

## Race Consciousness and the Philosophy of Education

**Kal Alston**

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

INTRODUCTION: BEDTIME STORIES (NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED  
TO PROTECT THE INNOCENT, THE GUILTY, AND THE CONFUSED)<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, little Iced Mocha went to visit with her friends, Snow White, Rose Red, the bears, the dwarves, the pigs, the wolves -- you know, the regular conference crowd. Race chats seemed to be the vogue. Everywhere she turned, beloved fairy tale characters were carrying baskets of Toni Morrison and her musings on Whiteness and the literary imagination to grandmother's house. And two whole hours in two different storylines were to be devoted to public contemplation on race. She was impressed. Then in the storylines, a funny thing happened. Somehow the time got away from us. Like Cinderella, the group stepped away from the race question dance under the press of the clock. Iced Mocha was kind of bemused, then she got mad, then she got mad at herself for confining herself to ironic remarks under her breath to Rumpelstiltskin and a few other odd balls. So she decided to write her own manifesto in three parts: a few suggestions about the conjoining of race consciousness and philosophy of education; an invitation into the life-world of the "other"; and a concluding suggestion about transforming perspectivism and the impulse/praxis of liberation.

On the handout of abstracts, it was said no abstract was available. It did and does, however, exist and this is it, in part: This essay seeks to bring to the surface questions about race and difference that have remained submerged in philosophy of education discourse, as well as in the particular world of the Philosophy of Education Society. The author wishes to express a longing, a history, a call. The author wishes to incite the audience to an honest appraisal of self-interest, to come out from the safety of philosophy to experience themselves and their profession as racially situate. This is a manifesto of love, anger, fear, and trembling.

### PART ONE: PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS

But on the other hand, it must be becoming increasingly clear to some, at least, that all of us are standing in the same deep shadow, a shadow which can only be lifted by human courage and honor. Many still hope to keep their honor and their safety, too.<sup>2</sup>

What would it mean to be race conscious in the practice of philosophy of education? To talk more about dark people and their educational problems? To invoke political theories of equality and freedom for the improvement of the social lot of people of color? To try to dig out racial biases in philosophical positions or in the profession? I think that several moves are required. Here I am only going to sketch out three areas of fruitful and necessary work: First, philosophy's own view of itself as purely contemplative must be put in question; second, the liberal faiths, whether in rationality, caring, or in education itself shall be displaced; third, the quest for truths will be interrupted.

Plato envisioned philosophy practiced by the older and wiser crowd, and Aristotle, who generally took action seriously, conceived philosophy as a game for those with leisure to spare. Plato even recognized that some women were necessary for the reproduction of the golden children. There was no allowance for the practice of philosophy by the dusky, dark, leaden folk, the stranger/other, those without whom the food would not be cooked, the wine poured, the perspiring philosopher-brow fanned. Philosophers are in bodies but not of them and in philosophy they are removed from the

press of materiality. That patina, disrupted many times by the subversive activities of flesh and blood philosophers, nevertheless clings to the discipline. So that there is suspicion on all sides: for those who hang their hopes of change in racial relations on the sciences, from sociology to biology to psychology; for those who want to conserve philosophy. For the former, philosophy is irrelevant and philosophy of education is not a particularly filling appetizer, if that, to the "real" jobs of fixing education, of dismantling the racist assumptions, biases, and practices that distort American schooling. On this account philosophers of education do not contribute to the accumulation of data necessary for changes in policy. Philosophers themselves have a vested interest in holding on to the privilege (thin and worn as it may be) of the philosophic. (This happens in many contexts -- even when the particular philosopher may be quite critical of mainstream philosophical traditions. As when Noretta Koertge suggested that feminist philosophers develop feminist ideas, which are then diluted at every step until they arrive in colleges of education from whence badly educated teachers spread a popularized and incomplete version of those ideas to students and the public -- allowing mainstream criticism of feminism to be based on distortions and misreadings of the original ideas.) Philosophy and philosophy of education can look to Critical Legal Studies as a potential model, taking up the traditional studies of race not simply as grist for the critical mill but as contributory texts to philosophical debates.

There is room both for asking new questions in old forms, for example, questioning assumptions about race, who is raced in particular contexts, what sort of category race is, whether its status is singular or multiple, how particular American histories have led to its idiosyncratic paranoias about race -- especially between black and white. At the same time, the opportunity arises to question the practices of philosophy itself, the comfort of its language, privileges, and strategies and how being a philosopher can itself evade the question of race by falling back on history and custom. Philosophers can begin by questioning their own presumed racelessness.

The question may well arise whether this is simply a variant on a familiar theme -- whether the call for race consciousness is a new take on the feminist demand for a reconsideration of the boundaries and content of the educated person.<sup>3</sup> However, the call comes at a time when it is reasonable to question the optimism of liberal faith. That faith is problematic in its assumptions about education and its benefits for the rational, autonomous, rights bearing individual. 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. The subjection of certain races and people in American history has not been the consequence of the whim of a willful child but rests on the ability of reason to buttress reason. And being admitted to the ranks of the autonomous individual does not perhaps constitute the dreams of the subaltern, since too often survival is conditioned on the presence of and the watchful eye of the group.

This is not, however, easily collapsed into the Gilligan-ite alternate universe of webs and meta-mother love. Mother/care is of course not foreign to the subaltern, but motherhood has not been the exalted experience for many women who have been made to leave their own children to be maternal to others' children in their charge. These women live in a world in which the labor of the subaltern continues to be exploited in order to accord more freedom and flexibility to the beneficiaries of expanded equality. This is not a competition over oppression. It is a recognition that the yield of liberal faith is paltry and not always tempting to those who do not share their life-worlds with the power elites.

The old orders [never redeem themselves without coercion], less because they would not than because they cannot. They cannot because they have always existed in relation to a force which they have had to subdue. This subjugation is the key to their identity and the triumph and justification of their history, and it is also on its continued subjugation that their material well-being depends.<sup>4</sup>

In some ways this call for race consciousness is precisely conditioned upon and defined by a pragmatic infusion of suspicion -- not that the old ways do not work but that they have been far too efficient in suppressing the development and well-being of the subaltern (at the same time that it has

distorted the possibility of the dominants' racial self-understanding). So the possibility of truth as shared understanding, belief, and experience is limited at best.

One may see that the history, which is now indivisible from oneself, has been full of errors and excesses; but this is not the same thing as seeing that, for millions of people, this history -- oneself -- has been nothing but an intolerable yoke, a stinking prison, a shrieking grave. It is not so easy to see then, for millions of people, life itself depends on the speediest possible demolition of this history, even if this means the leveling, or the destruction of its heirs. And whatever this history may have given to the subjugated is of absolutely no value, since they have never been free to reject it; they will never even be able to assess until they are free to take from it what they need, and to add to history the monumental fact of their presence.<sup>5</sup>

## PART TWO: I KNOW I AM BUT WHAT ARE YOU: MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE

The circle is centered on silence:  
the cave in the heart of the rose,  
the core of the apple where ebony seeds form,  
the eye of the mandala where vision whites out.  
The circle with no circumference is the pole of  
the journey and return in epicycles.<sup>6</sup>

My skin is hot; I've been told that "it must be strange not to blush" when what the person means is that I don't turn visibly red. But I blush I know I can feel the creep of the heat across my face, my throat, my shoulders, my chest. But what good is it to blush if noone can see it through the melanin screen? Does this mean I do not feel shame or maidenly embarrassment? It is a reminder at least of how important it is to be seen. When I am in a large crowd of white-skinned people, it is sometimes (not always, mind you) a bit tricky to remember my own face. I don't think that I am white although that is all I see in view in this room of alumni or faculty or philosophers. When I was an adolescent, I used to study my face in the mirror and my parents' and brother's to remind myself of who I was, in the absence of reflection in even the most beloved of blue eyes. For it was my brother and I who would run shrieking through the house, "There's a *Negro* on TV! There's a *Negro* on TV!" when we spotted Eartha Kitt or Diahanne Carroll or Sammy Davis, Jr. As if that were evidence that we existed in more than the mind's eye.

Is that what it feels like to be the "other," always to hold on through your suspicion that if they close their eyes, you will disappear? To be created by the gaze and held prisoner to it -- even when it cannot mask its contempt and its fear. To be raped because in his mind there is no such thing as a seventeen year-old Black virgin. Eyes locked in mutual disbelief. This can't be happening to me. You Do Not Exist. Wearing white gloves in public in the daytime and repeating the catechism that people who call you "nigger" are just ignorant. They don't know any better. You should feel sorry for them. I still wait for them to smash pumpkins in my driveway every Halloween. Or kill me with kindness like the old alumnus who, when I interviewed his grandnephew, told me how nice it was for the college to have such a nice Negress such as myself on staff. There's something endlessly gracious and terminally soul-destroying about that.

What is the fear? Of difference? Not quite. Of what will come out in the dark, in the darkies, of what will happen if one becomes the gazed upon instead of the gazer. When they get mad they burn stuff. Their own stuff, isn't that stupid? Black people did not own the land in Watts or in South Central or in Harlem.

James Baldwin:

Those who rule in this country...cannot afford to change it. They would not know how to go about changing it, even if their imaginations were capable of encompassing the concept of black freedom but this concept lives in their imaginations, and in the popular imagination, only as a nightmare. Blacks have never been free in this country, never was it intended that they should be free, and the spectre of so dreadful a freedom -- the idea of a license so bloody and abandoned -- conjures up another, unimaginable country, a country in which no decent, God-fearing white man or woman can live. A civilized country is, by definition, a country dominated by whites, in which the blacks clearly know their place.<sup>7</sup>

Maybe it's not the skin. Warm like coffee or dusky or deep almost blue or so light who could even know. Maybe it's the blood. One drop and you're busted. This is a true and funny and sad story. I met this woman in college, I never really thought about her race, which means I thought she was white. I was the one who had constantly to worry about race. (Will they like me? Will they like me? Will they like me? I wouldn't be 18 again if you paid me.) There was a big scandal in her sorority. (It had tried to recruit me as the Sidney Poitier of Sigma Kappa. I declined.) The word was out. She was "passing." Now I was aghast. Was she really Black trying to pretend she was white? And her BROTHER too???? So dishonest and she was so snooty to me too. But then I realized that she had one Caucasian parent and one light-skinned Black parent (what does that even mean in the twisted, sick, desperate history of unspoken miscegenation in America??). So if she said she was white or if the question never came up -- which I'm sure it didn't since she looked like Nancy Kerrigan with slightly curlier hair and bushier eyebrows -- why is that passing? She had at least as many Euro-genes as Afro-genes if not more. Didn't Pirandello say You are if you think you are? Funny because everybody just knocked themselves out over the quest to locate her race -- genes, color, blood, manners were of no help. Only history, the comfort of history, in which all the players agree to be categorized and kept in place according to the wish of the guys in charge. If she'd been born in Louisiana in 1830, she'd have had her own house and slaves and maybe sent her children to school in France. And sad because I heard that she refused to have her 'colored' parent come to the campus even after her secret was out. Sad.

I can only try to make sense of the borders obliquely, for example in my poem "Border Love Song."

Shadows of my travels from that land  
to this  
move sometimes with lightning speed so fast  
you cannot catch me or even see where I have been  
sometimes slow and painful  
drawn between us  
heavy velvet curtains with dusty fringe  
I am singing today and on the end  
of a note, the last of a triplet  
there is vibration there is ululation there are  
echoes between  
you and me  
vibrato that drips  
honey  
wine  
tears  
blood  
the memory of you sweet and metallic  
dark sisters mine.

The blood reminds me of the body. How comforting philosophy is. Even when the body is the subject of inquiry, half the time it becomes an idea. Enthusiasm and desire can surround it but there is no blood. Somehow we do not need to wait for the latest plagues to remind us of the contamination, the nastiness of blood. What the blood carries. What it threatens is our drowning. A friend told me a story of growing up in the deep South. One day he and his mother went to the laundromat. There was a sign that said Whites Only on the door. He worried the whole time they were there because his mother had not just brought the sheets and towels but the rest of the clothes. His mother was a free spirit and tried to protect him from the downside of reality. I don't know how old he was -- old enough to read anyway. But I do know that no black child could reach that age without having been told the meaning of that sign. Survival demanded it. And there is the struggle: to know who you are in the eyes of the culture of power and not to lose yourself in that despairing inhuman vision. I was born in Greensboro North Carolina. (10) I have very few memories of being

there -- I remember reciting "Twas the Night before Christmas" for the pageant sitting in a rocking chair, wearing a white felt circle skirt with a reindeer on it. I remember watching Kennedy's funeral on television. I remember my parents keeping a sharp watch some nights because Miss BeauLiware, our across the street neighbor, was a Woolworth's sitter-in. And I remember my mother crying because there had been a school bus accident. And the ambulance refused to take the children to the nearest hospital because they were Black and the hospital was white. So some children died by the time they got them to L. Richardson. The hospital where I was born. It was years before I understood that my mother was gripped by the despairing knowledge that those children could just as easily have been her children drowning in blood and choking on vomit. And her children were just little colored children who would not be seeing the inside of that white hospital if their lives depended on it. But I knew that day, watching my mother cry, that there was a lie in that song:

Jesus loves the little children,  
all the children of the world,  
red and yellow, black and white  
they are precious in his sight,  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

I think now that given the choice of how to fill us up, my parents chose to shut out despair in favor of hope, to turn away from cynicism to the promise of transformation. They saw the conditions for our survival in Fanon's contention: "we only become what we are by a deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us."

The mother in Audre Lorde's takes a different tack:

Yet when I was a child  
whatever my mother thought would mean survival  
made her try to beat me whiter every day  
and even now the color of her bleached ambition  
still forks throughout my words  
but I survived  
and didn't I survive confirmed  
to teach my children where her error lay  
etched across their faces between the kisses that she pined me with asleep  
and my mother beating me  
as white as snow melts in the sunlight  
loving me into her blood black bone  
the home of all her secret hopes and fears

Colonization, as Michelle Cliff suggests, is being rendered insensitive, having those parts necessary for survival numbed, and then perceiving this anesthetized state as privilege. This is the consequence of abdicating responsibility for one's own self, giving over all the descriptive power of identity to someone else, blurring the edge between refusing to show one's self to hostile others and losing touch with the real because of the strain of enacting.

## CONCLUSION

We seek not rest but transformation.  
We are dancing through each other as doorways.  
We are ripples crossing and fusing, journeying and returning  
from the core of the apple, the eye of the mandala,  
the cave in the heart of the rose,  
the circle without boundaries centered on silence.<sup>8</sup>

The black and white confrontation, whether it be hostile, as in the cities and the labor unions, or with the intention of forming a common front and creating the foundations of a new society, as with the students and the radicals, is obviously crucial, containing the shape of the American future and the only potential of a truly valid American identity. No one know precisely how identities are forged,

but it is safe to say that identities are not invented: an identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience.<sup>9</sup>

Angela Davis has suggested that change can only be accomplished if every different constituency of any coalition has its own interest at heart. Condescending or paternalistic help is no help at all, but when you see the connection of your struggle to the success of mine, we can live through our differences. I cannot tell others what to do, because I am an outsider inside. What I can suggest for the present question is that philosophers of education should find their own lights, their own questions, their own conflicts as a way of entering ongoing conversations and struggles. That they should not let guilt, or history, or will deter them from confronting themselves and their interests and their work seriously and without masks. That they should consider broadening their rhetorical and logical strategies of communication and understanding -- beyond pure linguistic argumentation -- to include other forms of intellectual engagement -- performance, narrative, visual texts -- which nevertheless engage the philosophically critical imagination. That they should submit to the scrutiny of a prophetic, embodied, pragmatic practice -- which interrogates experience, allows for the catalytic expression of affect, and challenges the intellectual niches in which we hide from ourselves and from the other.

By the way, Little Iced Mocha? She lived...ever after.

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2. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Dell, 1986), 136-37.

3. Jane Roland Martin, "The Ideal of the Educated Person," *Educational Theory* 31, no. 2: 97-109.

4. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 46.

5. *Ibid.*, 46-47.

6. Marge Piercy, *Women on the Edge of Time* (New York, Fawcett, 1985).

7. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 179.

8. Piercy, *Women on the Edge of Time*.

9. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 189.

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