

# Philosophy and the Black Experience



FALL 2017

VOLUME 17 | NUMBER 1

## FROM THE EDITORS

Stephen C. Ferguson II and Dwayne Tunstall

## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

## ARTICLE

John H. McClendon III

*2016 Presidential Election: The Capitalist State and the Political Economy of Democracy*

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Justin E. H. Smith: Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy*

Reviewed by Stephen C. Ferguson II

*Tommy J. Curry, ed.: The Philosophical Treatise of William H. Ferris: Selected Readings from The African Abroad or, His Evolution in Western Civilization*

Reviewed by Myron Moses Jackson

## CONTRIBUTORS



APA NEWSLETTER ON

# Philosophy and the Black Experience

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

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## FROM THE EDITORS

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We would like to begin this issue of the newsletter with a statement of support for Tommy J. Curry, professor of Philosophy and Africana Studies at Texas A&M University. In an *American Conservative* column published online on May 8, 2017, entitled “When Is It OK to Kill White?,” Rob Dreher misinterpreted some of the remarks Curry made on the podcast of a segment he did on the *Redding News Review* radio show nearly five years ago.<sup>1</sup> Rather than report that Curry’s discussion of the film *Django Unchained* was a segue into his criticisms of (1) how many Black scholars have avoided and continue to avoid studying the role that Black people using violence to defend themselves against white supremacists played in Black freedom movements and (2) how Black self-defense against white supremacists can be tolerated in mainstream American society only if it is depicted in the form of cathartic entertainment, Dreher reported that Curry endorsed the idea that Black people ought to be allowed to kill white people.<sup>2</sup> Dreher’s column went viral in the conservative and right-wing echo chamber and led to many people calling for Texas A&M to fire Curry. It also led Texas A&M’s President Michael K. Young to distance himself and his institution from Curry’s remarks in a campus-wide letter released on May 10, 2017.<sup>3</sup> Even though President Young did not mention Curry by name in that letter, anyone familiar with the controversy would have known that he was referring to Curry. Soon after learning that Curry had received death threats, Dreher denounced anyone who threatened Curry and his family. Yet Dreher held firm to his initial interpretation of Curry’s remarks.<sup>4</sup> A week after releasing his initial statement, President Young issued a second statement that softened his condemnation of Curry’s remarks while still distancing himself from Curry.<sup>5</sup>

Curry deserved for his university’s president to support his academic freedom to speak in a public forum about a subject matter related to his scholarly expertise—in this case, critical race theory. Thankfully, Curry’s colleagues in Philosophy<sup>6</sup> and Africana Studies<sup>7</sup> at Texas A&M issued statements supporting his academic freedom to speak on controversial issues. We are also heartened that a group of concerned Texas A&M students<sup>8</sup> wrote a petition in support of Curry, which has been signed not only by current and former Texas A&M students, but also by his Texas A&M

colleagues and colleagues not affiliated with Texas A&M who want to support him.

Curry has joined the ranks of Black philosophers and Black intellectuals whose livelihoods and very lives have been threatened for questioning the anti-Black racist status quo in academia and in the public square. At least two of these Black philosophers (Leonard Harris and George Yancy) are former editors of this newsletter. We are glad that the APA Board recently issued a statement on harassment, bullying, and intimidation of philosophers and noted that there are risks to philosophers who take up controversial social issues in their work and make controversial statements in public forums. We are especially glad that the statement noted that these risks “are intensified when the philosopher occupies a minority social identity, untenured position, or other vulnerable status.”<sup>9</sup> Yet we feel the need to support Curry in this particular venue for at least two reasons. First, this newsletter is the official organ of the APA Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers, and it is part of the committee’s charge to support Black philosophers like Curry. Second, we are obligated to support the academic freedom of philosophers in general and of Black philosophers in particular to write and speak about controversial issues within their scholarly expertise.

Unfortunately, the Curry incident is only one episode in a larger white ethno-nationalist movement on the ascent in the United States during the Trump presidency. We could have just as easily begun this newsletter with a statement of support for Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, assistant professor of African American Studies at Princeton University. Professor Taylor has been the target of intimidation, death threats, and racist, sexist, and homophobic comments for her opening remarks about President Trump being “a racist and sexist megalomaniac” delivered in her May 20, 2017, commencement address at Hampshire College. Critics ignore her call for activism, struggle for social justice, solidarity, and hope in the face of what she considers to be dark political times.

Both Curry’s and Taylor’s recent experiences of being attacked publicly and privately by white ethno-nationalists and others who are uncomfortable with Black scholars stating inconvenient truths about the historical reality for Black people in the United States shows the need for venues willing to publish this kind of work. We hope that this newsletter can be a place where these inconvenient truths can be published. Of course, we welcome submissions of a less political nature as well, just as long as they are about the Black experience broadly defined.

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We are happy to have contributions from Stephen C. Ferguson II, Myron Moses Jackson, and John H. McClendon III. McClendon's essay, "2016 Presidential Election: The Capitalist State and the Political Economy of Democracy," is a revised transcript of his keynote address at the eleventh African American Intellectual Thought Symposium at Fresno State University, April 20, 2017. In his address, McClendon performs a Marxist ideological critique of the U.S. political and economic system to disclose the actual (material) structure of that system. This kind of critique discloses is how the U.S. is not actually a genuine democracy, but rather is a racist and capitalist system in which large segments of the U.S. population have been (and currently are) politically oppressed and economically disempowered. McClendon also explains how the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election is not an aberration, but fits within the racist and capitalist history of the United States. Ferguson provides us with a review of Justin E. H. Smith's book, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy*. Lastly, Jackson provides us with a review of Tommy J. Curry's edited volume, *The Philosophical Treatise of William H. Ferris: Selected Readings From The African Abroad or, His Evolution in Western Civilization*.

As we stated in the previous issue, we strongly encourage potential authors and book reviewers to submit their work for possible publication. We also encourage any suggestions that you think might help make the newsletter more philosophically rigorous and engaging. For submissions to the *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, articles and book reviews should be emailed to either Stephen C. Ferguson or Dwayne Tunstall at [apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com](mailto:apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com). The deadline for submissions for the spring 2018 issue is December 1, 2017.

#### NOTES

1. For readers who are not already familiar with the controversy, here are a few sources you can read to get the general gist about what happened and some relevant commentary about the controversy: (1) Justin Weinberg, "Philosophy Professor Receiving Death Threats (updated with transcript, letter from colleagues)," *Daily Nous*, May 11, 2017, <http://dailynous.com/2017/05/11/philosophy-professor-receiving-death-threats/>; (2) Colleen Flaherty, "Furor Over Philosopher's Comments on Violence Against White People," *Inside Higher Ed*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/05/11/furor-over-texas-am-philosophers-comments-violence-against-white-people#.WRX0Ax92KUI.facebook>; (3) Kelly Brown, "Texas A&M Professor Defends Remarks, Questions Young's Response," *The Eagle*, May 12, 2017, [http://www.theeagle.com/news/local/texas-a-m-professor-defends-remarks-questions-youngs-response/article\\_7d4fffc1-7313-51a5-9664-7553f68ebc21.html?1494594878890](http://www.theeagle.com/news/local/texas-a-m-professor-defends-remarks-questions-youngs-response/article_7d4fffc1-7313-51a5-9664-7553f68ebc21.html?1494594878890); (4) Zak Cheney Rice, "The Black Texas Professor at the Heart of the Latest Right-Wing Campus Witch Hunt Speaks," *Mic*, May 17, 2017, <https://mic.com/articles/177306/the-black-texas-professor-at-the-heart-of-the-latest-right-wing-campus-witch-hunt-speaks#.8a7Gily2D>; (5) John W. August III, "Rod Dreher's Misrepresentation of Professor Tommy Curry's Scholarship," *Philosophical Percolations*, May 18, 2017, <http://www.philpercs.com/2017/05/dreher-misrepresentation-of-professor-tommy-currys-scholarship.html>; and (6) Bethania Palma, "Did a Texas A&M Professor Advocate Killing White People?" *Snopes*, June 2, 2017, <http://www.snopes.com/2017/06/02/texas-professor-white-people/>. All of these sources were last accessed June 6, 2017.
2. Rob Dreher, "When Is It OK to Kill Whites?" *The American Conservative*, May 8, 2017, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/when-is-it-ok-to-kill-whites/>. Accessed June 6, 2017.

3. Michael K. Young, "Standing for Our Core Values," *Texas A&M University Office of the President*, May 10, 2017, <http://president.tamu.edu/messages/standing-for-our-core-values.html>.
4. Rob Dreher, "Killing White People, Part II," *The American Conservative*, May 11, 2017, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/killing-white-people-tommy-curry/>. Accessed June 6, 2017.
5. Michael K. Young, "Affirming Our Values," *Texas A&M University Office of the President*, May 17, 2017, <http://president.tamu.edu/messages/affirming-our-values.html>. Accessed June 6, 2017.
6. Texas A&M University Department of Philosophy (specifically José Luis Bermúdez, Kenny Easwaran, Robert Garcia, Amir Jaima, Claire Katz, Chris Menzel, Clare Palmer, Gregory Pappas, Martin Peterson, Roger Sansom, Robin Smith, Kristi Sweet, Linda Radzik, and Gary Varner), "Texas A&M Must Defend Academic Freedom," *The Eagle*, May 13, 2017, [http://www.theeagle.com/opinion/columnists/texas-a-m-must-defend-academic-freedom/article\\_360c1e9c-37d3-11e7-b9cd-1b0f648e444c.html](http://www.theeagle.com/opinion/columnists/texas-a-m-must-defend-academic-freedom/article_360c1e9c-37d3-11e7-b9cd-1b0f648e444c.html). Accessed June 6, 2017.
7. Violet M. Johnson, Shona N. Jackson, and Carmela Garritano, "AFST [Africana Studies Program] Letter to President Young," May 15, 2017, <https://afst.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2017/05/5-15-17-AFST-Response-PresYoung.pdf>. Accessed June 6, 2017. Dr. Johnson is director of Africana Studies at Texas A&M. Dr. Jackson is associate professor of English at Texas A&M, and Dr. Garritano is associate professor of Africana Studies and Film Studies at Texas A&M. Their letter was signed by twenty other colleagues (both core and affiliated faculty members) from the Africana Studies program at Texas A&M University.
8. Concerned Students, "An Open Letter: Statement of Support for Dr. Tommy Curry," *Change.org*. Accessed June 28, 2017. As of June 28, 2017, there were 1,245 supporters signed the petition to President Young.
9. "Board of the APA Issues Statement on Harassment, Bullying, and Intimidation of Philosophers," June 2, 2017, <http://blog.apaonline.org/2017/06/02/board-of-the-apa-issues-statement-on-harassment-bullying-and-intimidation-of-philosophers/>. Accessed June 5, 2017.

## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

The *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* is published by the committee on the status of Black philosophers. Authors are encouraged to submit original articles and book reviews on any topic in philosophy that makes a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors welcome submissions written from any philosophical tradition, as long as they make a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors especially welcome submissions dealing with philosophical issues and problems in African American and Africana philosophy.

All article submissions should be between 10 and 20 pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between 5 and 7 pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and *The Chicago Manual of Style* formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author. Please send submissions electronically to [apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com](mailto:apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com).

## DEADLINES

Fall issues: May 1

Spring issues: December 1

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## FORMATTING GUIDELINES

- The APA Newsletters adhere to *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
- Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use *italics* instead of underlining. Use an "em dash" (—) instead of a double hyphen (--).
- Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:

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

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

concept, "A House Divided." So therefore, he decided to make this topic the homework assignment for that day.

Those of us that are teachers know it is very important we not only tell students what they need to know, but we must also train students on how to find the answers to their questions. Consequently, we must direct them on researching about those issues, which they vitally need to know for their growth and development.

In fact, it has been my experience that when students dig for the information—discover the knowledge for themselves—they retain the information better than if you resort to just telling them the answers. So, therefore, the young middle school students went out and did their research. Now, we live in a particular age where many young people understand research in terms of surveying the internet. Therefore, they investigated via the internet how this notion, "A House Divided," related to the 2016 presidential election.

The teacher gave them a clue. He said there are two key concepts the students should investigate in their research. One is the concept "divided." The other is the concept "united." Therefore, when the students came back after doing their research, the teacher asked, "Can anyone talk about the notion 'A House Divided?' What is the importance of 'divided' and 'united,' and how it is related to the events following the presidential election?"

One student raised his hand and responded, "A house divided will not stand. From what I understand from this is that a divided house will collapse. In other words, when a group of people have fundamental disagreements, they cannot work together." And the teacher responded, "Very good!"

There was another student who raised her hand and was very excited. The teacher said, "What did you find?" The student responded, "I looked at this very carefully, and it seems to me that when you talk about 'United' not only will you fall but also someone will pull you down the aisle of an airplane, and at the same time, they will beat you. This beating will lead to a broken nose; then after breaking your nose, you'll be arrested. That's what I understand about the idea of 'United.'"

This is a very important illustration about the context of a text. When we talk about "A House Divided Will Not Stand," we have to understand that when we talk about the concept of being "united" we have to put that into some kind of context. This is very important, especially for young people that heavily depend on the internet as their source of reference.

I want to share with you another story. This is a story about a discovery that a certain group of anthropologists made a number of years ago. The anthropologists came upon a group of people with its own (distinctive) form of village community. One feature of this community stood out among all others. This village community engaged in an annual ritual of rain dancing, which served as the very heart and soul of their community. Every year, all the people in

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## ARTICLE

### *2016 Presidential Election: The Capitalist State and the Political Economy of Democracy*

John H. McClendon III

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

I have been quite fortunate in having attended all the past symposiums here at California State University at Fresno. I can unequivocally state that every session of the "African American Symposium on African American Intellectual Thought" has provoked us to think critically about the pressing issues faced by our community. This year we are reflecting on the impact of the recent presidential election and what it means for the impending future, particularly for people of color. Hence my keynote address for this afternoon: "2016 Presidential Election: The Capitalist State and the Political Economy of Democracy."

I want to begin by sharing a recent observation. I was reading the other day about a teacher who was concerned with introducing the significance of this historic moment—the presidential election—with his middle school students. The widespread aftermath of intense debates, with respect to the election, provided an excellent occasion for learning about history and politics. In the discussion with his students, this teacher talked about the notion of "A House Divided." He asked his students how the notion of "A House Divided" relates to the recent presidential election. His students responded that they had never heard of this

the community would gather for the rain dance. Initially, the rain dance was for a selective few—the most prominent people in the community. The early participants in the rain dance tended to be older males in the community. Over time other people in the village began to challenge the idea that only a select few could participate in the rain dance. Consequently, women were later incorporated into the rain dance. And, in due course, young adults were finally brought into the ritual.

The anthropologists found that the rain dance was deeply important, not merely because it was an agricultural community—which needed rain as the necessary means of producing crops for collective survival—but it was also essential to the *cultural identity* of the community. The rain dance became the substance and symbol of group solidarity and social cohesion. In fact, it was so important to this community they developed a very extensive mythology around rain dancing.

In turn, the rain dance served as the basis for the collective (in-group) notion, “We.” I must point out, the idea of “we” and “they” is universally important for all social and cultural groups respecting collective identity. Subsequently, the villagers believed that any other community that did not engage in the rain dance was a community infected with demons. Groups considered as “They”—the outsiders—were essentially a different people; so, we observe, the rain dance ritual became the decisive factor outlining the character of one’s social identity.

Hence, this prevailing idea evolved into the rain dance becoming the center of the villagers’ worldview. Furthermore, they thought, the rain dance was not just something one’s own community should do, but the whole world should be engaged in each year. In concurrence, the rain dances even had an ethical significance and, accordingly, the sense of moral obligation for each person of responsibility within the community.

Consequently, the villagers were leery of all outsiders. When anyone came from the outside and entered into their community, the villagers were very reluctant to receive them as members within the village community, particularly if outsiders did not have a prior history of engaging in rain dances. Rain dancing, in many ways, resulted in closed society among the villagers.

As the anthropologists began to investigate this very important cultural tradition of rain dancing, they discovered something that was crucially affixed to this viewpoint, which explicitly detailed why the villagers firmly held this belief about rain dancing. The anthropologists uncovered that this ritual happened to coincide with climatic fluctuations and seasonal changes. What happened is that the villagers did the rain dance just before the rainy season. The mystical rain dance just happens to overlap with natural climatic transformations. In effect, the rain dance was not the cause for the rains, which inundated the village each year.

Now, imagine the impact of this discovery? The powerful impact on the world outlook of the villagers? This worldview built around the importance of the ritual—rain dancing?

Can you visualize their response? How they reacted to the anthropologists? It must have been a tremendous shock to hear this message. This ritual of such importance—lasting over generations—was in reality an action of no consequence. Quite naturally, the villagers thought that the anthropologists were imbued with demons since no one in their right mind would take this key ritual—the rain dance—away from their community. In effect, the anthropologists had shattered the villagers’ worldview.

We begin to see a very important lesson here. When we think in terms of our view on the world, we may have to seriously think about the nature of different perspectives on the world. Thus, the significance of an alternative worldview—that is, if we are going to understand the problems of any given society. We could argue these people lived in a simple society, and, moreover, we live in a more complex society. Surely, we are not caught in the grips of mythology. Certainly, we are not caught in the grips of dogma. Indeed, we are not closed-minded with respect to how we see others and ourselves in the world. Yet, we really need to ask the question: Are we really free of such mythologies? How do various kinds of mythology play a role in our lives?

Today, we hear quite a bit about the notion “alternative facts” and how these “alternative facts” subsequently explain the nature of our reality. However, facts are those factors that point to what are the actual (objective) state of affairs—the given empirical conditions, which are open to observation, description, verification, and public scrutiny. The suggestion that there are “alternative facts” is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms which hides more than it discloses.

What I want to suggest, fellow students, is that we need not be concerned with this confused idea of “alternative facts.” Rather, our attention should be focused on developing an alternative “worldview.” With an alternative worldview, perhaps we can more clearly understand the effect and significance of the recent presidential election. A wise man once stated, the ruling ideas—dominant worldview—always belong to the ruling class. Under capitalism, the capitalists are the ruling class.

This idea of the capitalist state is very important to keep in mind. This is because the concept of democracy is linked to our viewpoint about the state and its political function. Some people think the idea of democracy stands outside of any specific context. Accordingly, we must ask questions of such people: How can we determine if this country is a democratic society? In what context should we understand the notion of democracy? How does the matter of political-economic context shape the definition of democracy? In other words, why should we talk in terms of democracy when making references to the capitalist state? I want to suggest that political philosophy—political philosophy, which is critical of capitalist assumptions—is one approach toward the correct approach.

Subsequently, I am going to talk in terms of critique—particularly the concept of ideological critique. Why ideological critique? Ideology addresses the question

of worldview. An ideology frames how we see ourselves as individuals, groups, communities, and societies. And, hence, we begin to comprehend our place in the world. It follows that we value who we are in the world based on our worldview. In part, this requires that we look at our basic presuppositions and assumptions. So, therefore, how do we go about doing ideological critique?

First, we have to recognize that there are three levels of critique: empirical, conceptual, and ideological. They are not mutually exclusive. In other words, while you can do one and not the others; nevertheless, they can also be linked together. What is empirical critique? An empirical critique is concerned with the *current state of affairs*—in other words, the facts that surround any particular phenomenon.

An example of empirical critique would be the following: if someone were to say to you that in 1890 the Thirteenth Amendment was passed, you would know that empirically (factually) this statement was wrong. If someone wrote, "With the ending of slavery in the United States in 1890...", then, right away, we could offer an empirical critique with the adjoining explanation, "this statement is not factual." Most of you know it was the Thirteenth Amendment which abolished slavery. Furthermore, 1865 was the year in which the Thirteenth Amendment was passed. Clearly, 1890 was not the year this event actually happened. This counter-statement—concerning the year of the Thirteenth Amendment—would signify an empirical critique.

With empirical critique, we are looking at the facts surrounding the case. Subsequently, when you hear talk about "alternative facts," be aware of the need for bringing critical tools of analysis into the discussion. We should inquire about the facts of the case. It is not enough to juggle our conception about facts—adopt so-called alternative facts—without looking at the actual state of affairs. The factual context during a specific moment in time does not demand an alternative viewpoint. Instead, we seek to uncover and verify the facts of the matter. Now let us proceed to conceptual criticism.

What is conceptual critique? A conceptual critique is broader than an empirical critique. A conceptual critique is concerned with the *conceptual schemes* and *theoretical frameworks* which we employ in our analysis. This is important because we always operate with our conceptual schemes and theoretical frameworks, especially when making an examination of any important issue or significant problem. Conceptual schemes and theoretical frameworks allow us to move from the *description* of facts to the *definition* of things. This is why we usually have an operative conceptual scheme respecting politics. We also have our theoretical frameworks regarding the law. The same principle—about conceptual schemes—applies as well to the interpretation of history.

All of these factors come into play when we seriously consider politics, law, and history, not to mention the very nature of reality. Since we often not only differ with respect to our descriptions concerning reality but also the very definition of reality, it follows that these latter disagreements are often based upon how we employ

our respective conceptual schemes and theoretical frameworks.

For example, some people argue that the event that took place in 1776, which led to the formation of the United States, was a revolution. How many people have heard that? You can have a conceptual framework that frames the interpretation of history in such a fashion. With respect to African Americans, if that was a revolution—a democratic revolution—then this notion becomes a very difficult conceptualization. The conceptual difficulty resides in explaining the institution of slavery where African people remained chattel, brutally and violently forced to labor under the lash.

How could there have been a "democratic" revolution if millions of Black people were held in slavery? Why describe such important periods in history as Jeffersonian democracy or Jacksonian democracy, particularly since we know that both Jefferson and Jackson were slaveholders? Furthermore, they were not only slaveholders but also served as presidents of the United States. Additionally, Andrew Jackson was involved in so-called Indian Removal.

Based on our conceptual critique, how do we call Jackson a democrat? It is a fact; Jackson had a white popular following, indeed, racist popular support, many of whom advocated slavery and the removal of indigenous people from their land. Although we may call Jackson a white populist, we can't *conceive* of calling him a democrat. Conceptual critique requires uprooting conventional ideas. It is important to realize that "democracy" and "populism" are not identical concepts. Over the course of history, we discover that Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, and Franco in Spain were all populist as well as fascist. It follows that Jackson's populism does not of necessity point to democracy. We have to carefully inspect the functioning conceptual scheme and theoretical framework.

It should come as no surprise that Donald Trump finds in Andrew Jackson the best model for his presidency. As with Jackson, while Trump is a populist, he is yet far from advocating the form of democracy which would include you and me. This is why we must re-conceptualize the historical basis for notion of Jacksonian Democracy.

Trump very well realizes the historical grounds on which he stands when he turns to Andrew Jackson's historical legacy. The past presidential election and Trump's populism is rooted in a specific viewpoint on history. Accordingly, we have to reassess our own conceptual schemes and theoretical frameworks for the very interpretation of history. We must do so explicitly, if we intend to shed light on the lessons of history that are affixed to the recent presidential election.

Now, with ideological critique, we can employ both empirical and conceptual criticism for amplifying why the ruling ideology—worldview—emerges as misplaced, wrong, or incorrect for us and our interests. Quite evident from our prior discussion on the young student and the confusion about "united," engaging in ideological critique is not simply going on, on the internet.

The idea of ideological critique strikes at the foundations of one's worldview. Consequently, we are required to dig deeply into our own basic presuppositions and assumptions. Our basic presuppositions and assumptions inform who we are, where we are, and how we must chart the future. Ideological critique demands we raise questions about our basic social identity. In turn, what is the meaning of "We"? For instance, how should we understand the phrase "We the People?" Especially in light of slavery, segregation, and institutionalized racism, this question becomes very important.

How do we understand "We the People" in light of settler colonialism, which was a violent advancement—terrorism—against the indigenous people who occupied this land? How do we explain this as a *democratic process* and not declare it as institutionalized genocide? How do we explain the very borders that form part of what we know today hold between Mexico and the United States? All of these historical developments are part and parcel of imperialism and settler colonialism.

If we don't reconceptualize, have a new conceptual scheme, then how must we consider the attendant questions about these pressing issues of imperialism and settler colonialism? Without ideological critique, we can become confused about history and our present identity and status in this country. It is not enough that we rely on the "Alamo" story and mentality. The "Alamo" story and mentality are expressions of the particular ideology that supports building a wall between Mexico and the United States.

Our ideological critique raises a whole set of questions for consideration. For instance, how did Texas become part of the United States and subsequently emerge a slave state when, previously, as Mexican territory, there was no slavery? How do you explain this historical reality while subsequently stating it is necessary to build a wall against the people of Mexico, blocking "them" from entering what is the United States? What does it mean to talk about "We" and "They," given this racist and imperialist background? Whose interests are being served by such policies?

So, therefore, an ideological critique takes more than just exploring information on the internet. It takes the concerted effort and the awesome responsibility of taking up the tools of analysis for restructuring our worldviews. Without the intellectual tools of analysis, we are stuck at point A, lost and confused, talking about "them" as "illegal aliens," invading "our" country.

You ask, therefore, what are the tools that we need? Now I want to talk about three important tools: historical, philosophical, and political economic theories. With respect to the presidential election of 2016, if we want to think about this historically, we have to go back to the Constitutional Convention. The Constitutional Convention fundamentally shapes the contemporary discourse about "democracy."

We have to critically examine the developments surrounding the Constitutional Convention. We have to offer a conceptual critique of the Constitutional Convention. What happens

when we examine it closely in its historical details? Before the Constitutional Convention, before the U.S. Constitution was written, there was a group of people that came together to envision how that process would take place.

What developed was something called *The Federalist Papers*. If you look very closely at *The Federalist Papers*, one of the chief concerns was how do you restrict the masses of people from taking political power? So, the Constitutional Convention was not about guaranteeing that power went to "We the People at the bottom" but to safeguard "We the People at the top." The chief priority transpires with maintaining political power.

This is evident with how the Constitution was framed, for example, when we study deliberations on the question of slavery. At this period, most of the world had begun to move in the direction of abolishing the institution of slavery. England had already begun the process of abolishing slavery. The framers of the Constitution argued that slavery would be an essential part of the political-economic (capitalist) structure of this country. Yet, what happened in the newly formed United States? This political structure—Constitution—would sanction the institution of slavery. First, there was the extension of the slave trade—for another twenty years—until 1808.

Furthermore, the Constitution had provisions such that if a slave ran away from the slave-holder, it was the function and duty of the federal government to return the slave to his or her slave-master. That's why, during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln—on more than one occasion—made Union Generals return slaves back to Confederate slave-masters. Lincoln said the Civil War was not over slavery; the war was to save the Union. He announced he would do whatever he had to do to save the Union. Chiefly because the Union, the United States was founded on slavery. This fact is important for our reflection. Now we have to reconceptualize this so-called Revolution of 1776. And what set the stage for the framing of the Constitution.

A recent work by Dr. Gerald Horne—a very prolific scholar at the University of Houston—called *The Counter-Revolution of 1776* re-examines the issue as to why the developments surrounding 1776 were not revolutionary at all. Indeed, we observe that Horne points to *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*. Here, we have a fine example of ideological critique—a completely different conception of the realities surrounding the events of 1776.

Let's go back and look at the circumstances that led up to 1776. Slaves were rebelling. Slaves were resisting the institution of slavery. It became problematic for the continuance of slavery in light of slave resistance. There had to be a way of stopping that process. And one of the ways that became prominent among European colonial settlers was the establishment of a separate country. European colonial settlers—now called the United States—knew the institution of slavery was vital, crucial, and pivotal to their very existence.

They wanted to ensure that slavery would be primary and foundational. When we look at this counter-revolution

of 1776, one of the key debates centers on the British official, Lord Dunmore. Dunmore declared that if African slaves joined the British forces against the colonialists, he would grant Africans their freedom. And what did George Washington say? If you join us, you will retain your position as a slave. This counter-revolution was very important, you see, for maintaining the institution of slavery. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson were all slaveholders. They had personal as well as political interests in maintaining the institution of slavery. Their conception of democracy did not include Black people; indeed, their idea of democracy itself was founded on the enslavement of Black people. It should be clear now that history is a crucial tool in our ideological critique.

So, therefore, how do we understand the relationship of history to philosophy? Now, we often think of philosophy as merely speculation and contemplation about ideas, which have no relationship to our day-to-day existence. We think of philosophers as people who walk around in the clouds and are kind of cloudy in their makeup. They don't seem to know what's going on from day to day. We have the story about the Greek philosopher, Thales. It is said Thales was so busy speculating about the nature of reality that he failed to pay attention to where he was walking and fell in a ditch. However, philosophy can be very helpful to us, specifically if we have the right kind of philosophy. There is the wrong kind of philosophy—what we call philosophical idealism.

Philosophical idealism plays a key role in the makeup of the worldview that governs this country. Philosophical idealism is very important to the ruling class. This is because the ruling class seeks to perfect the illusion such that the masses do not resist but cooperate in their exploitation and oppression. Hence, rather than conflicting with—struggling against—their oppressors and exploiters, philosophical idealism tricks the masses into cooperating in their own oppression and exploitation.

The philosophical idealist viewpoint says that given the ideals embedded in the Constitution, we can conclude this is a great country. All we need to do is move toward those ideals. However, without examining the material conditions and material context which gave rise to the Constitution, philosophical idealism would like us to pull the Constitution outside of its context. Thus, with this ideal document, we can embrace it and proclaim it has some important truth embodied in it. There is something we can shoot for in this ideal document, something we can aim for. All we have to do is remove it—pull it out—from its historical context. And that's what we mean by philosophical idealism. Nevertheless, we have a viable option to philosophical idealism, namely, philosophical materialism.

If we adopt philosophical materialism, then we have to view things in their material conditions. We have to make a concrete analysis of concrete conditions. And in making a concrete analysis of concrete conditions, we don't just look at how things immediately appear. Therefore, the concrete and what is immediate are not the same thing. Many times, we observe that people say: "I'm a person that is more concrete. You have to give me something I can feel or touch."

However, that's not concreteness. That's empiricism—what I call vulgar empiricism. Because things may *appear* to be one way when, in fact, in essence they are another. And that's why ideology becomes so important; because it facilitates perfecting the illusion that everything is working fine. It fosters the illusion (the appearance) that all we need is the rain dance—every four years—and everything will work out.

Yet, when we go back and engage in the materialist philosophical examination of the U.S. Constitution, we find that the Constitution—besides preserving slavery—makes a very important point about how one can obtain a position on the Supreme Court. How many of you were involved in the last election for the Supreme Court Justice? You didn't do the rain dance, that is, vote for the Supreme Court justice. Can there be a recall if he or she didn't do their job well? Can we stand up and say we expect something better?

We can't recall this guy, Neil Gorsuch? How long can he stay? For life. You have to study your Constitution. The reason he can stay for life, as well as all the other Supreme Court justices including Uncle (Clarence) Thomas, is because the Constitution allows for that reality. This aspect of the Constitution was part of the material reality, the concrete conditions, which pertains to its ideological function. So, therefore, we can't do anything about the Supreme Court. The notion of some form of democratic intervention is effectively removed as an option.

Where else can we go? Let's look at the U.S. Congress. This is very interesting. You may not know the Senate was not open to popular elections when it was initially formed. How many know this fact about the Constitution? It took an amendment—the Seventeenth Amendment—to the Constitution to allow people to vote for the Senate. It happened in 1911, during the twentieth century, so that wasn't the original intent or plan. The original intent was for the Senate, just like the Supreme Court, not to be in the hands of the masses of people.

The third branch of government—the executive body—is the presidency. Notice what happens with the presidency. There is a popular vote for the presidency every four years. However, the framers of the Constitution came up with something that was so slick. It was a move that most people never think about because they are busy doing "the rain dance" every four years. Many people do not realize that after all the rain dances—every four years—there is something called the Electoral College. And what does the Electoral College provide? This is an instance where after the great majority express who they want, the Electoral College actually determines who becomes the president of the United States.

Now let's go back. What happened in the most recent presidential election? Is the popular vote the reason the current president became president of the United States? No. Think about that for a moment. Much of the discussion about the presidential election focuses on the character of the candidates that engaged in the election, namely, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump—discussion about what

they did or failed to do. Yet, I see very little discussion about the real “Trump card,” the Electoral College. I see very little discussion about the institutional and structural relationships that, in fact, ensure that the ruling class gets their particular person (in place) to run the (capitalist) system on their behalf.

When did another president obtain the office resulting from the Electoral College? Was it a long time ago? No. George W. Bush. Follow me closely now. Before we do an ideological critique, you have to look at the worldview, the basic presuppositions and assumptions that guide how we see the world, ourselves, and our place in it. When we begin to do that, we see immediately that the problem is structural. It’s institutional. And there is also a third concept, *system*. We have to understand the process systematically, not individually. Why is that important? Because some people argue that methodological individualism best explains this system and how it works.

Let me explain the concept of methodological individualism. Methodological individualism is the view that individuals are at the core of society; thus, society is an aggregate of individuals. It follows, when each of us go out and vote, this is an expression of democracy. And, therefore, we are all “free citizens,” since we have this right to vote on an individual basis. I must point out that methodological individualism masks what pertain to structural restraints, which limit individuals regarding their class position.

Given the nature of capitalist class relationships, each person accordingly does not have the same power—the same power within the real (existing) material relations of production. Subsequently, we have to move to our third tool—political economic theory. Political economic theory, hence, facilitates our critical understanding. Thus, we comprehend how capitalism—as a system—operates in the United States. This is a vital part of our critical examination of capitalism, our ideological critique at the foundational level of real (material) conditions of exploitation and oppression.

In critically understanding capitalism, what we find is that the notion of democracy has to be qualified by bourgeois democracy. That simply means capitalist democracy. This is why the title of my talk, “The Capitalist State,” accents how “democracy” signifies class interests. Hence, the notion of bourgeois democracy emerges as significant. And why is it important?

Precisely due to the fact that we can observe how the system may appear as democratic, yet remain inconsistent with our real (material) interests. Remember, how we define the system—capitalist state—demands more than merely offering a description. For example, the conventional description—everyone can vote after the age of 18—*apparently* demonstrates everyone can join the rain dance as adults. However, this description of voting as an expression of democracy does not deal with the essential reality, namely, the grave circumstances of material inequality and the powerlessness experienced by those that are poor and oppressed. Although this capitalist state allows for adult participation in voting, you cannot vote away the persistent reality of 47 million people living in

poverty. Additionally, elections do not transfer power from the wealthy to those that struggle for material existence and survival.

Let’s say you are unemployed, underemployed, or in poverty. Even when you work very hard each day to make a living, you find yourself falling short in meeting the basic needs of life. Are you then—because you can vote—in the same boat with Donald Trump? Can you say that since Trump was able to sit outside the political establishment and win the presidency that I too can become president of the United States?

We heard a lot of people give expression to such ideas when Barack Obama was president. A lot of people of color said there’s hope that one day I too can become president, because Barack Obama—a Black person—became president. We need to grasp that the notion of juridical equality—people are equal under the law—does not transfer in terms of shared material conditions. Indeed, the gap between the very wealthy and the poor is rapidly growing every day. This formal equality—supposedly under the law—is not an equality of material substance, not an equality of socio-economic content. It takes more than the declaration, “we put on our clothes the same way, so therefore we’re equal,” [for everyone to be really equal].

If you think that you are really equal, go tell the person that you work for what you really think about your working conditions and wages. If you do not have solidarity with your fellow workers on these issues, what do you think will happen? Actually, the next day you will get a pink slip! This is why I say that juridical equality masks the reality—perfects the illusion—that the oppressed and exploited, the poor and impoverished actually are powerless. Merely voting is only the semblance of power. This is why when somebody argues that you failed in your responsibility by not voting or that people died for the right to vote, let them know it’s all about the rain dance. When anyone proclaims you are not a good citizen because you didn’t vote, just say, “I have a worldview, one different than the rain dance worldview.”

Not long ago, with Obama’s election, many thought a fundamental change occurred within the political system, within the capitalist state. And in eight years, what happens? Donald Trump! Now, we have to understand this past election in political-economic terms. What Donald Trump declared: I’m not happy with the people we put in place. The people that run the capitalist State. Those administrators of the state must act in our behalf—the ruling class. Clearly, Trump represents a significant segment, especially those on the right-wing of the ruling class.

Trump’s view is that he would rather run the capitalist state, do it himself, not have others making political decisions and public policies for him and the like. How is he going to be able to do it himself? He has to manipulate the class contradictions that persist by utilizing the ideology of racism, the ideology of nationalism, the ideology of xenophobia, in order to develop a consciousness of “we” against “them.” How can we make this country white again? “We” as white, we as “American,” and “we” as “Christians”

effectively blurred the capitalist class contradictions for a considerable segment of white workers.

Now, this is important to appreciate; when you look at the presidential election, you have to go back to the primaries. The Democratic Party had an opportunity to win over the white working class. And they had a strong candidate who spoke to the white working class. But he spoke to the white working class, from the left of center—on the political spectrum. What's that guy's name from Vermont? Bernie Sanders. A lot of white working-class people thought Sanders was making some sense. However, Hillary Clinton and company, along with the Democratic Party National Committee, began to manipulate the debates. They maneuvered so that Bernie would not become the Democratic Party presidential nominee. The two-party system in the United States is a critical component of the rain dance. Bernie Sanders offered a different alternative, in terms of the rain dance, and they—the Democratic Party leaders—didn't like his class approach.

When Sanders was out of the picture, it opened the door for Trump to appeal to white workers. This political vacuum allowed Donald Trump to make his (right-wing) appeal to poor white people. Trump pronounced, "I speak for you. I'm a populist." However, I earlier stated, let's not confuse the term "populism" with "democracy." Consistently, fascism depends on populism to shore up its ideology. Study, very carefully, Mussolini. Study, very carefully, Hitler. Study, very carefully, Franco in Spain. What you will find is a fascist masquerading as a populist, one which depends upon nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. This is not new in history. But it is new if your world outlook, if your ideology, does not permit you to see beyond the framework of the rain dance.

When scrutinizing the character of the capitalist state, we have to understand that the state's involvement in the political economy is not intended to serve the interest of the masses. The only way the state will relinquish to mass interest is through the power of counter-struggle. When did that take place? Primarily during the Great Depression when Black people, working people, poor people, and groups like the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) fought. There wasn't any Social Security. Many of the social welfare programs that emerged as state programs were the result of intense class conflict. This conflict, this struggle, transformed how bourgeois society would operate in the future.

Additionally, the state was also attempting to find a solution to the economic crisis brought about by the Great Depression. Despite President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, what actually saved the country was World War II. You must read the British economist, John Maynard Keynes. Keynes states the old theories of political economy don't work and failed to explain capitalist crisis. Keynes was critical of Say's Law. Say's Law—the economic theory on the balance between supply and demand—Keynes held, does not work. The economic crisis demonstrated that the self-regulating markets required state intervention. We cannot neglect this important reality of capitalism; for the system to work, then the state needs to intervene. All

you have to do is construct a pie diagram. And as much as capitalists talk about privatization and on the significance of privatization, look very carefully who gets the biggest piece of the pie, regarding government expenditure.

Why is military spending the biggest part of the pie? Closely observe the Trump administration's proposed budget. The ruling class gains—profits—from military spending. Whether they drop a super bomb or not, many corporate powers gain from government contracts. Why all the talk about privatization? They simply want to cut out what working people had gained. The benefits attached to the so-called welfare state. The most appropriate concept should not be the welfare state? Rather, it is, more precisely, state monopoly capitalism. State monopoly capitalism provides us with an alternative ideological perspective on the character of the state.

So therefore, what we are examining—fellow students—are the institutions, structures and systems, the historical base and political economic foundation. The political economic foundation of capitalism, which is not in the interest of working people—no matter their race, nationality, or religious beliefs. Believe me, if you are going to make Islam the primary danger to this society, then you might as well tell everyone in the rain dance community, "if you don't dance, then it's going to dry up." Terrorism is not new to the United States. It didn't begin with Islam.

We cannot neglect the terrorism and bombing in Oklahoma (1923); it is not something new in the United States when Black Wall Street was bombed. Terrorism is not new; we only need to recount the history of lynching in the United States. That's terrorism. Terrorism set into place the possibilities for what we know today as *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In a twenty-year period from 1876 to 1896, there was a period of intense terrorism, which violently overturned the political gains that Black people forged during Reconstruction. It wasn't about another rain dance; they did not resort to voting in their seizure of political power. It was white racist terrorism—politics by others means—which led to Black oppression under segregation.

This historical reality, this political reality, we cannot forget and ignore. When *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) became the law of the land, it was only the aftermath, the justification of the existing order. Whenever you hear talk about law and order, be aware! Recognize, first, we have the (socio-economic) order, and then there is the law. Our talk about juridical equality—equality under the law—is not without its corresponding unequal (social) order, exploitive (economic) order, oppressive (racist/imperialist) order. If we steadfastly work on developing our alternative worldview, then, fellow students, we will discover that we will need to do more than just participate in the rain dance.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Studies, and Dr. Malik Simba, the founder and organizer of the African American Intellectual Thought Symposium, for their kind invitation. Also, thanks to my fellow symposium participants, Drs. Jeff Cummings and Lisa Bryant of the CSU-Fresno Political Science Department. UCLA Assistant Vice Chancellor of Government and Community Relations Mr. Keith S. Parker served as commentator, and I greatly appreciate his insightful remarks. Last, however, not least, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Stephen C. Ferguson II. He not only suggested that I submit this address to the newsletter but also assumed the arduous task of transcribing the audio format of my Keynote Address. Despite the generous assistance and cooperation from all the above parties, I am solely responsible for the viewpoints expressed in this essay.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy*

Justin E. H. Smith (Princeton, New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 2015), xi + 296 pp.; illustrated. Hardcover, \$ 39.95. ISBN 978-0-691-15364-3.

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With Anthony Appiah's seminal 1986 essay, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," and its companion piece, "Racisms" (published four years later), the philosophy of race was born. Appiah set the world on flame with his declaration: "The truth is that there are no races."<sup>1</sup> With his analytical lens and veiled positivist assumptions, Appiah set the philosophy of race on its present course. In contrast to the idealism of Appiah, it is important to recognize that race is a social category that emerges from historically determinate social relations, and, therefore, it is an object of social *scientific* investigation. This does not mean that race is a social construction.<sup>2</sup>

In rejecting Appiah's "Argument from Illusion," the contemporary philosopher of race tends to make several problematic moves. First of all, the social ontology of race has been conveniently abstracted away from class, capitalist exploitation, and bourgeois social relations. Few contemporary philosophers talk seriously about how racial inequalities in capitalist societies are rooted in the dominant social relations and power structures. Second, there has been a conspicuous tendency to endow race with "causal powers," which explains everything and nothing. And, lastly, the philosophy of race has operated on idealist premises—believing that we should focus on the problem of whiteness (e.g., the "whiteness of philosophy" and "philosophy's white gaze") rather than on racial inequalities. Unfortunately, there are some philosophers of race who believe that with the elimination of racial discourse, the social reality of racism will magically disappear into thin air.

Given this background, Justin Smith's book *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy* is an important contribution to the philosophy of race, particularly that "curious kink" of the human mind—our understanding of human differences and human nature. In

fascinating detail, Smith weaves his way through scientific and philosophical debates (from the early sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, from Christopher Columbus to Immanuel Kant) to reveal the gradual emergence of the race concept, specifically, how race came to be identified with "nature." Smith "aims to show all kinds of things, the kinds of people, that appeared to be carved out in nature itself in fact come into being in the course of human history as a result of changes in the ways human beings conceptualize the world around them" (3).

To his credit, Smith has no problem acknowledging racist ideology as an a posteriori rationalization of capitalist slavery. As historian Eric Williams writes in his 1944 classic *Capitalism and Slavery*, "Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery." Smith notes, "It is hard not to see [Francois] Bernier's proposal not as pure disinterested theorizing, but rather as a distillation of the emerging political preoccupation of his time and place: to provide an articulation in words that could impose some sense and legitimacy on an increasingly harsh and unequal system of labor extraction" (5). Bernier's 1684 publication *Nouvelle division de la terre par les différentes espèces ou races qui l'habitent* (*A New Division of the Earth*) is considered the first published modern classification of humans into distinct races using physical characteristics.

Smith summarizes his main argument as follow: "a crucial feature of the emergence of modern race concept was the collapse of a certain universalism about human nature, which had been sustained by a belief in a transcendent essence of the human soul, and this belief's gradual but steady replacement over the course of the early modern period by conception of human beings as *natural beings*, and thus as no less susceptible to classification in terms of a naturalistic taxonomy than any other natural being, plant or animal or mineral" (8). In other words, Smith argues that the social myth of racial inequality resulted from "an *overextension* of the project of biological classification" to human beings as part of nature (10).

Smith does not present a monolithic view of the "European mind" on race, human (ethnic) differences, and human nature. He seeks to offer a complex—if not contradictory—intellectual history. Smith's discussion of René Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz offers an insightful chapter in the history of philosophy and its connection with the development of racist ideology. In Chapter 7, "Leibniz on Human Equality and Human Domination," Smith argues that, for Leibniz, there is no "Great Chain of Being." Leibniz rejects the idea that there are essential differences between groups. Leibniz's position, Smith reasons, grows out of his philosophical system and his commitment to the ontological principle that the world consists in unity within diversity. Consequently, for Leibniz, unity in diversity extends from his metaphysics to his philosophical anthropology.

A particular strength of the book as a whole is the ease with which Smith draws on philosophical, scientific, and historical scholarship to provide what he terms a "historical ontology" of the period from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and the evolution of ideas about human difference. Smith's approach brings together the history

of philosophy and the history of science. His approach provides a historically informed and dialectical account of a period covering two centuries.

Some of the themes and debates covered by Smith will be relatively familiar to scholars who have worked in the philosophy of race. Yet, for the uninformed reader, Smith's first chapter provides a useful and accessible guide through current philosophical debates on race, with particular attention on social constructionism and cognitivist approaches. I must admit that Smith adds to the depth of contemporary debates, in addition to our overall knowledge, about the messy transition from ethnic differences to absolute racial differences and cultural inferiority within European intellectual culture.

I found much delight in reading chapter 8, "Anton Wilhelm Amo." Here, Smith engages in a philosophical debate about whether the Afro-German philosopher Anton Amo was a materialist or a dualist. Smith makes an interesting argument in contrast to Kwame Nkrumah, William E. Abraham, and John McClendon, who argue that Amo was a materialist. Smith's position is close to Kwasi Wiredu and Charles Leander Hill, who argue that Amo was a dualist. For Smith, Amo offers what he characterizes as a "radicalized version" of Cartesian dualism. Amo's commitment to Cartesian dualism, Smith argues, "provides the resources for a properly egalitarian and antiracist philosophical anthropology" (221). According to Smith, "Amo . . . inserted his own views within a broadly Leibnizian theory according to which mind and body harmoniously run on two distinct tracks, so to speak, while all of the states of the body unfold from entirely mechanical causes" (221). While Smith provides a well-reasoned position, I tend to agree with Nkrumah, Paul Hountondji, and McClendon that Amo is offering an *internal criticism* of vitalism and, more generally, Cartesian idealism.

Beyond the field of early modern philosophy as such, this book is useful for interdisciplinary approaches to the philosophy of race. Similar to Ian Hacking, Smith makes the history of science and scientific knowledge accessible to both specialists and general readers alike. When compared to the mumbo jumbo that makes up the cottage industry of the philosophy of race, this is a particular strength of the volume as a whole. I would recommend this book for all those interested in developing a better understanding of the origins of ideas about human diversity and race in modern philosophical thought. This book offers a well-thought-out and philosophically sophisticated reading of the transition to scientific racism and the race concept. This book could be the major text in a course on race and racism in Western philosophy. Indeed, this book is a useful companion to St. Clair Drake's *Black Folk Here and There*, Frank M. Snowden's *Before Color Prejudices: The Ancient View of Blacks*, Stephen J. Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*, Oliver C. Cox's *Race, Caste, and Class*, Alex Callinicos's *Race and Class*, or Robert Young's *Signs of Race in Poststructuralism*.

**NOTES**

1. Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 35. Appiah's Argument from Illusion rests on the positivist assumption that the natural sciences (in this case the biological sciences) have the last word on what exists in the world. It is no small matter that Appiah commits what could be called the naturalistic fallacy by presupposing that all ontological descriptions and accounts are confined to and exhausted by the natural sciences. Just because capital does not exist in nature does not mean that it is an ontological illusion. Rather, we seek to disclose the nature of capital through social scientific investigation. For critiques of Appiah's argument, see John H. McClendon, "On the Nature of Whiteness and the Ontology of Race: Toward a Dialectical Materialist Analysis," in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Questions*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 211–25.

2. See Stephen C. Ferguson II, "Exploring the Matter of Race: A Materialist Philosophical Inquiry," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, ed. Naomi Zack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 261–70.

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## *The Philosophical Treatise of William H. Ferris: Selected Readings from The African Abroad or, His Evolution in Western Civilization*

Tommy J. Curry (ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016). 264 pp. Hardcover, \$125.00. ISBN: 978-1-78660-032-5; paperback, \$41.95. ISBN: 978-1-78660-033-2.

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It has only recently become a worthy subject of interest in academic philosophy to take the scholarship of modern Black cultural anthropology, Black identity, and Black experience seriously. Therefore, Tommy Curry's selected edition of William H. Ferris's *The African Abroad* (1913) could not be timelier! A true intellectual and scholar in the classical sense, Ferris presents arguments seeking to interweave the future progress of Western civilization with the social and cultural uplift of Black men and women. He bases these arguments on the idea that literacy, political and economic capital, and devotion to the Christian faith are the ways by which Black people may stand to prosper. Ferris is less concerned with pointing the finger and finding fault with one's enemies and is more motivated to cultivate means and ways of Black self-improvement. Philosophical ideas are not detached from cultural conditions and historical predicaments. That is why Ferris is concerned with the relationship of social developments that nurture human agency, particularly Black agency, in the unfolding of human history.

While W. E. B. DuBois's *Suppression of the Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (1896) and George Washington William's *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880* (1882) were considered masterpieces in the study of Black people in the early twentieth century, Ferris still saw the need for constructing a more thorough Black historiography. He believed that "no discriminating accounts of colored history-makers have been written yet. All of the books eulogizing the great Negroes lack the historian's perspective" (198). *The African Abroad* is

Ferris's response to that need for a more thorough Black historiography, exploring the meaningful contributions of African peoples to the triumphs and tribulations of Western civilization. For Ferris, it is through a "native poetic imagination" that the Negro race bestows the gift of being "vivid word painters," or what Ferris calls the "gift of gab" (162-63). There is also a peculiar adaptability and perseverance revealed in the sufferings of uprootedness that Black people have endured. Ferris contends that plasticity is what psychologically differentiates the Negro from other races: "The Negro has a remarkable ability in adjusting himself to a varied and changing environment. That is why he thrives under changed surroundings, where other races perish" (175). But it is not enough to address the economic and environmental conditions of the Negro when writing a history of the contributions that African peoples have made to Western civilization. One also needs to study the "precious traits" of the race. This leads Ferris to posit his concept of the Negrosaxon.

Ferris argues that the term "Negrosaxon" better characterizes the mixed descent of African Americans than does the derogatory term "Negro." Ferris readily admits the term "Negrosaxon" has a certain queerness to it, but its positive potential cannot be understated. Its positive potential is the realization that one cannot understand what it means to an American without recognizing this unsettling paradox: Anglo-Saxons and Negrosaxons must cooperate despite their lingering differences because they both are necessary components of being American. In fact, the Negrosaxon could not exist without African peoples first being integrated into Anglo-Saxon civilization, but without completely becoming Anglo-Saxons themselves. Readers should keep in mind that Ferris's notion of Anglo-Saxon civilization is quasi-global, almost cosmopolitan, constituted by an array of heritages. It is a "stream that is fed by currents from Hebrew, Greek, Roman and German thought. It is a thread into which are woven strands of Hebrew monotheism, Greek art and philosophy, Roman law, German mysticism and philosophy and Anglo-Saxon aggressiveness and reverence for women" (209).

By re-envisioning the eminent value of individual freedom as achievable only by means of Anglo-Saxons and Negrosaxons co-existing, Ferris paves the road for an ethno-pluralism in which pride of people and place can be managed without succumbing to a vulgar tribalism. The Negrosaxon serves as a reminder that most colored Americans are mixed people and that American culture is the result of intermixing between peoples. Such an orientation of intermixing speaks to the intensely blended American character better than many of the popular grand narratives about America being a "melting pot" or that Americans being "the Chosen Nation."

Yet, readers may be shocked by Ferris's unapologetic praises of the white man like this one: "If the Negrosaxon expects to share in the political inheritance of the Anglo-Saxon, he must be made over in the likeness of the Anglo-Saxon. He cannot bleach out his complexion, or straighten his hair, or sharpen his nose, thin his lips. But in mind and character and disposition he must become a black white man. After the Negrosaxon has been made over into the

likeness of the white man he can hope to be made over into the image of God" (205). Or this one: "There is DuBois—what, is there Negro about him, except that he is one fourth Negro by blood and descent? While he has the poetical nature and tropical imagination and gift of language of a Negro, in intelligence, pride and sensitiveness, he is an Anglo-Saxon of the bluest blood" (205-206). Such esteem for *white* civilization cannot be misconstrued as a false sense of superiority or be read absent his scathing critique of the systematic dehumanizing, ill-treatment of the Black race. Ferris argues that Negrosaxons can exemplify the values of freedom so dear to *white* civilization better than white Anglo-Saxons can themselves. This means that Negrosaxons can be better stewards of *white* civilization than white ethnic groups.

Negrosaxons have a knack for re-inventing themselves, and isn't that the essence of the American dream? It should come as no surprise, then, that those nine traits Ferris portrays in the Negro (taken in Ferris's derogatory sense) have been amplified with the explosion of American entertainment and social media in the form of sports, movies, and music. Qualities once deemed as "Negro" vices—"immoral, to have a happy-go-lucky disposition, to be jealous of his fellows, to be deceitful, to be imaginative, oratorical, musical, emotionally religious, and imitative" (161)—have become American virtues. In other words, Anglo-Saxon privilege is not exclusively for white folks. The things that Anglo-Saxons desire to attain are not different from those things desired by Negrosaxons. With its emphasis on individual freedom, the American way of life promotes personal success and equality of opportunity. That way of life is not the exclusive possession of a preordained group or race. In fact, Ferris believes this way of life is the destiny of divine providence, working toward the realization of individual freedom for all. American ideals and symbols of freedom are to be exported around the world through the Negrosaxon as an expression of hope and opportunity. Ferris's philosophy should be of interest to contemporary readers since it challenges us to re-think and question what it means to be white or Black in fresh ways.

There is great potential in Ferris's *The African Abroad*, but there is much work that still needs to be done. Ferris captures the urgency of the inquiry without succumbing to the tidiness of dialectical sublations and metanarratives of history notorious in the tradition of high German Idealism. The conflicts between individuals and groups are resolved in God's evolutionary processes as they unfold in human history, without the individuality of individual persons being swallowed up by the Absolute. At the heart of Ferris's philosophical orientation, readers will find a high regard for the development of genuine individuality, which is the telos of human history.

It would be shortsighted to view Ferris's philosophy as simply an updated version of his teachers' work at Harvard and Yale (e.g., William James, Josiah Royce, and George T. Ladd) and his colleagues in the American Negro Academy (e.g., Du Bois). Following the spirit of John Edward Bruce's 1917 essay, "The Importance of Thinking Black," Curry shows how Ferris the Black thinker ought to be respected on his own terms.<sup>1</sup> In Curry's reading of *The African*

Abroad, Ferris's philosophy of history serves to offer "a metaphysical account of why Black American identity is exceptional, why Black Americans have been placed in the belly of empire, so to speak [and] provides a lens to think about the racial identity of Black citizens beyond the dichotomies of separation and integration" (47). It also provides an important alternative to popular narratives and genres in the study of race, class, and sex by a Black thinker studying Black people. These two things are Ferris's unique contribution to Black thought and, by extension, to the cosmopolitan realization of human freedom.

#### NOTES

1. John Edward Bruce, *The Selected Writings of John Edward Bruce: Militant Black Journalist*, ed. Peter Gilbert (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 131–33.

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