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# On “Ur-Contempt” and the Maintenance of Racial Injustice: A Response to Monahan’s “Racism and ‘Self-Love’: The Case of White Nationalism”

Grant J. Silva

Philosophy, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

## Abstract

This article offers a response to Michael J. Monahan’s engagement with and criticism of Grant Silva’s article “Racism as Self-Love.” So as to demonstrate how Monahan’s idea of “ur-contempt” fits alongside the author’s project and supplements his attempt to challenge the variety of forms of moral obfuscation employed by white nationalists and other racists today, this response begins with an overview of the central critique of moral responsibility for racism that Silva’s work offers. At stake is the attempt, by unabashed white supremacist and others, to bank on historical acts of racial oppression and reap the benefits of elevated social status while evading responsibility for that past.

The goal in this project is thus to demonstrate the entanglement of interpersonal and structural forms of racism while also describing how racism unfolds in the present in order to challenge the types of moral evasion for racism that Monahan and Silva are concerned with.

## Keywords

racism, self-love, racist hatred, contempt, ideology, white nationalism

In a society shaped by racial injustice, such as the United States, the charge of racism can cut across the entire moral landscape. Not only will it be levied at apparent (and disguised) instances of interpersonal and institutional racism, but it can also chastise the myriad investments, requisite forms of ignorance, and moral indifference of those persons whose sense of flourishing depends upon the status quo. It should not be surprising, therefore, that from a white supremacist culture emanate ways of thinking about racism that circumscribe its critical dimensions by enabling bad-faith and moral evasion rather than cognitive, behavioral, and structural shifts that might actually promote change.

When it comes to philosophical analyses of racism, this same tendency, unfortunately, makes its way into professional philosophy. After all, if a link exists between philosophy and the historical circumstance from which it arises, then this link does not imply that only the “good” idiosyncrasies of that culture or society will manifest in its philosophy; so, too, will the “bad.”<sup>1</sup> In writing this, I do not mean to suggest that philosophers working on racism intentionally strive to enable bad-faith or moral evasion. Nor do I wish, for that matter, to exculpate professional philosophers for promulgating racism in their field.<sup>2</sup> Instead, my concern is the sense of moral responsibility that often accompanies descriptions of what makes racism morally wrong, especially those accounts focused on its moral psychology, so-called introspective analyses of racism. When viewed in individualistic or piecemeal terms whereby “moral luck” or the historical circumstance in which one’s agency takes place is largely considered irrelevant or off-limits to moral assessment, the sense of responsibility that undergirds conceptualizations of racism can often reinforce rather than tear asunder white supremacy.

For example, following Thomas Ross (1990), it should be uncontroversial to ask: “What white person is ‘innocent’ if innocence is defined as the absence of advantage at the expense of others?” (636). Yet, such a question is often considered unfair since, to put it biblically, the iniquities of the parent shall not be bestowed upon the child. It is unreasonable, many philosophers believe, to blame a moral agent for an inherited advantage or historical injustice when they had no part in its formation. While I, too, am under the sway of this thought when it comes to the *creation* of structural injustice, I reject the extension of this logic to include to the *perpetuation* of racist social structures. One can see this extension at work in (1) the dismissal of racism as a problem of contemporary relevance in places like the United States (e.g., “racism is a thing of the past”); (2) within incessant denials or gaslighting tactics used to obfuscate the charge of racism (e.g. “I did not intend on that sounding racist” or “how dare you claim to know my motivations”); and even (3) in the *confining* of interpersonal racism to a conceptual horizon that allows many of the beneficiaries of racial injustice to wash their hands of any moral accountability.

While it should be obvious how the Trump administration's recent attacks on "critical race theory" and professional diversity-related trainings are meant to assist in the erasure of racism's identification, philosophers contribute to the types of moral evasion described above once moral responsibility operates like a life raft in racist waters. The current makes for smoother sailing for some, rougher waters for others. Nevertheless, those seeking to criticize racism in all its permutations are expected to excuse the paddling and prodding of those persons who's well-being only "coincidentally" works with rather than against the flow. My point is that philosophical thought on the nature of racism can be compromised in a white supremacist culture; more ideological, a set of ideas that reinforce a social order, than philosophical, critical inquiry striving to uncover and question the various assumptions and/or conceptual limitations implicit to our thought.

"Racism as Self-Love" (Silva 2019—from here on out "RSL") was thus born out of several frustrations with how racism is conceptualized in our particular sociohistorical context. In addition to the above, these frustrations include the tendency to ignore racism's dynamic and complex nature; the conceptual overdependence on negative emotions—for example, hatred, malice, envy, or contempt—as the source of racist action; and the focus on *either* the interpersonal or the structural in the analysis of racism.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the classic image of the bigot who cares not for the various social norms and prohibitions against racism, racist action is typically contoured by the desire to avoid the label "racist." While concerns about conceptual bloat (Blum, 2002) or "mission creep" (Kaufmann, 2017) seek to delineate what constitutes racist activity to a rather narrow range of phenomena for the sake of preserving the charge of racism's critical edge, such delineations bring into effect what they seek to prevent: the dilution of the potency of this charge by limiting its scope. Much like knowing where a punch is going to land before its thrown, the charge of racism is easy to slip once its definition is restrained. Holding back the conceptual analysis of racism therefore limits the ability to track its wily nature. And while there should be no doubt that racist hatred exists in the world today, focusing on it—much like tearing down statues to the racists and slavers of bygone days—is the easy work. The harder work is getting the rest of society, especially those claiming to "lack hate in their heart" and who often view themselves as allies in the struggle for racial justice, to take seriously the racism they emit and depend upon. From within a hermeneutical framework afforded by a white supremacist culture, how we think about racism today cannot complete this harder task.

I draw attention to the sense of moral responsibility that is often operative within philosophical conceptualizations of interpersonal racism, since Michael J. Monahan's criticism of my essay centers on the original constitution of the subject—the "I," "we," or "self"—striving to self-preserve through what I term, borrowing from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, racist acts of "self-love." According to Monahan, as fruitful as it might be, my account of racism does not fully address the generative dimensions of white identity formation. While the rhetoric of "love" or even self-protection might be operative as pretext, Monahan explains, a deep-seated need for the *anterior* or *pre-established* devaluation of nonwhites, what he terms "ur-contempt," resides at the core of white nationalist identity formation today, a point that my focus on "self-love" leaves out of the picture. As grateful as I am for Monahan's engagement with my work, my point was to demonstrate how what he refers to as "ur-contempt" is only possible if it is the case that one cannot be held accountable for the past in ways outlined above. So as to get at Monahan's criticism, the following offers an explanation for why I wrote RSL and highlights why my

account of racism does not concern itself so much with the origins of racial injustice as much as it does the perpetuation of it.

RSL is a follow-up to “Embodying a ‘New’ Color Line: Racism, Anti-Immigrant Sentiment and Racial Identities in the Postracial Era” (Silva, 2015). That essay examined the historical development of white identity alongside the creation and history of racist immigration law. More specifically, I argued that anti-immigrant sentiment is a central modality of the embodiment of whiteness today and called for a moratorium on labeling anti-immigrant fervor “xenophobic.” Under the auspices of xenophobia, one runs the risk of reifying the sense of belonging that undergirds white identity in the United States. My concern was thus with the theoretical concessions one finds in the immigration debate today. Rather than “xenophobia,” anti-immigrant sentiment should be referred to as racism. The nature of this particular manifestation of racism, however, is such that it is explicitly focused on perpetuating the primacy of whiteness in the United States, what I describe as racism’s self-reflective or self-referential dimensions, rather than explicitly contributing to the oppression of nonwhite others. Whereas white nationalists might not “hate” immigrants or even target them because of their racial difference (or so they say), the object of their concern is frequently said to be the well-being of white America, a feat that requires the blatant disregard of predominantly nonwhite immigrants desperately trying to enter the United States. In this setting, as I argued, “race” takes on a primordial nature once bolstered by the semiotics of the national border. That is, viewing the U.S. border with Mexico as simply a juridical boundary between countries obscures the fact that it also operates as a “color line,” to employ the Du Boisian phrase. Reduced to this formal role, the border performs the boundary-work parsing belonging from non-belonging *within* the United States (e.g., “legal” vs. “illegal” or “American” vs. “non-American”). Once generalized and affixed to racial or ethnic groups (in ever so problematic ways, of course), this boundary-work supplies the racialized logic that bolsters the need to keep “foreigners” out in the first place. This cycle continues in dialectical fashion by granting legitimacy to the border’s juridical role while obscuring the racializing aspects of this process in the appeal to “law.” The trouble was, in spelling out the sense of racism operative here, especially the “self-referential” dimensions, I could not rely on conceptualizations of it focused on harm or hatred.

Monahan is thereby correct that I do not offer a “new” kind racism but “at best only a different way of enacting racism.” RSL takes seriously the possibility that racism has a variety of affective sources. The range of negative emotions often referred to as “hatred” is but one cluster. One of the roots of racism, I argue, is fear. People come to “hate” what they are afraid of just as they might take on a defensive posture in relation to these fears (none of this is to touch on how racial fears are themselves byproducts of racist expectations). More specific to the United States today are worries about the loss of control; not a fear of immigrants, per se, but a fear of what will happen to whiteness when it no longer inhabits the demographic norm or once its supremacy is challenged by a reconsideration of the economy of value that undergirds race relations in the United States (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement). In the hands of white nationalists, the deployment of anti-immigrant rhetoric is meant to alleviate white anxieties about demographic change and reassure white people of their national predominance in the United States. For this reason, RSL offers an account of racism emanating from love, albeit a corrupt form of it. My argument is strategic and meant to take away the ground upon which novel instances of racism stand but it is also concerned with how it actually unfolds today and is justified by supposed nonracists themselves, so-called instances of what Jody David Armour

(1997) refers to as “reasonable racism.” Following James Baldwin (1998a), my goal is to demonstrate how whiteness (or being white in the world) takes on a moral hue that can be appropriately criticized when one refuses to disembark from the racial optics afforded by white supremacy. Thus, on the one hand, as Monahan puts it, self-love racism is about “deeply sedimented racist histories [that] condition white ways of apprehending what is or is not threatening.” On the other hand, though, the sense of “love” operative here is the protective attachment to the racialized dimensions of one’s social status, wealth, privilege, and/or identity.<sup>4</sup>

As Monahan points out, this is not real love. Instead, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1993) use of *amour-propre*, “self-love,” gets at what I mean: “a purely relative and factitious feeling, which arises in the state of society, leads each individual to make more of himself than of any other, causes all the mutual damage men inflict on one another, and is the real source of the ‘sense of honour’” (73). Self-love is not simply about self-preservation (*amour de soi*) since that might actually motivate many whites to reject whiteness considering that they are frequently harmed by the same public policy-decisions and attacks on the welfare state that negatively effects blacks.<sup>5</sup> Instead, self-love is the desire to flourish as the type of person who’s well-being depends upon extant forms of inequality, especially the inequity of racial identities. Self-love is Rousseau’s depiction of what self-preservation looks like *after* the establishment of society and social inequality.

Monahan correctly identifies this Rousseauian influence when writes, “what Silva describes may well be cases in which, at the level of the individual psyche, it is possible to lack racial animus and be focused solely on this “self-love,” but this possibility arises only because of [a] larger context of diffuse and sedimented racial animus.” This larger context is Monahan’s “ur-contempt,” an idea that fits well alongside my description of the primordial nature of race relations in the context of the immigration debate. As “sedimented” this animus is not a product of one’s doing. Nevertheless, RSL pertains to the alacrity with which many people come to bank on the “hatred” of the past, what I mean by having an investment or stock in a racist history (an investment that not only whites benefit from). While one might not have created the social structure that provides for their racial privilege, just like as a man patriarchy predates my existence, at a certain point, by actively being a man and coming to depend upon male-privilege and sexism (whether intentionally or not), I take on a level of responsibility for my historical context; I must be held *accountable* for the sins of the past if I actively benefit from them (or if my imagined benefits cause the harm of others). I do not have the space to flesh-out this shift in conceptions of responsibility.<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to say, however, that not being a man, much like not being white, would require that I inhabit the world in some other way, a feat I am reluctant to attempt if I find nothing wrong with who I am or if a sense of “innocence” undergirds my entire existence. This explains why many today seek to ignore, downplay, or rewrite those inconvenient aspects of our racist and sexist history.

Cognizant of their indebtedness to ur-contempt, white nationalists attempt to skirt blame by denying any involvement in the origins of systemic wrong and claiming to be the victim of political correctness and efforts to promote racial equity. Their escape from the past and victim-status is enabled by the construal of racial privileges along the lines of legal and political entitlements. From this point of view, any attempt at rectifying historical racial injustices requires denying the “rights” of whites in the present—the right to gainful employment, the right of protect oneself and bear arms, the right to

security via law enforcement, the benefit of the doubt when it comes to racism, and more—all of which amounts to a calling into question the national primacy of whiteness. These “rights” require a level of contempt for nonwhites that rather than disdain—which is how most understand the term—should be understood more along the lines of J. L. A Garcia’s (1996) usage in what he described as the derivative form of racism: racist “contempt” is the disregard or withholding of minimal levels of respect owed to an individual or group because of their race (7). Whiteness becomes a moral choice, I argue, when this sense of contempt (as moral disregard) is justified by the conflict of interests that arises between what is called for by racial justice and the “cost” that the beneficiaries of historical injustice would accrue. Again, what whites have to lose might not actually help them materially but, as Baldwin (1998b) writes, “It is not really a ‘Negro revolution’ that is upsetting this country.” He continues, “What is upsetting this country is a sense of its own identity” (683). Uncovering the full scope of the historical formation of whiteness exposes more than just the contributions made by black people to United States history. It also exposes the racist dependencies of our nation (whites in particular).

It is worth pointing out, however, that my focus in RSL is not only on white nationalists. Such emphasis on easy cases of racism would be of assistance to a white supremacist social order. My concern is also with those persons whose ability to flourish is, again, only “coincidentally” entangled with the well-being of white supremacy. In reality they are not coincidental but designed to work this way, hence my criticism of conceptualizations of moral responsibility that zone-in on the freedom of the agent at the expense of the context in which their decisions take place. Although it might not be a fault of my own, it is not unreasonable to ask me to take account for my existence if it is intertwined with an oppressive social structure. To not do so results in a fault of omission in which I assume Garcia’s sense of moral disregard towards those agents my “well-being” depends upon. While self-destruction or “self-hate” are not answers, to evade responsibility, on account of blame being elsewhere—the law, the threat of terrorism, the decisions immigrants make, the fragile economy, or history itself—, is to be complicit in white supremacy and thus racism. Here, the fashionable difference between not being racist and anti-racism becomes helpful. Wrapping themselves in their life raft, many of the beneficiaries of racial injustice go to great lengths to not be considered racist. Few are willing to take that extra step toward anti-racism, which is to say that many people disembark from their commitment towards racial justice once it requires something of them; once it cost them something more than words, thoughts or prayers, statues, or even the “hate” they claim to not have in their heart.

*Grant J. Silva*  
*Marquette University*

**GRANT J. SILVA** is an associate professor of philosophy at Marquette University.

## Notes

1. This is especially true when philosophical practice requires the type of methodological abstractionism that jettisons the epistemic salience of such things as race, gender, sexuality, the intersections of these, and more. In reality, no abstraction is achieved; philosophers simply learn to take on the universalized and supposed race-or gender-less hegemonic standpoint of that group of individuals who inhabit professional philosophy.

2. For instance, in the forward to Bryan Van Norden's (2017) *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*, Jay Garfield claims that by ignoring or marginalizing non-Western philosophies in their research, curriculum, and hiring practices, professional philosophy is deeply racist (19). He writes, "In leveling the charge of racism . . . I do not mean to suggest that our colleagues in philosophy individually harbor or act upon racist views." Reveling in the space between structural and interpersonal conceptualizations of racism, he continues, "A social structure can be racist without any individual who participates in it being racist when it serves to establish or to perpetuate a set of practices that systematically denigrate—implicitly or explicitly—people of particular races" (Ibid). Such a claim is rather specious. While many might applaud Garfield for calling-out professional philosophy's racism, his understanding of racism commits him to the view that there is no one to hold *morally* accountable for it; after all, racism is unintentional and philosophers unknowingly (but somehow) contribute to it.
3. In her analysis of the confinement of the definition of racism Alana Lentin (2018) offers another worthwhile frustration: "the universalization of racism as equally practiced by all groups independent of status and power" (p. 12). Consequentialist accounts of racism, say that offered by Clevis Headley (2006) or Kenneth Stickers (2014), offer another worry, namely, that of the focus on what goes into racist action, inputs, rather than what comes out of it, the harmful consequences of racist actions.
4. Some might think that my use of "privilege" is divisive and unhelpful in the struggle for change (see Rothman and Fields, 2020). Since many white people in the United States are often disadvantaged by the same political and economic decision-making or structures that disproportionately harms black and brown people, finding common ground, if not frankly appealing to white self-interests, would be best. As true as this might be, such a claim fails to take seriously the investments in racism necessary for white identity formation. By "privilege" I am not just referring to material benefits or the guarantee of Constitutional safeguards that are afforded to some and contested, at the very least, when it comes to others. There are psychological and even "social" benefits that come from whiteness: a sense of rightful national-belonging; a lack of racial double-consciousness; the ability to dismiss race as a negative variable shaping how others treat you; the moral (not just legal) benefit of the doubt when it comes to racism; and more. I agree that many poor whites are hoodwinked into thinking these nonmaterial privileges are just as valuable as actual material benefits. Really, they are their only form of wealth. The reason these "privileges" continue to be desirable is because they bolster the sense of esteem, value, and self-worth (*amour propre*) attached to white identity.
5. For more on the harmful dimensions of whiteness see Jonathan M. Metzel's *Dying of Whiteness* (2020). Metzel's account of "Trevor," a man suffering from Hepatitis C, who would rather die than support the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") because he does not want his tax dollars "paying for Mexicans or welfare queens" (3) is particularly illuminating.
6. See Zheng (2016) for more on the difference between accountability versus attributability when it comes to moral responsibility. While Zheng's focus is on the relationship between implicit bias and theories of moral responsibility, which as she argues is better approached from the standpoint of accountability, there remains much work to do in terms of articulating a sense of responsibility for the aspects of racism that motivate my concerns. As Zheng writes, "Accountability is this primarily a matter of interpersonal, not metaphysical, relations; not what



it takes to be an agent, but what it takes to be a member of a community of agents” (67). As I see it, the search for where racism comes from or who introduced it into the world is different from inhabiting a world of others in which racism and racial inequality are *already* there. One’s actions can support it or strive to do away with it even if you are not the locus from whence it came.

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