanize people holding a wide variety of racial, cultural, and political grievances to support far-right politicians and their policies. As such, attacks on CRT can be understood as part of a larger ideological effort to delegitimize historically accurate presentations of race and racism in American history; to thwart attempts by members of marginalized groups to participate fully in civic life and to retain political power.⁴ Such is the reality of the times that we live in. It is a reality that is shaped by political expediency rather than the courage to speak about and confront the dark, uncomfortable, disgusting underbelly of American racism. These laws and negative responses/attacks mouthed against CRT today are designed to avoid the difficult and deeply problematic of race/racism in America. As Lati⁵ rightly observes, although CRT is an intellectual tool set for examining systemic racism with roots in academia, the framework has become a flash point as Republican officials across the country seek to prevent it from being taught in schools.⁶

3) See the following for example: Texas legislature, House Bill 3979: <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=87R&Bill=HB3979>; Arkansas Senate Bill 627: <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Bills/FTPDocument?path=%2FBills%2F2021R%2FPublic%2FSB627.pdf>; and State of Oklahoma, House Bill 2988; http://webserver1.lsb.state.ok.us/cf_pdf/2021-22%20INT/hB/HB2988%20INT.PDF

4) López, et. al., “Understanding the Attacks.”

5) Lati, “What is Critical Race Theory?”

6) Given that CRT is a theoretical, analytical framework useful primarily to academic researchers, at first glance it seems an odd target for pundits, Republican officials, think tanks, wealthy donors, foundations, and legislators associated with the ideological right to attack. Taken at face value, the demand that CRT not be taught in schools is absurd, since it would be hard to find a K-12 school that teaches CRT to begin with. It seems clear, therefore, that what is being offered is not a critique of the actual substance of CRT. Instead, ideologues are using CRT as a frightening symbol to intensify a collection of cultural and political fears related to race, racism, and the prospect of an increasing number of citizens from marginalized groups participating in the democratic process (López, et.al., “Understanding the Attacks”).

One sad reality about the attacks on CRT as a critical method of exposing the structures of racism as embedded within the American social fabric and legal system is that it is constructed on versions of *what it is not* rather than *what it is*. So, what then is CRT (Critical Race Theory)? CRT is a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines the practice of interrogating the role of race and racism in society that emerged in the legal academy and spread to other fields of scholarship.

As a scholarly movement, Critical Race Theory (CRT) began in the early 1970s with the early writing of Derrick Bell, an African-American civil rights lawyer and the first black to teach at Harvard Law School. Writing about interest convergence as a means of understanding Western racial history and the conflict of interest in civil rights litigation (the lawyer or litigation fund wants a breakthrough; the client or her group, better schools), Bell was one of a small but growing group of scholars and minority activists who realized that the gains of the heady civil rights era had stalled and, indeed, were being rolled back. Traditional methods such as litigation, exhortation, and marching were yielding fewer and fewer gains. New approaches were necessary to cope with the less sympathetic public and the more nuanced forms of racism that were developing.⁷

Following this path, to find new critical frameworks for understanding the structures of inequality embedded in society (and the educational value of such critical approaches), researchers have used CRT as a theoretical and interpretive mode to analyze how racial inequality is woven into legal and social systems and negatively affects people of color in their schools, policy development, government offices, the criminal justice system, and countless other parts of life. A central premise is that racism is a normal and ordinary part of our society, not an aberration. So, the understanding that our world is color-conscious, not colorblind, should invariably reveal that the law and the social structures in society, must be as well.⁸

A central focus of CRT is the examination of both historical and contemporary legal thoughts and doctrines from the viewpoint of law's role in shaping society, unravelling the attributions of schemas of power and practices of subordination domination of peoples within a given social context. Delgado and Stefancic⁹ consider CRT as a movement inspired by "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power." A common view of CRT is that it is an academic framework centered on the idea that racism is systemic and not a mere reflection of the moral flaws of individuals in hegemonic social frameworks. It is important to note that even though CRT began within the field of legal studies, its application has broadened over the years to other areas of human inquiry. For instance, many scholars in the field of education consider themselves critical race theorists who use CRT's ideas to understand issues of equity, injustice, school discipline, and hierarchy as well as controversies over curriculum and history and IQ and achievement testing.¹⁰

Crenshaw,¹¹ puts the task of CRT more pointedly thus:

Although Critical Race Theory scholarship differs in object, argument, accent, and emphasis, it is nevertheless unified by two common interests. The first is to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America,

7) Delgado and Stefancic, "Past, Present, and Future," 490.

8) Wing, "Is there a Future," 47.

9) Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3.

10) Ibid.

11) Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas. *The Key Writings*.

and, in particular, to examine the relationship between that social structure and professed ideals such as “the rule of law” and “equal protection.” The second is a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to *change* it.¹²

So, much of the antagonisms and outrage against CRT are generated from either a knee-jerk dismissal of fundamental goals of the theory (ensuring that America measures up to its ideals of fairness, equity, and justice for all) or a profound (intentional in some cases) misunderstanding of the substance of the theory. Such misunderstanding is often driven by the tendency of people to unreflectingly and thoughtlessly believe what they read/hear on social media, including the prejudiced and half-baked opinions mouthed by political figures who are expected to be responsibly representing the people. In such a situation, not many people are even willing to find out the truth about CRT since both liberal and conservative news media commentators and social media influencers (even when they are mostly ill-conceived) are now considered as the ultimate sources for *what is true* – where what is true is merely construed as what conforms with preformed assumptions.

The irony of all this hyped outrage against CRT and the efforts by these law makers to ban this theory and expunge it from public school curricula across the country, is that it reveals the correctness and appropriateness of CRT’s assessment of the failures of American law in terms of how it is used to mask injustice: control and construct what should be deemed as reality. On this view, the law and the legal processes are seen as fundamentally tainted and irrevocably entangled in the problem of structural racism in America. Thus, the attacks on CRT in the form of legislation and policies banning CRT reveals how the law in America, historically and contemporaneously, has been framed to align with white interest over and above the interest of other minority groups. This is what is referred to as *the interest convergence principle* within CRT – the idea that legal amendments and interventions have always been made only when it is in the best interest of the white racial group. In this case, the white Republican politicians banning CRT believe, albeit misguidedly, would “protect” white students from learning about how the history of slavery and the systems of inequality and oppression built into the foundations of the United States, from its very inception, continues to inform and build social realities even until this day. What makes such approaches to legal remedies or interventions consequential is the idea that it is often applied to subordinate the constitutional interests of those who are outside of the dominant white racial group. These are some of the truths that these legal and communicative efforts are devised to evade. The upshot of this debate about whether CRT promotes injustice or antagonizes “American heroism” is a subterfuge for a more deeply rooted problem of intolerance, and the attempt to suppress substantive discussions about the complicated and troubling history of race and racism in America within and outside of the classroom. It is worthy of note that this debate generated around CRT is something that has developed from a larger symptom of intolerance regarding the issues of race and racism that is now manifesting in different areas of human inquiry. This polarity about CRT and the question of the appropriateness of the discourse of race within educational contexts is also present within professional philosophy today, especially exemplified by the problem of diversity in philosophy.

To Be Is to Be Perceived: Philosophy’s Diversity Problem

To my mind, the first steps one must take when trying to solve any problem is to identify and define that problem. Philosophy has a diversity problem. This problem largely stems from the Eurocentric framing of what (or ought to) constitute the substance of the discipline and the privileging of ideas grounded in white-

12) Ibid., xiii.

ness – philosophy as whiteness and whiteness as philosophy. Most of the books on the history of philosophy published over the last hundred and fifty years contains much the same story. The story that philosophy arose suddenly in ancient Greece over two thousand years ago, when Thales theorized that water was the fundamental principle of nature, followed by other naturalist thinkers or cosmologists who propounded different elements as the absolute substance of reality. For the last two-thousand years, the story goes, philosophy has been cultivated by other European thinkers, most notably those from Germany, France, Denmark, and Britain, with American thinkers also contributing over the last two centuries. The clear implication is that anything worthy of the name philosophy occurred in the west (western modernity), more particularly in western Europe and America.¹³ This is the story that is continually being told in philosophy even though there are notable philosophical writings and research citing previously ignored archeological, cultural, and historical evidence that questions the veracity of this narrative. For instance, Grant¹⁴ argues that the first written evidence of anything that to me might appropriately be characterized as philosophy appears in the two great contemporaneous river-valley civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, commencing sometime around 3500 to 3000 BC and has nothing to do with Europe. In this work, Grant elaborated on how Early Egyptian philosophers made significant contributions toward a better understanding of nature and reality before the Greeks suddenly or mysteriously showed up on the scene.

However, the research by James,¹⁵ which resulted in the publication of *The Stolen Legacy*,¹⁶ shows that the incursion of the Greeks into the philosophical scene around 600 BC was not mysterious. He provided historical evidence to support the thesis that the now well-known Greek philosophers were students, studying the mystery systems in early Egypt. For instance, Plato did not profess to have originated his philosophical thoughts entirely himself. He expanded what he gathered from the Ionic philosophers, from Egypt, from Babylon, from Pythagoras.¹⁷ James showed that the foundation of Greek philosophy is traceable to the thought systems developed by ancient Egyptians, that western intellectuals had falsely attributed to the Greeks. This is a position that has been corroborated by other historians and theologians and naturalist philosophers. Hord and Lee¹⁸ contend that given available archeological evidence, philosophy began in ancient Egypt (Kemet). They argued that:

This should come as no surprise for, regardless of the extent of Egypt's influence on Greek philosophy, it is only reasonable to suppose that reflective thought about the primordial questions of being and fundamental realities of the human community would begin where civilization as we define it begins. Archaeological evidence in Africa reveals that philosophical reflection was born at least five thousand years ago in Egypt.¹⁹

13) Guess, "Social Construction of Whiteness"; Almedia, "Race-Based Epistemologies"; Strickland, "How Western Philosophy Became Racist"; and Radney, "Why African American Philosophy Matters."

14) Grant, *A History of Natural Philosophy*.

15) James, *Stolen Legacy*.

16) I am aware that some of the materials cited on this issue (included the work by George James) are controversial and generate debate among philosophers across different philosophical traditions. But, I have included them here to acknowledge the fact that even the debate that these works engender, in and of itself, constitutes their philosophical relevance. Philosophy, by its very nature, is an inquiry that thrives on disagreement. Some other resources or materials that supports James's view are: Olela, "African Foundations of Greek Philosophy"; Obenga, *African Philosophy*; and Bernal, *Black Athena*, vols. 1 and 2.

17) Grant, *A History of Natural Philosophy*.

18) Hord and Lee, "I am Because We Are: An Introduction to Black Philosophy."

19) *Ibid.*, 17–18

Edkins confirms that “philosophy did not begin with the Greeks.²⁰ There were philosophers before them in Western Asia and in Egypt.” This view is also supported by Davis²¹ who provided historical evidence to substantiate the claim that the Greeks were conversant with the Egyptians and got much of their education and knowledge among them. Pythagoras, Solon, Plato and several others, their most renowned philosophers travelled into Egypt to get knowledge and wisdom. In the face of such contradictory evidence, the famed story of philosophy continues to be told – centering whiteness, specifically the ideas and thoughts developed in western Europe and America.

The formation of the philosophy canon has been constructed in such a way that knowledge ascription and knowledge within areas of inquiry (such as logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and the history of philosophical thinking) are mostly framed as problems that arise only within a narrow cultural framework.

Most non-western philosophies that used to form part of books on philosophy’s history have increasingly been excluded outright, while those that remained have often been treated superficially or dismissively or included only for their value in explaining the development of western ideas. Whether consciously or not, the picture that is often painted in textbooks on the history of philosophy is that philosophy has been an exclusively western concern, with any ideas and doctrines of any value – and thus worthy of recording in a history of philosophy – developed by whites.²²

Sometimes, this practice of exclusion in philosophy is grounded in the language of abstraction and axiomatic categories that privileges western ways of thinking and knowing and the defense of boundary-making for the sustenance of the profession. The tendency by the professional discipline of philosophy to adhere to professional boundaries and academic self-understandings, despite its apparent failings, is what West²³ refers to as the evasion of philosophy. Some philosophers have levelled serious criticisms against philosophy for this problem of exclusion. For instance Xiang²⁴ argues that current mainstream western academic philosophy’s erasure of philosophical ideas developed in other cultures is premised on a fear of the racial *Other*. He regards this as “a continuation of the pervasive racist beliefs that have dominated much of western history.”²⁵ Similarly, Norden²⁶ argues that the professional practice of philosophy in this manner, in much of the world and in the United States in particular, makes it racist in precisely this sense. In his view:

To omit all of the philosophy of Asia, Africa, India, and the Indigenous Americas from the curriculum and to ignore it in our research is to convey the impression – whether intentionally or not – that it is of less value than the philosophy produced in European culture, or worse, to convey the impression – willingly or not – that no other culture was capable of philosophical thought. These are racist views.²⁷

20) Edkins, *The Early Spread of Religious Ideas*, 55.

21) Davis, *The Gospel Plan*.

22) Strickland, “How Western Philosophy Became Racist.”

23) West, “A Genealogy of Pragmatism.”

24) Xiang, “Philosophy’s Fear of Relativism.”

25) *Ibid.*, 99.

26) Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy*.

27) *Ibid.*, XIX–XX.

Although, the view that philosophy as a discipline is racist is quite strong and many philosophers might disagree with such a broad stroke characterization of the discipline as such, it will be difficult to deny the fact that philosophy, as practiced in the west, does not give credence to other philosophical traditions developed outside of this cultural context. Philosophy, as developed within the context of Europe and America, is too arrogant to accept this reality that it persistently evades philosophical work produced in other cultures in the construction of its intellectual genealogy. This is a deep-rooted problem in philosophy.

In the wake of the rise of intolerance and sophisticated unreason regarding the issues of race, racism, and the hegemony of whiteness in America today, philosophers and philosophy students are divided on the question of how to deal with the problem of the normative norming of whiteness as philosophy – intellectual homogeneity. This division also extends to the question of whether the issue of intellectual homogeneity that is present in philosophy is even a problem that deserves any serious consideration or philosophical consideration. There are denizens of the philosophy community on either side of the spectrum regarding how this question ought to be answered – very much analogous to the current debate on whether CRT deserves to be taught in academic environments within the United States. Those that consider this as a serious problem mostly approach the issue from the broad standpoint which holds that since philosophy concerns itself with the problems of human existence, the problem of lack of diversity is a legitimate problem because the designation of what it means to be “human” should not be restricted to peoples in western Europe and the United States. Those that argue philosophy should not concern itself with issues around diversity, anti-racism, and social justice tend to frame their arguments around the erroneous notion that philosophy is a method and an analytic that focuses on “ideas” and abstract concepts that have nothing to do with embodied categories and subjective introspections. In other words, they consider philosophy to be misguided if it focuses on the problems of race and racism in society. For instance, on September 8, 2021, the *New York Post* reports the case of a professor of philosophy, Peter Boghossian who resigned in protest because he could not stand that the university is becoming what he referred as a “social justice factory.”²⁸ Boghossian, who sees no problem with the canonization of philosophy as decidedly European and androcentric, used this term to articulate his outrage regarding how the discipline of philosophy, and the university broadly, have “transformed a bastion of free inquiry into a social justice factory whose only inputs were race, gender, and victimhood and whose only outputs were grievance and division.”²⁹

Philosophy students have also been impacted by this crisis of diversity in philosophy, now magnified by the waves of intolerance and unreason that drives the aversion to discussions on racial injustice in contemporary America. On February 4, 2019, *Inside Higher Ed* reports the case of a Black male Ph.D. Candidate, Irami Osei-Frimpong, in the department of philosophy at the University of Georgia who was harassed for his critical views on racism and racial injustice.³⁰ In this case, the University administration used intimidation tactics, including using the office of the attorney general of the state, to prosecute a graduate student whose views were initially declared as protected under the First Amendment. Upon further review, it was revealed that the University only decided to “prosecute” the student only after some donors complained about the comments of this student. Apart from the fact that this case shows the disregard for free speech and academic freedom, it shows the influence that financial interests from donors or other vested interests play regarding what academic spaces are considered as acceptable ideas and which are condemned. It is quite telling that throughout this student’s ordeal, the department of philosophy at the University of Georgia did not specifically offer any public

28) Patteson, “Portland Professor Slams University.”

29) Boghossian, “Sacrificed Ideas.”

30) Flaherty, “Comments on White People.”

statements of support for this student. An essay entitled, “Why I Left Academia: Philosophy’s Homogeneity Needs Rethinking,”³¹ describes why he decided to withdraw from the discipline of philosophy after putting in six and half years of graduate study. Part of the reason he gave for this decision was due to the lack of diversity in philosophy – especially how the topics deemed important or “philosophical” are those that almost always ignore issues around race, ethnicity, and gender. He elaborates further:

At best, Anglo-American philosophers seem to regard most non-Western philosophy as a cute side hobby, but certainly not something deserving of serious attention ... So why did I choose to leave philosophy, instead of staying and advocating for change from within? It was certainly not an easy decision, but, by the end, my departure felt like an inevitability. I loved studying philosophy, and truly have no regrets about devoting nearly a decade of my life to it. But I also grew tired and frustrated with the profession’s unwillingness to interrogate itself. Eventually, I gave up hope that the discipline would ever change, or that it would change substantially within a timeframe that was useful to me professionally and personally.³²

In this case, the mere “loving” of philosophy is not enough to mask the deep-rooted problems of diversity that are being articulated in this paper. It is a kind of “loving” that consequentially produces frustration, angst, and despair while the pretensions or facade of a progressive discipline is maintained. What makes this even worse is that students are introduced to philosophy as a field of inquiry that promotes open-mindedness, free-thinking, dialogical discourse, and rational understanding of ideas, including those that may make one uncomfortable. The reality of philosophy – its fundamental problem of diversity stands contrary to such characterization of the discipline. What all these point to is that the struggle against racism, intolerance, and cultural homogeneity in philosophy is real and there is much work to be done to engage with this problem. This, I believe, should be the task of those I will be characterizing as antiracist philosophers in what follows.

The Problem of Racism in Philosophy and the Antiracist Philosopher

What a world this will be when human possibilities are freed...
– W. E. B. Du Bois

Any cogent discussion about the project of antiracism in philosophy must begin with its converse: the reality of racism in modern philosophy. Thus, any attempt to describe the idea of antiracism in philosophy must begin with the acknowledgement of the existence of racism and racial intolerance in Classical and Modern Philosophy. In the introduction to an edited volume entitled, *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, Andrew Valls³³ raises this very provocative question – “is modern philosophy racist?” which strike at the heart of the issue at stake here. This question was aimed at capturing a common area of disagreement among philosophers on how to deal with the documented racist views of early modern philosophers such as John Locke, David Hume, George Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel. Particularly whether such racist views should be considered as something that is central or on the fringe in the discourse of philosophy. He aptly describes the dual sentiments on this issue thus:

31) Park, “Why I Left Academia.”

32) Ibid., paragraph 7.

33) Valls, *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*.

Scholars have been puzzling over these questions for some time now, and no consensus has been reached. For some, modern philosophy, or at least some of the major schools of thought within it – rationalism, empiricism, liberalism, social contract theory – is deeply racist. On this view, the appearance of race neutrality in these theories is belied by a deeper reading, and this calls for a major revision of our understanding of modern philosophy. For others, the racism expressed by some major modern philosophers has no significant implications for, say, their epistemology or their ethics. Rather, on this latter position, any racism expressed by modern philosophers can simply be detached from their philosophical views, and no reinterpretation of these views is required.³⁴

It is clear from the above that philosophers are at a variance regarding how this question should be answered. But the very idea that this debate exists among philosophers shows the problematic nature of the question of racism in philosophy. Even though philosophers disagree on the question raised by Valls³⁵ it does not erase the fact that these philosophers (and some others) espoused deeply troubling racist views that drew largely from the prejudiced anthropological assumptions about the hierarchy of beings in the early modern period. This is especially clear when it is noted that “modern ideas about race and modern philosophical doctrines developed together in a context shaped by conquest, colonialism, and slavery.”³⁶ Thus, the problem of racism has always been part of the story of the history of philosophy. Although, it is not an aspect of the story that we often speak about in the way we approach research and teaching in philosophy.

In *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780–1830*, Park³⁷ traces the history of racism in the formation of the western philosophical canon, especially in the early modern period, which presents a reading of the historiography of philosophy that is different from how it is offered in many philosophy departments today. This work offered an account of “the history of philosophy with the thread of racism intact.”³⁸ It is not an emendated, abridged, or sanitized version that is recorded in most of the well-known books chronicling the history of western philosophy. What makes this approach to unearthing the racism that is embedded within the intellectual foundations of western philosophy interesting is the offering of a more realistic, albeit unpopular, account that shows “how racism and Eurocentric history of philosophy go hand in hand.”³⁹ This does not in any way suggest that the gamut of philosophical knowledge that is developed within this historical context is tainted with racism. Rather, it is an attempt to tell the story of philosophy that has been systematically evaded or suppressed in the chronicling of this history and exploring the broad implications of this reality. In *Racism and Philosophy*, Babbitt and Campbell’s⁴⁰ survey, the implication of bringing this perspective to the fore is that it establishes that racism has far-reaching effect for how the entire field of philosophy is practiced: what are considered as substantive areas of research. They argue that such realization can be a nucleus for all members of the discipline who are concerned about the problem of racism to work toward achieving an antiracist praxis in philosophy.

What is at stake in this paper, is the characterization of what it means to be an antiracist philosopher especially in the context of the fragmentation of social discourse around issues of diversity, equity, and social

34) Ibid., 1.

35) Ibid.

36) Ibid., 2.

37) Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy*.

38) Ibid., 6.

39) Ibid., 8.

40) Babbitt & Campbell, *Racism and Philosophy*.

justice. Who is an antiracist philosopher? In his well-known book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibrahm Kendi describes an antiracist as “one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.”⁴¹ In other words, an individual who is considered an antiracist must fundamentally reject racism as it manifests in thought, attitude, within institutions of power, as well as the material and ideological expressions of prejudice in all facets of life, including within the discourse of knowledge. It involves an active engagement in efforts, strategies, or intellectual schemes that are primarily positioned to counter racism. An antiracist philosopher, therefore, is one whose efforts within the practice of philosophy are keenly directed at combatting the problem of racism, and the consequences of exclusionary practices within a discipline that centers whiteness as the normative ground for the archeology of knowledge.

To put it differently, an antiracist philosopher is one who considers the struggle against racism, injustice, and the marginalization of non-whites in philosophy as a serious problem and is interested in fashioning ways to engage with this problem. Clearly, from what has been exposed in this paper, not all philosophers will or can become antiracist philosophers since people tend to hold varying beliefs about whether the struggle against racism in philosophy is a real problem or a philosophical problem that deserves serious intellectual investment at all. I am not writing to such philosophers who may disagree that this is a real problem. I am writing to those philosophers who, despite the divisive nature of rhetorics in our current socio-political context, are averse to the spirit of anti-racist work in philosophy, but in the broader culture are willing to put themselves forward in the struggle against racism. The antiracist philosopher, as I imagine it, must be able to rise above the politics of hate, resentment, intolerance, and marginalization, to work toward making the practice of philosophy a more inclusive and fairer representation of the broad spectrum of human experience. In what follows, I explore what I consider two important attributes of an antiracist philosopher.

The first attribute of an antiracist philosopher is truth-telling. This must be the beginning point for anyone one who is going to become an effective antiracist philosopher; even so when the acknowledgment of the truth, that philosophy has a diversity problem, is uncomfortable and upends deeply rooted, but not fully accurate knowledge about the historiography of philosophy. According to Heisig, “the perennial task of philosophy does not consist in transmitting accumulated knowledge but in reassuring the love of truth.”⁴² This demands a distinctive relationship of mutual criticism between the *known* and the *knower* which opens possibilities to the creation of new knowledge. Philosophy as a discipline, is often described as a rational search for answers to the difficult questions of human existence, even when those answers are not always satisfactory or occasionally offer new questions. It is an intellectual engagement that explores the depth and breadth of the human spirit, encouraging free thinking and the celebration of human ideas as well as the methods by which those ideas are developed. What is clear from this description of the nature of philosophy, is the idea that exercising one’s curiosity, agency, or rationality is an important attribute that one must possess to be characterized as a philosopher: the nucleus that drives the pursuit of truth. As Michel Foucault queries in “The Masked Philosopher,” “What is philosophy after all? If not a means of reflecting on not so much what is true or false, but on our relation to truth? How, given that relation to truth, should we act?”⁴³ Foucault’s question unravels the perpetual quest of the philosopher in pursuit of truth, the necessity of human action, as well as the significant role that reason plays in this task. However, when the historical legacy of the discipline is critically considered, it reveals a practice that runs contrary to this characterization of the nature of philosophy.

41) Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 13.

42) Heisig, *Rude Awakenings*, 270.

43) Foucault, *Michel Foucault’s Politics*, 330.

A correct assessment of the historiography of philosophy must take into consideration the role and effects of the structuring of philosophy to present whiteness as the standard of human civilization and as the fundamental structure of human thought; especially, the way philosophical streams of thought developed outside of the western or Eurocentric context are cut-off from the story of the history of philosophy that students are exposed to in many departments of philosophy. This is what Mercier⁴⁴ describes as a philosophical scheme that is designed as a territorial structure. This implies that philosophy's problem of exclusions consists in the structuring of ideas to present a lopsided view of reality. The aim of an antiracist philosopher in engaging with this problem will be focused on the adoption of:

Constructive stances toward new forms of global histories of philosophy that do not entirely overwrite the conflicts, which the power relations structuring our scientific and philosophical practices are continually reproducing. Therefore, if getting hold of "race" in the history of philosophy remains a relentless and laborious endeavor, and one that will not solve itself under the mere impulsion of affirmative action, reckoning with the overlapping territorialities that have shaped the history of philosophy, as discipline and practice, imposes itself as necessary preliminary.⁴⁵

An effective way to do this will not be a superficial engagement with global histories of philosophy as an addendum or appendage to histories developed in western Europe and the United States, but a recognition that the apparatus of knowledge as introduced to students requires serious restructuring and de-centering of whiteness as philosophy. It would also entail the confrontation with some of the underlying cognitive presuppositions and attitudes that motivates the demarcation of certain philosophical traditions as acceptable and others as unacceptable, grounded on the assumptions of philosophical rigor and sound judgment.⁴⁶

In her iconic essay, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth and Freedom," Sylvia Wynter criticizes the pursuit of truth, in the present order of knowledge, as a phenomenon that is framed in the language of coloniality – coloniality of power that logically produces the coloniality of knowledge and Being.⁴⁷ In which case, the archeology of knowledge is chronicled within traditions and lines of succession that speaks to homogeneity rather than plurality. For instance, in *Philosophy of History*, Hegel defends a historicization of human consciousness that is restricted to subjects mainly within European modernity. Hegel wrote comprehensively about the world in terms of geo-spatial territories and human hierarchies while employing nineteenth century ethnological views to develop a racialized epistemology that fundamentally puts Black people outside of the realm of consciousness, as non-human subjects that can be reduced to a "thing" and "object" of no value.⁴⁸ Thus, the very ideas of reason, consciousness, and reasonability within the practice of philosophy are shaped and defined in the language of exclusion. This is especially apparent in how the documentation of human experience and achievement are framed in specific axiomatic categories (such as modernity, enlightenment, and reasonability), and how such notions largely shape the allotment or denial of epistemic credibility to subjects in the space of reason. Wynter considers instances of such denial as a deliberate act of disregard, or "blocking out voices," with significant ontological, epistemic, and existential implications for those groups (Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans as an example), whose consciousness or subjective realities are undermined and considered to be outside of the representations of the human.

44) Mercier, "Warding Off the Ghosts."

45) Ibid., 41.

46) Leeuwen, "An Existential-Phenomenological Perspective."

47) Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being."

48) Ogungbure, "Dialectics of Oppression."

In “White Habits, Anti-Racism, and Philosophy as a Way of Life,” Noe⁴⁹ describes an antiracist philosopher as someone who approaches philosophy as a “way of life” that renders intelligible how antiracist confrontation of racist ideas and institutionalized white complicity is a properly philosophical way of life requiring regulated reflection on thought systems – particularly, thought systems that are grounded in whiteness. He characterizes the grounding of philosophical thought in whiteness, as professional philosophy’s tendency to fetishize the abstract as a problem because its projects view that the discipline is little more than a conceptual factory of some sort, dealing with grand axiomatic categories while avoiding more tangible aspects of normal life. In his view:

Philosophy’s fetishization of ideal theory obfuscates normalized mechanisms of white complicity in the not-to-be-spoken de facto racial order by abstracting from what is in fact a racially selective experience, selectively treating historically promoted white experience as a qualified candidate on which to base a purportedly representative socio-political imaginary.⁵⁰

So, what this orients us toward is the idea that an antiracist philosophy offers a counter-philosophical narrative and an antiracist ethos that is largely grounded in the truth for truth’s sake. This is a “spiritual act of courage by nonwhites and whites alike against the forces of culturally sedimented racist habits and institutionalized white complicity.”⁵¹ This is consistent with how Foucault considers the philosopher’s relationship to truth.

The second attribute of an antiracist philosopher I would consider is to be actively working toward the attainment of diversification of the philosophical community and the substance of philosophy. In a recent survey⁵² on the diversity of philosophy students and faculty across departments of philosophy in the United States, it was discovered that despite generally increasing trainings and conferences on diversity, people who identify as Hispanic (any race), or non-Hispanic Native American, Alaska Native, or Black remain substantially underrepresented in philosophy at all levels compared to their presence in the U.S. population, and in some cases also as compared to other majors. There are two findings from this study that deserves to be highlighted. First, Asian, and Hispanic students seem to be underrepresented among Ph.D. recipients in philosophy, compared to other disciplines, and Hispanic people are probably also underrepresented among faculty, compared to the U.S. population. Since 22% of the U.S. population aged 20–29 are Hispanic, their underrepresentation among recent philosophy PhDs (approximately 4%–9%) is especially striking. Second, people who identify as non-Hispanic Black are substantially underrepresented in philosophy at almost all levels, constituting about 6% of philosophy bachelor’s degree recipients, about 2.5% of philosophy PhD recipients, and based on the voluntary self-report of APA members possibly about 4% of philosophy faculty, despite constituting 12% of the U.S. population.⁵³ These data support the thesis that there is a serious problem of diversity within philosophy.

An antiracist philosopher must raise serious questions about the overwhelming representation of whiteness in the student population as well as in faculty ranks while fiercely resisting this often-told falsehood that the whiteness of philosophy departments across the country is due to the non-existence of qualified students of color to recruit, or the absence of “qualified” faculty of color to hire. An antiracist philosopher must accept

49) Noe, “White Habits.”

50) *Ibid.*, 281.

51) *Ibid.*, 296.

52) Schwitzgebel, Bright, Jennings, Thompson and Winsberg, “The Diversity of Philosophy Students.”

53) *Ibid.*

the premise that there are talented students and highly gifted intellectuals in underrepresented communities or minoritized populations in the United States and make a case for their recruitment when/if the opportunity arises because of the value diversity would bring to the philosophical community. In the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, Naomi Zack argues that an increase in the racial and ethnic diversity within academic philosophers, given the divisive nature of current social discourse on race and racism, will improve philosophy not only for the sake of demographic variety, but to also provide verisimilitude for underrepresented groups in philosophy who have a long history of social disadvantage in society, from black slavery to social oppression and intergenerational poverty. In her view, “increasing diverse presence in philosophy would acknowledge that history and provide some justice for past exclusion.”⁵⁴ As Cornel West notes in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, the true aim of philosophy is not to become grandiose by imposing its elite intellectual views upon people, “but to become part of a social movement by nourishing and being nourished by the philosophical views of oppressed people themselves for the aims of social change and personal meaning.”⁵⁵

Apart from working to improve diversity in numbers, the antiracist philosopher needs to work to improve to diversify the substance of philosophy. In a very provocative article entitled, “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is,” published in *The New York Times*⁵⁶ Garfield and Norden criticize the current practice within philosophy departments in the U.S. that centers around the foundation of knowledge. Their critique of philosophy is based on a survey they carried out that discovered that most philosophy departments in the United States offer courses only on philosophy derived from Europe and the English-speaking world. For example, of the 118 doctoral programs they surveyed in philosophy in the United States and Canada, only 10 percent have a specialist in Chinese philosophy as part of their regular faculty. They discovered that most philosophy departments offer no courses on Africana, Indian, Islamic, Jewish, Latin American, Native American, or other non-European philosophical traditions. They also found out that out of the top 50 philosophy doctoral programs in the English-speaking world, only about 15 percent have any regular faculty members that teach courses in any non-western philosophy. They were also clear on their intentions regarding this critique of philosophy, showing that it was not designed to disparage the value of the works in the contemporary philosophical canon but to point to the need to make philosophy richer, diverse, and pluralistic.

In the words of Charles Mills in “Rethinking Philosophy and Race,” antiracist philosophers “need to self-consciously seek out minority writings and try to incorporate them into mainstream courses.”⁵⁷ He offered exemplary insights how he imagines such works to be approached within the discipline thus:

I think people should also make a self-conscious effort to incorporate such themes into mainstream courses: for example, a course in ethics, a course in political philosophy, a course in metaphysics, a course in epistemology. You might wonder, “How could you do that?” But in fact, there is a growing body of work by people, for example, Sally Haslanger at MIT, who are looking at the metaphysics of race and the metaphysics of gender. Political philosophy can be expanded to include writings on the theme of racial justice. Social epistemology lends itself easily to bringing in social factors like race. For the history of philosophy, you could ask, “What non-traditional figures are there, people of color, who could be incorporated into such a history?” For example, W. E. B. Du Bois,

54) Zack, *Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, 2.

55) West, *A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 231.

56) Garfield and Norden, “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify.”

57) Mills, “Rethinking Philosophy and Race,” 84.

whose PhD was in history, but who also had an acquaintance with philosophy, which shows in some of his writings, like *The Souls of Black Folk*. Metaphysical claims about race can be found in his famous 1897 essay, “The Conservation of Races.”⁵⁸

Although, Mills was clear about the fact that he was directing this suggestion to white philosophy professors who need to educate themselves as to what is available, in terms of published writings – and striving to include such materials in their courses, so that non-white students can see their experiences addressed within the discipline while broadening the perspectives of white students. The challenge with this is that such inclusive practices that Mills⁵⁹ suggests will require a great deal of work that many white philosophers within the academia are unwilling or reluctant to undertake. It not only requires unknitting the fundamental assumptions that have been held about philosophical thought systems developed outside of the western canon, but it also requires substantial time investment in the face of other pressing academic related and general commitments of life. Mills suggestion also creates the erroneous impression that the mere addition of a few topics here and there to pre-existing philosophy syllabi, that are heavily centered on Eurocentric thought, is going to necessarily lead to the diversification of the substance of philosophy. Apart from the fact that this creates the impression that non-western philosophical traditions could only be understood as an appendage of western philosophy, it also raises the question of whether those philosophers who are not trained in those traditions can adequately “select” and string together such fragmented ideas within multiple traditions.

Conclusion

To become an antiracist philosopher requires courage – the courage to speak about philosophy’s diversity problem or the struggle against racism in philosophy. It involves raising serious questions about the practice of philosophy in an exclusionary sense even in the face of the rise in intolerance in society today. This can come at a great cost, especially to younger scholars who are expected to ask questions that would not make people uncomfortable or teach materials that students may perceive as too demanding. I am speaking of examples like that of Mathew Hawn who was fired for teaching about white privilege in Tennessee,⁶⁰ Daryl Cox who was fired for deploying antiracist pedagogy in the classroom,⁶¹ and George Yancy, a highly respected professor of philosophy was sent death threats for daring speak honestly about the problem of racism in America.⁶² All these point to the fact that there is a tendency to vilify those who raise such questions within the discipline as provocateurs who have no real good intentions, which is one of the principal reasons why these problems within philosophy persist.

If philosophy is going to look different from how it has been practiced in the past and is being practiced today, then some fundamental change within the discipline must occur – which is what I am hoping that this paper would orient us toward. By fundamental change, I am not referring to the all too familiar speeches and statements of solidarity that philosophy departments are quick to put up whenever incidences of police brutality and other virulent forms of injustice occur in society. For instance, after the brutal murder of George Floyd in 2020, many departments of philosophy put up statements disavowing anti-black racism and condemning

58) Ibid., 85.

59) Ibid.

60) Natanson, “It Cost Him His Job.”

61) Blake, “Florida Teacher Fired.”

62) Yancy, *Talk Honestly About Racism*.

forms of injustice. But, such open disavowal of racism has not translated into a substantive transformation in terms of developing courses and curriculum that speaks to such aspects of the human experience or recruiting people of color into intellectual spaces in line with the statements of solidarity. Philosophy departments need to engage seriously with the manifestations of antiblackness and the plural forms of discrimination that people of color experience in society, as deep philosophical problems that represents the crisis of humanity not as an addendum to some ideas of what is popularly referred to as “core philosophy.” In my mind, the antiracist philosopher is the one who sees beyond the superficial ways issues of diversity, antiracism, or social justice are mostly approached within the discipline of philosophy and is actively working to bring substantial change within philosophy. The upshot of the work of an antiracist philosopher should make the discourse of philosophy more open, in terms of embracing the broader spectrum of human experience with the realization that philosophy is fundamentally a reflective activity that is engaged in by people in the global sphere, not only in western Europe and the United States.

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