

Good Intentions Are Not Enough: A Response to Kal Alston's "Race Consciousness and the Philosophy of Education"

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It was not so long ago that in liberal circles it was considered impolite to talk about race or "difference" or color. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison wdiscourse

ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body.¹

In public discourse this color-blind stance, the idea that we are all the same under our skins and that this sameness as persons is what really matters, still dominates. Essential "sameness" is assumed to be the great equalizer of the past injustices of race essentialism and "unnoticing" is believed by many to be the only correct anti-racist stance. (For example, arguments which claim that affirmative action disadvantages and stigmatizes minorities are premised on such a belief.) Yet, as theorist Ruth Frankenberg has pointed out, one of the ironies of unnoticing is that any mention of color is considered racist, and thus nonwhiteness becomes bad in and of itself.²

Contemporary academic discourse's embrace of "difference" is also not without its ironies -- for a power imbalance remains despite our good intentions. White remains unmarked -- the norm, the center -- while difference is that which is "outside," or "beyond," or "Other." To some extent, race remains a "non-white" issue, the problem solely of persons of color. Thus, in our efforts to be inclusive, to "let the Other be other," European-American scholarship remains the subject of the gaze, and the narratives of "Others" become the raw material which we consume, analyze, and deconstruct. Homi Bhabha writes:

[s]ignificantly, the site of cultural difference can become the mere phantom of a dire disciplinary struggle in which it has no space or power...[T]his strategy of containment [is] where the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation. The Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment.³

Of course, by starting out this way, I set myself up to fall into the same trap, for as a European-American scholar responding to a paper of a African-American academic, I run the risk of similarly appropriating, objectifying, or misinterpreting Kal Alston's arguments and experiences. Thus, I offer my response as tentative and partial, cautioned by Alston's claim that in the hindsight of the subaltern's testimony, "the possibility of truth, as shared understanding is limited at best."

In her powerful paper "Race Consciousness and the Philosophy of Education," Kal Alston challenges us to interrogate the unintended consequences of philosophy's presumed racelessness and suggests three areas which the philosophy of education must interrogate in order to achieve race consciousness. These are: philosophy's perception of itself as a theoretical pursuit distinct from worldly action, our belief in the righteousness of liberal ideals such as rationality and caring, and our trust that truth is always shared and absolute. According to Alston, race conscious philosophy of education is not merely a catalogue of omissions and biases, but must challenge the meta-narratives and structures underlying philosophical discourse.

Reminding us that "the experience of the subaltern does not eliminate the importance of reason so much as it points to the absurdity of reliance on rationality as a guide to right and just behavior," Alston argues that history and the day-to-day existence of the subaltern necessarily challenge liberalism's blind faith in rationality's potential for enlightenment, progress, and justice. Likewise, the lived experiences of subaltern subjects highlight the shortcomings of Mother/care as a correct-all for androcentric individualism. Neither autonomy nor connectedness is sufficient, Alston argues, for the life experiences of the subaltern reveal their exploitation as well as their liberation under these ideals.

Despite these criticisms, Alston rejects neither rationality nor connectedness but argues instead for a race conscious philosophy of education which is defined by what she calls a "pragmatic infusion of suspicion." She calls for a shift in methodology, a rejection of the totalization of liberal ideals, advocating a philosophy of education grounded in the pragmatism of everyday concerns. Blind faith, belief, and trust are to be replaced with suspicion and wariness, states of mind which emphasize self-reflection and self-interrogation rather than paranoia or skepticism. In the classroom this would mean that concepts such as "fairness" and "safety" become context dependent, inseparable from the situatedness of those individuals to which they apply. Texts and educational mandates which seem "fair" or "safe" to some students might be oppressive to others. Not for everyone, is history "our glorious past." Alston's "pragmatic infusion of suspicion" calls for educators to acknowledge what Deanne Bogdan has named the "feeling, power, and location problems"⁴ of differently situated individuals. For Alston, race consciousness involves not the annihilation of liberal principles but the dismantling of totalizing meta-narratives, using lived experience as the barometer to measure and question abstractions, to bring us, quite literally, down to earth.

The second half of Kal Alston's paper is itself an example of such *praxis*, philosophy grounded in everyday experience, history, and memory. Here, Alston's arguments circle back to her body and her lived experience, where race *does* matter. She refuses what she identifies as the comfort of a philosophy where "even when the body is the subject of inquiry, half the time it becomes an idea." Using autobiographical prose which is both self-reflexive and self-interrogative, Alston attests to what it is like to be "other," to be the object rather than the subject of the gaze, to live the paradox of being overly visible to others but nearly invisible to oneself. Her memories tell of oppression which co-exists with liberal ideals, a powerful testimony which challenges the complacency of theoretical abstraction and thus the complicity of philosophy in perpetuating systems of oppression.

Alston's paper is evidence that the "pragmatic infusion of suspicion" is necessary for the subaltern's survival. She further suggests that such self-reflexive wariness has the potential to enhance "the dominants' racial self-understanding." While resisting a formulaic solution, Alston invites other philosophers of education to enter the ongoing conversations and struggles of the subaltern, entreating us "to find [our] own lights, [our] own questions, and [our] own conflicts." For me, her paper suggests that race conscious philosophy of education demands more than the inclusion of "other" voices and must go beyond the words on the pages of multicultural anthologies. In order to truly comprehend the voice of the subaltern and to participate in anti-racist struggles, European-American philosophers of education such as myself must reflect not only upon "race" as an (external) object of study, but how we ourselves are "raced," or rather how whiteness has been "erased" by both public and philosophical discourse. My body becomes my reality check. I use embodied criticism and felt-situated writing to remind myself that I am a living, breathing inhabitant of the tangible world, pinching myself when I misrecognize my reflection as "Otherer" on the screen and in the text.

In closing, let me stress that if we are serious about making the philosophy of education race conscious, we face many difficult challenges ahead. No doubt, there will be resistance to interrogating the whiteness/racelessness of philosophy as well as continued attempts to whitewash the norms of liberal discourse. Moreover, upsetting the status quo of everyday discourse in which "white" is unmarked and all others are "persons of color" requires both caution and our recognition

of the possibility of what Leslie Roman calls "white defensiveness,"⁵ the appropriation of the language of victimization by the dominant in order to maintain the (im)balance of power. Furthermore, the pain, guilt, and self-loathing European-American philosophers of education feel when (mis)recognizing themselves in the personal narratives of both insiders and outsiders are potential obstacles to constructive change. Urged by Alston not to be deterred by guilt or history which implicates European-American culpability and continued complicity in racial oppression, we must guard against political paralysis, retreatism, and defeatism, confronting the cynicism, despair, and defensiveness prompted by such emotional revelations.

From positions of relative privilege it will be especially difficult to relinquish the dreams of our liberal faiths, especially if our beliefs in the ideals of progress, enlightenment, and caring seem to be "paying off." However, the current political climate in which the language of liberalism is used to justify racist xenophobia and the villainization of the dispossessed should serve as our reality check, a reminder that neither colorblind optimism nor multicultural panaceas are working. Denizens of the ivory tower, academic philosophers strive to "do the right thing" and be "the fairest of them all." Kal Alston's paper disenchants us from narcissistic self-congratulation, challenging our fetishization of abstract principles to remind us that good intentions are not enough.

1. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9-10.

2. Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 145.

3. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 31.

4. Deanne Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination: Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook Publishers Heinemann, 1992), ch. 6.

5. Leslie G. Roman, "White is a Color! White Defensiveness, Postmodernism, and Anti-racist Pedagogy," in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*. ed. Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (New York: Routledge, 1993), 71.