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Myron Moses Jackson
Editor
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5406-4999>
mmjackson@email.wcu.edu

Undoing the Mirage of Racism through Philosophy of Race

Whether held as essentialist and hierarchical or constructivists and egalitarian, race is a central concern around issues of social justice. During a recent World Cup interview, American soccer star Tyler Adams was chided by an Iranian journalist for mispronouncing his country's name and for, well, being American. "It is not eye-ran but e-ron" is what he was instructed to say. Then, he was asked how it feels to represent such a racist country like the U.S. with such a tarnished legacy of discriminating against Black people and other non-white groups. Without taking the bait, Adams responded with an openness and ironic modesty symbolic of being American: "My apologies on the mispronunciation of your country. Yeah, that being said, there's discrimination everywhere you go. One thing that I've learned especially living abroad in the past years and having to fit in with different cultures is that in the U.S. we are continuing to make progress, every single day. I grew up in a white family with, obviously, an African-American heritage and background as well. So, I had a little bit of different cultures and so I was very easily able to assimilate into different cultures. So, I know not everyone has that ease and the ability to do that and, obviously, it takes longer to understand and through education, I think it is super important – like you just educated me now on the pronunciation of your country. So, yeah, it's a process. As long as you see progress, that's the most important thing."¹ Without getting into a tit-for-tat witnessed too frequently in the verbal violence on social media, without lashing out by means of grievance and revenge politics against the Iranian government, this 23-year-old star responded with the poise and character needed for us to get educated about race and work to dismantle racism. Adams reminded us that we can have respectful and constructive discourse about race that will hopefully result in meaningful, lasting change.

1) Anna Lazarus Caplan, "USMNT's Tyler Adams Gracefully Hits Back at Iranian Reporter's Question About Racism in the U.S.," *People*, December 1, 2022, <https://people.com/sports/world-cup-tyler-adams-responds-iranian-reporter-racism-in-us/>.

No shortage of bigotry and prejudice can be found around the world. But why race to the bottom and compete for a monopoly on tragedy in human mistreatment? The philosophy of race is an intricate piece to the study of language, art, history, and culture and wants to learn about elsewhere and distant others. How we go about understanding the issues of identity politics and what solidifies a community's sense of purpose and mythic consciousness hinges upon our attitudes toward cultures and ethno-racial relations. When it comes to the migrant crises, socio-economic conditions aggravating inequalities, or geo-political conflicts, for example, people's premonitions about race largely inform how they respond to the demands for social justice. Tracing the trajectory from chattel slavery, the trail of tears, Jim Crow laws and lynchings, the civil rights movements, police brutality and profiling, to Black Lives Matter should we be believers or skeptics of racial progress?

Our global ethnoscape and diasporic makeup is vast and complex. Due to this, studying race is emerging from the backwaters of academia and becoming an essential mode of inquiry, especially in African American philosophy and philosophy of culture. Similar to the "linguistic turn," philosophy is undergoing a "racial turn" of sorts. Philosophy's transdisciplinary nature is well-suited to examine this ethno-racial complexity, but has not lived up to its potential by failing to take more seriously the social disadvantages endured by underrepresented groups. In many ways, philosophy contributed to the dark history of grounding antiblack racism in biology, anthropology, the social sciences, and speculative metaphysics. Hence, it is vital that all practitioners in our profession, especially philosophers of culture, work on behalf of reconciliation and atonement for such sins. Furthermore, confronting questions about racism and social justice will "improve philosophy" as Naomi Zack and others have argued.²

It is with great honor that we introduce this timely issue when anti-Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), anti-trans, or antisemitism and other sentiments and acts of dehumanizing racism are running unchecked. As the fervor grows for people to turn inward, against globalization (broadly construed), the likelihood that people will adopt forms of imperial apathy or non-sympathetic, self-serving narratives amalgamated with the harsh treatment toward "outsiders" becomes more attractive. These essays tackle conflicts resulting from intercultural exchanges around the issues of race, when appropriation and assimilation goes wrong, as is common in cases of cuisine, fashion, hairstyles, dance, and music. The contributions provide a strong mixture of treating historical and contemporary racism and what it means for racial identities to be denigrated, manipulated, or ignored. Our aim is to consider the way philosophers have relied upon race within their conceptions of culture, along with how philosophy has contributed to a robust sense of cultural justice by taking seriously minority representation in the discipline's graduate programs and hiring practices. In this regard, there is much more work to be done.

In "Not for the Faint of Heart: Becoming an Antiracist Philosopher in a Society Polarized by Critical Race Theory," Adebayo Oluwayomi argues that "[p]hilosophy has a diversity problem which largely stems from the Eurocentric framing of what (or ought to) constitute the substance of the discipline and the privileging of ideas grounded in whiteness." Given its Eurocentric parochialism philosophy often engages in tokenism, at its own detriment. For example, citing Schwitzgebel, et. al., 2021 American Philosophical Association (APA) survey, "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." Oluwayomi argues that philosophers will benefit from a diverse chorus of interlocutors, introducing us to new experiences that enrich and challenge our conceptions of the world and how race func-

2) Naomi Zack, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook to Philosophy and Race*, ed. Naomi Zack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-14.

tions within in it. More importantly, how can one become an antiracist philosopher? Oluwayomi argues that “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.” Working in the spirit to combat 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 more inclusive and fairer representation of the broad spectrum of human experience.” The two attributes of an antiracist philosopher are truth-telling and “to be actively working toward the attainment of diversification of the philosophical community and the substance of philosophy.”

In her essay “Black Women’s Hair Consciousness and the Politics of Being,” Sarah Setlaelo considering the politics of dress codes in the office and other professional settings raises the issue of cultural appropriation pertaining to cross-racial hair style choices. Recognizing how black hair consciousness is haunted by feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, Setlaelo argues that “Black is beautiful.” This new understanding of race and beauty is achieved when peoples acquire a *critical consciousness* “within a sexist and racist society.” Applying Mabogo Percy More’s “survival strategy” interpretation of the Sartrean “Look” to Black hair consciousness, Setlaelo critiques the pressures leading to complicitness with benign bigotry. Certain hairstyles “have been assimilated into mainstream fashion, and have become commercial and social statements ...” She contends that “[B]lack women actually complain about having to survive interracial and intra-racial hairism.” From this point of contention, the “overarching argument is [presented] that there is a conflation of the interracial and intra-racial sites of hair discrimination, although there is also a dialectical relationship between the two.” Any form of racial profiling will inevitably be harmful even if it is in the service of creating a false sense of superiority.

In the spirit of one of Charles Johnson’s philosophical novels *Dreamer* (1998), which focuses on the resemblance, doppelganger, and the stand-in, Kevin Harrelson focuses on the issues of passing and “racial fraud” identities. How can we come to be held as genuine members of the group without looking or acting the part? This has always been a mystery and juggling act for preconceived “outsiders.” Should we think about racial transitioning along similar lines as gender transitioning? Harrelson argues it would be unwise to do so. Mainly, “because different groups have different obstacles to entry.” In other words, treating groups as monoliths and not complex wholes overlooks the rich history of “racial ambiguity in America.” Thinking more pluralistically reveals how even the cultural meanings of whiteness and blackness – “anyone with non-European ancestry” – have transitioned over time. Harrelson draws our attention to how racial relations are being experienced and interpreted more loosely, leading him to argue against adopting “a single ethical principle, or set of principles, that would apply to all identity transitions.” There should be no “unified analysis” of racial, gendered, and religious transitions. “If there is no single principle regulating identity transitions, then *eo ipso* there can be no general rule about first-person authority with regard to them.” The anxiety and estrangement from feeling invisible can lead people to do desperate things. People act on such sentiments not out of emptiness, but out of loneliness and self-appraisals of insignificance.

In my essay, I contend that Alain’s Locke’s philosophy of culture works as an epistemic contraceptive against the global rise of populist and nationalist movements relying upon the fantasies of ethno-racial superiority and domination. Locke’s theory of value and notion of “cultural reciprocity” provides the basis for more than the moral obligations we have toward various “racial sense” or “kinship feeling” groups, like the nation-state or our preferred in-groups. There are modes of responsibility among strangers or through non-intimate encounters that can be normatively binding with similar or more intense and loyal intentions. How should we respond to the demands of *shared action* like wearing a mask during the pandemic, stopping to help someone with a flat tire, or when I see police officers, rushing to use lethal force during a common traffic stop? Locke’s *When People Meet* (1942) formulates an “intercultural reciprocity” which “relies on the anthropological notion of cultural

contact, but it goes far beyond it in putting values – rather than, say customs or rituals – at the center of such contact.” Making the cultural rituals secondary and values primary creates shades of *mulatto*, increasing the level of novel hybrids. One of the powerful aspects of mixed-race relations and identities is how less socially constructed they are compared with blackness and whiteness. I read Locke to be arguing that the intensification of intercultural exchanges stipulates ethical demands that can be grounded in “racial foster care” and resistance toward ethno-racial chauvinisms. Racial foster care can sustain a stronger sense of belonging, I argue, bringing people together through the linkages of interracial solidarities. We have to learn to accept and appreciate the hybrid manifestations of race, gender, class and other forms of identity adoption.

In this issue’s Forum section, Maria Gołębiewska offers further considerations into the philosophy of race by reconstructing cultural normativity through the phenomenological philosophy of law. In examining social conditioning, her essay concentrates on the difference between cultural and legal normativity, while emphasizing how the latter represents “the paradox of the changing and at the same time well-established character of cultural norms that distinguishes them from other normativities.” Kevin Taylor’s “Mutterings on the Wall,” compares graffiti artist Banksy’s *The Street is in Play* and Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku’s artwork *Pilgrims* against the backdrop of the dialogue between Buddhism and Pierre Hadot’s Philosophy as a Way of Life. He presents an interesting and compelling case showing how one can use these works of art to “better understand both figures via thematic elements of humor and socially disruptive writings.”



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