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A Review of George Yancy's *Reframing the Practice of
Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*

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BOOK REVIEW

A Cadre of Color in the Sea of Philosophical Homogeneity: On the Marginalization of African Americans and Latino/as in Academic Philosophy

A Review of Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge

George Yancy, ed. (Albany: SUNY, 2012). 393 pages.

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For readers interested in acquiring insight into the plight of people of color in academic philosophy, particularly the predicament of African Americans and Latino/as in the field, *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy* is incredibly illuminating while simultaneously upsetting. Each essay tackles tough questions of inclusion and exclusion in ways that reveal an assortment of biases and structural flaws latent to professional philosophy. "The attempt to explore and explicate the lack of African Americans and Latinos/as in the field of philosophy," Yancy writes, "actually resulted in a much broader and comprehensive text that uncovered complex and multifaceted issues such as alienation, institutional prejudices, insidious racism, canonical exclusion, linguistic exclusion, nonrecognition, disrespect, white hegemony and power, discursive silencing, philosophical territorial arrogance, and indignation" (2). The volume is a powerful, self-conscious, and exigent analysis of one of the whitest fields in academia. More honest conversations like this must take place in order for our field to reinvent itself along more equitable lines, assuming that this is indeed a collective goal.

Almost every essay addresses one or more of the above issues through insightful argumentation infused with autobiographic prose—a hallmark of several of Yancy's volumes. The contributors comprise a prominent list of active Latino/a and Black voices in professional philosophy, many of whom specialized in more "mainstream" areas of philosophy prior to delving into such topics as philosophy of race, feminist theory, Latin American philosophy, Caribbean philosophy, African philosophy, and more. Through their efforts, the volume asks meta-philosophical questions about the nature and practice of philosophical inquiry in societies shaped by legacies of racism and other forms of widespread, systematic oppression. How has the history of classical, institutional, and non-conscious forms of racism, particularly

that which targets Blacks and Hispanics, or, for the same reason, the blind commitment to a tradition that continually marginalizes minorities, women, and the philosophical topics pertinent to both, affected the conditions that make possible philosophical inquiry? How have the range of questions philosophers are willing to ask, the type of books they read, the *kinds* of people they listen to been shaped by the history of these forms of oppression and ignorance? This range of questioning alone makes the volume worth picking up.

Philosophers of color alive today will find the text a useful resource for dealing with some of the pressures and frustrations of academic life. In fact, the volume may serve as a springboard for voicing one's opinion and (most likely) similar experiences. As Yancy explains, "I began to see just how important the text had become beyond the scope of low numbers, particularly in terms of the text's forward-looking dimensions. The text constitutes an important site—a textual balm of sorts—for blacks and Latino/as currently pursuing degrees in philosophy and who, as a result, may feel isolated, 'out of place,' and marginalized. Moreover, the text speaks to future philosophers of color who might need confirmation of their sanity, a collective voice that says, 'We also know your pain, your blues'" (2).

The dedication to "philosophers of color not yet born" adds a sense of urgency to the topics discussed throughout the volume, especially in light of changing demographics in the United States, which will undoubtedly bring more nonwhites into philosophy and expand the range of philosophical inquiry. If the critical thinking skills acquired in a philosophical education are a good thing, then more should be done to ensure that vast segments of the population, if not the majority, do not feel alienated from this field of study (this might actually serve to philosophy's benefit in terms of institutional support and funding).

In terms of Latin American philosophy, Jorge J. E. Gracia describes the canonical marginalization of this sub-discipline as follows: "Latin American philosophy is a good example of a philosophy systematically excluded from both the Western and world philosophical canons as these are conceived in the United States. This claim . . . may be easily documented by looking at histories of philosophy, reference works, anthologies, philosophical societies, evaluating tools of philosophy as a field of learning, education programs such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) seminars, Ph.D. dissertations in philosophy and common areas of specialization in the discipline, and the college curriculum (in the United States, philosophy is generally taught only at the college level)" (89). In his essay, Gracia quickly dismantles a veritable list of objections that would justify the exclusion of Latin American philosophy from the Western canon. However, the real reason, according to Gracia, stems from a blind commitment to tradition.

Ofelia Schutte summarizes the reasons for the marginalization of Latinos/as in professional philosophy with three problems: (1) the Anglo/Eurocentric orientation of philosophy, (2) the desire by "prestigious" philosophers to safeguard prestige (sometimes talked about in terms of "rigor"), and (3) the "we" of philosophy, or the fact that the mainstream academic philosophical community is a rather monochromatic bunch where people of color often feel second-class or

unwelcomed (unless, of course, people of color are willing to "play the game" as it is). All of these arguments, Schutte explains, depend upon "extra-philosophical" factors that reveal implicit biases against Blacks and Latino/as in ways that perpetuate the whiteness of philosophy.

Charles Mills explains that the entire discipline of philosophy is "inimical to the recognition of race." He continues, "Philosophy is supposed to be abstracting away from the contingent, the corporeal, the temporal, the material, to get at necessary, spiritual, eternal, ideal truths" (60). Much of the difficulties engendered by the incorporation of marginalized voices and topics has to do with the subject matter of philosophical thought and its supposed universality. Philosophical truths are supposed to escape the realm of the particular and rise to a level of abstraction beyond cultural, ethnic, and racial particularities (59–60). With one intriguing sentence Bill E. Lawson captures the essence of this sentiment when he writes, "when race comes in the room, logic goes out the window" (197). The idea that race and logic are incompatible can mean that when discussions of race take place, conversation quickly deteriorates to irrational, emotion-driven fights. Put differently (and in terms that garner instantaneous philosophical capital in some circles), there cannot be any *logos* when speaking about *ethnos*.

Thus, the volume highlights the subtle and not-so-subtle prejudices held by professional philosophers. Besides historical contingency, there are no good reasons as to why the concerns of people of color are ignored. Although their work aspires towards levels of abstraction that make universal truth claims possible, philosophers are nonetheless born into particular societies, cultures, and histories, all of which yield an assortment of racist or sexist leanings, cultural insensitivities, bias and jingoism, etc. Yancy thus endeavors to show how it is the case that "blacks and Latinos/as often experience nonacademic spaces and academic spaces as a distinction without a difference" (3).

Along these lines, the critical dimensions of the text are found in aggregate. Individually, the question of marginalization or specific examples of racist/sexist statements and attitudes may appear to be scandalous moral failures, the kind of material that gets talked about on national blogs and at APA meetings. Viewed piecemeal, these incidents and complaints appear sporadic and incidental. However, the forms of marginalization experienced by Latino/as and African Americans are manifold, often intersecting and widespread—this volume serves as proof. By allowing prominent thinkers to voice their experiences and concerns Yancy's text allows for the emergence of patterns of systematic exclusion that venture beyond the incidental: "As the text continued to take shape, what also began to emerge was a parallel between many of the issues that black and Latino/a bodies experience within the everyday world of social perception as linked to pervasive de facto racism, and the refined and intellectually highfalutin world of professional philosophy" (2). Reiterating the goal of the text, Yancy writes, "[The] goal was to create a critical space where both groups [African Americans and Latino/as] would come together to discuss critically a collectively important defining theme, a common problem—our marginalization within the profession of philosophy, which is one of those 'inappropriate' philosophical subjects" (1).

Yancy revels in a bit of ambiguity at the end of this quote. Not only is the subject matter of philosophy at stake, i.e., the range of questions philosophers think about and the ways in which philosophical issues pertinent to Latino/as and African Americans are often relegated to the philosophical wayside, but also at stake is the question of philosophical agency, i.e., whether or not Blacks and Hispanics constitute true philosophical “subjects.” Central to the volume is the assumption that philosophical inquiry is pertinent to what it means to be human, a natural outgrowth of having critical reflective skills. To deny the ability to practice philosophy, or to impose terms that make a fetish of rigor, tradition, and prestige, is to deny human subjectivity and autonomy. It is to say to Blacks and Latino/as that philosophy cannot take place on their terms.

Donna-Dale Marcano’s wonderful contribution, “Re-Reading Plato’s *Symposium* Through the Lens of a Black Woman,” lends support at this point. Marcano’s reading of Plato’s *Symposium* compares the character Alcibiades as a stand in for black women in philosophy. Both attempt to negotiate their relationship with philosophy (or Socrates) in ways that cannot divest themselves of the particularities of their existence. She writes, “Does philosophy fail some of us then? Yes! It fails those of us who understand that we are particularly situated. We are particularly situated in our desires, in our communities, in our race, in our genders, in our loves. For this, black women’s intellectual work that engages their racialized and gendered perspectives and which aims to take account of the social and political context in which these perspectives take shape are often viewed as so particular as to be of no philosophical value” (232).

Jacqueline Scott’s essay, “Toward a Place Where I Can Bring All of Me,” speaks towards this notion when comparing the “traditional” view of the self as afforded by the history of philosophy, and the more complex, “impure” understanding of the self provided by life. She writes, “We need to conceive of a philosophy that is in the service of life—in the service of the complex, multifarious, incoherent lives most people really live, and we need to convey this in both our research and teaching” (220).

Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains the way in which his studies of Frantz Fanon allowed him to approach a conception of “decolonization as first philosophy,” which breaks with the idea that some people are subjects of knowledge while others are mere objects in need of dominance. He writes, “the fundamental axes of reflection about human reality are grounded in the human-to-human relation, and that the primary questions out of which philosophy itself emerges are motivated not so much by wonder in the face of nature, but by desire for inter-human contact and scandal in the face of the violation of that possibility. This means that the *telos* of thinking, if there is any, is the struggle against dehumanization, understood as the affirmation of sociality and the negation of its negation. I refer to the negation of sociality as coloniality and to its negation and overcoming as decoloniality” (261).

Lawson writes something similar: “Our colleagues are not idiots. They are trained to solve problems. Like most people they will work to solve a problem if they think that it is important. If they think that racism in the profession is

a problem, they will begin to work with their own and their colleague’s racism and sexism. No person of color can force them to work to change the game or their attitudes. If they think that blacks are indeed inferior intellectually, then they will feel no compulsion to change the game” (197). Drawing from John Hope Franklin’s “The Dilemma of the American Negro Scholar,” Lawson continues by stating that if there are white philosophers passionate about the elimination of disrespectful practices in academic philosophy, they must realize that the respect owed to black scholars is connected to the type of respect black people receive outside of academia. In a powerful line, Lawson writes, “It has been a truism that a black person being respected in one arena of social interaction gives us no hint of how he or she will be respect [sic] in others. However, respect must begin at home” (197).

By rethinking the agents responsible for philosophical thought, the volume attempts to “reframe” the practice of philosophy. This process “steps back and takes another look, realizing that the current frame excludes all that does not fit with the demarcated limits of that frame.” “In fact,” as Yancy continues, “that which is outside the frame is constituted as . . . unintelligible and ersatz. This form of framing actually deforms, delimits, and truncates the very power of philosophical imaginings. To reframe the current practices of philosophy, then, functions to reveal the limits of its current practices, its current assumptions, its current conceptual allegiances, and its current self-images. The aim is to expand the hermeneutic horizon of what is possible, philosophically” (5).

Yet the process of reframing philosophy remains difficult when philosophers inherit forms of prejudice and ignorance ingrained throughout their societies. Yancy writes, “Philosophical academic spaces are . . . continuous with everyday, politically invested, racially grounded, prejudicial, social spaces. Such normative (white) academic spaces are shot through with much of the same racist toxicity that configures black and brown bodies as outside the normative (white) *Demos*” (2). Returning to Lawson’s essay, his point was to note that African Americans will not acquire philosophical clout until Black people, as a whole, are respected as full, rational agents. This starts at home *and* in our own departments. Returning to Maldonado-Torres’s essay, his understanding of philosophy necessitates reciprocal social exchanges that assume co-subjectivity; to deny this is to colonize the mind of others and even the self (since one is denying the possibility for dialogue and instead supplies only monologue). Returning to Scott’s essay, philosophy should be a place where a person does not have to sacrifice one’s cultural, ethnic, or racial particularity to reach standards set by racist.

Obviously, white allies will find much value in the text. More importantly, white philosophers who fail to see the importance of diversification would also benefit from reading the text. At the very least, the volume succeeds in placing the onus upon those who fail to see the importance of philosophical diversification to justify their stance. Along these lines, several contributors provide interesting arguments that explain why academic philosophy, as a whole, fails to take seriously the philosophical questions pertinent to people of color or even make difficult one’s personal existence inside the field. One

could only imagine how the text would be improved if it went beyond a black/brown binary to include people of Asian and indigenous descent (among others). Nonetheless, that form of exclusion sets the stage for a new volume expanding this discussion in ways beyond the confines of this volume.
