

# Race and Pedagogical Practices: When Race Takes Center Stage in Philosophy

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*This paper presents a segment of a broader research project titled “When Black Consciousness Meets White Consciousness,” which first developed out of my research work with White women in violence-against-women organizations. It documents an interview between a White woman and me, a Black South African philosopher. I lived and worked in Canada at the time but I traveled to the United States for conferences on a regular basis. I was presenting my work on Black consciousness, White consciousness, and Black existentialism—relying on Derridean deconstruction and psychoanalysis—when I had the exchange with a White woman, a young faculty member in the philosophy department, which had jointly hosted the talk with the women and gender studies department. This paper offers a verbatim account of this dialogue wherein the history of philosophy is unraveled and where I draw on Jacques Derrida’s “White Mythology” to demonstrate how White consciousness is engraved. It is out of this intertwined analysis that my work on White consciousness emerged in the 1990s—and with which I continue—as is evidenced throughout the paper. In unpacking this dialogue, I situate the complexities that arise from the pedagogical practices within philosophy when race takes center stage within a discipline that has written itself as though race does not exist.*

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For many Black women who earn doctoral degrees in philosophy, the choice of where to work—in which country let alone in which department to apply for a job—is a reality few of us care to remember. Those of us who are employed in philosophy departments at present either consider ourselves fortunate or contemplate developing interests in other disciplines, thinking that we’d have a better chance at a full-time job in a sister discipline, such as women’s and gender studies, ethnic studies, or cultural studies. Currently I work at the University of Kwa Zulu Natal in Philosophy and Gender Studies and also as the Director for the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity. I teach a broader range of courses than do most of my Black women colleagues in philosophy in the United States, and I am able to bring to my

work with postgraduates the years of study I put into my philosophy training, my years of scholarly and clinical training in psychoanalysis, my doctoral years at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, my work in the area of violence against women, and my work in Black consciousness, both scholarly and in protest politics. What remains a constant reference in my work in philosophy and gender studies are critical race theory and Black consciousness. I note this here precisely because White colleagues in the United States often situate my work in philosophy as an afterthought.

In this essay I present a segment of the research work that developed as a consequence of a talk I gave at a university in North America. When I agreed to do this talk I was asked whether I would be willing to meet after my talk with a group of graduate students and faculty from philosophy and women's studies for a workshop-style discussion. I was told that the workshop segment would be informal and that it was really for the benefit of graduate students who do not always feel comfortable asking questions in a large venue. For most Black women in philosophy, the chance to deliver a talk within a philosophy department is rare. In the past few years I have given talks at philosophy conferences when the segment or panel has been arranged by an African American scholar, generally a panel on race, often under a synonym, so that philosophy societies, and those who steer them toward contemporary niceties, can pretend to be concerned with placing race on the agenda and have Black women in attendance. In places where gender studies and/or women's studies are taught, and with faculty who work on intersectionality, there is a greater chance, however limited, that the work of Black women in philosophy will find a place to be taught. It was therefore a nice surprise to receive an invitation where I would be speaking about my work in philosophy, especially my research work that falls broadly in the area of Black consciousness and White consciousness.

#### A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Gaining knowledge by direct or indirect means through observed phenomena—this is what is described as empirical research. Yet how does one conduct empirical research when your Black feminized identity is drawn into the very terrain where research is conducted—within philosophy—by research participants, even when you are not the subject of the research? In responding to this question, I take my cue from existential philosophers Lewis Gordon and Charles Mills, who both argue that the materiality of race places the Black philosopher in a position to account for her lived experience within the very environment where she constructs existential philosophy. They both agree that the materiality of race allows the Black philosopher to situate herself as raced, and it is from that position that existentialism has to take its cue: from the acknowledgment of the politicization of presence, in the flesh, of the Black woman whose very existence offers existential philosophy its lack (Mills 1999; Gordon 2000). In this vein, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which Black presence, in the flesh—as teacher, professor, researcher, scholar—when accounted for within

empirical research (Hooks 1994; Curry 2004) is either treated with suspicion or as too much.<sup>1</sup>

I refer now to the main focus of this paper—the research setting and unpacking of it.

#### THE RESEARCH SETTING

Over the years, since 1993, I have used the subtitle of my doctoral thesis, “When Black Consciousness Meets White Consciousness,” as the title of my continued research. On one such occasion, like many before it, I gave a talk on the philosophy of Black consciousness; as has often been the case with titles that I have chosen in the past twenty years, the term *White consciousness* was at the end of the sentence. Nothing draws White scholars closer to a talk than knowing that some Black woman is going to speak on Whiteness, which my work does not, so that they can take out their pens and paper, not even look me in the eye as they occupy the front row, and write down everything I have said and reproduce it as their own!

At this particular event my talk traced some of the ways in which I began to work with women in violence-against-women organizations in Canada, and how I realized, as I went from one organization to the next, that they were all White women in paid jobs with clients who were Black women and women of color through which they declared their antiracism agenda. I also spoke about my first year in a university classroom as a Black woman teaching predominantly White students in a course titled “Social and Political Thought in the Study of Racism and Feminism.” It was during that first year of teaching, in 1991, during a discussion on false consciousness vis-à-vis the writings of Heidegger and Steve Biko that a mature White woman student, who was working at a women’s center, uttered:

I just cannot imagine this racism you are talking about. I have a friend, she is from the Caribbean. One day she was telling me a story about racism in Canada. I told her, “really, is this really happening in Canada?” I could not imagine what she was talking about. Now listening to you, and to some of the people who have talked about racism, makes me really wonder about this. I cannot imagine this racism she was talking about. This really worries me. It worries me that four of the students in this class talked about Black consciousness and I don’t even know what that means. I know that it frightens me. It frightens me to know that I don’t have a White consciousness, as you were saying. I don’t have anything. Nothing.<sup>2</sup>

I am quoting this here as a means of offering some preliminary insights into where and how my research on “When Black Consciousness Meets White Consciousness” began; I had included it in the talk that I presented.

I did my talk in the face of almost complete silence. I was dressed in black, which constitutes more than half of my wardrobe, pearls, fishnet stockings, high-heels, red

lipstick—my fall-to-winter uniform somewhat—and the silence in the room made me feel as though I was at a funeral. Few questions followed, all of which were asked by four African American students who sat together in a group of about seven. After the talk I proceeded to the workshop; the environment was equally somber. All of the seven African American students spoke and asked questions. Two White women spoke, both of whom I knew and had taught before, and who had driven some distance to attend the event. I had to check with the organizers to see if it was okay for them to attend the workshop. Before the two White women former students left, they noted that they felt awkward speaking at a university that they did not attend; they reminded me of the time that I met them, under similar circumstances, I was told, and how long it took them to approach me and later take a class with me because talking about White consciousness was, at the time, for both of them so uncomfortable.

None of the professors spoke at all, although several smiled through masked, agitated faces. After the workshop segment a newly appointed professor, a White woman in her mid-thirties, introduced herself. She noted that she was interested in my ongoing research on White consciousness. We agreed on a time to meet the following day. Her request came as a surprise since she had made hardly any eye contact with me and had stared at the floor for most of the short time we spoke. The following morning, as per our arrangement, she sat waiting for me in the lobby of the hotel. She had a notebook with her and a pile of books under her arm—all European philosophers, I noticed, as I hastily glanced at the titles, as she appeared to carry them as armor. She noted that she found my encounters with White women scholars, activists, and academics “fascinating,” at which I paused and asked: “what is so fascinating about these research settings?” “They seem so unbelievable, really,” she replied. “Often scholars who do similar research work talk to me about what they consider research and ask when the process starts for me. I generally reply that often the first contact is the most revealing, much like the conversation we are having right now,” I replied, as she took notes.

For the first twenty minutes she asked me whether I was willing to answer questions about my talk and the workshop setting the previous night and whether she could record my responses. “I will only agree to your interview if we record the entire conversation or interview as you put it,” was my response. After we agreed on the full process and that each of us would be recording the event and would be able to use it for our work—should the need arise—we sat down in a room that the university had booked the previous night, which was made available to faculty and students until midday. The woman in question is represented by a different name.

Sarah begins:

Sarah : I really came because I wanted to engage with you beyond the talk.

Rozena: Where would you like to start?

- Sarah : I am not sure where to start. It is at the talk that I first heard you speak about White consciousness and the workshop, which was supposed to be the follow-up, was a disaster for me.
- Rozena: Well, then why have you come here, signed the research form, and agreed to have this session recorded as an interview?
- Sarah : Well, I wanted to talk to you about the racism issue and about this work you are doing on White consciousness. I saw it in the title of your talk before you came and I was curious. It just seems like psychological testing. You just sprang this White consciousness stuff on everyone in your talk and I feel like I am some kind of pathological creature. I felt as though I am being psychoanalyzed—in the lecture and in the workshop. You used your power in the keynote to tell us that we had all participated in furthering Derrida’s “White Mythology,” then you put the nail in the coffin by telling us that what we’re really doing is entrenching White consciousness. This is a philosophy setting. People are not used to this.
- Rozena: I used my power? And what power might that be? And what exactly are you not used to? Being challenged? What are you saying?
- Sarah : This is *not* how we do philosophy.
- Rozena: How *do you do* philosophy? And who is this “we” you’re talking about?
- Sarah : You’ve basically accused an entire philosophy department of being racist.
- Rozena: I did? How? Because the entire philosophy department is White?
- Sarah : I am sure you’re well aware of it.
- Rozena: What exactly is philosophy in your view? And more importantly, how does one do philosophy?
- Sarah : *Frowns.*
- Rozena: Okay, who is this “we” you’re talking about? Since you’re part of this “we” tell me how this “we” does philosophy.
- Sarah : Well, I am not suggesting that there are not contentious issues in philosophy that cause students or academics to be upset. I am just saying that your way of doing philosophy is destabilizing. I just found the whole talk upsetting and the workshop portion, hosted by women’s studies, although there were almost fifty-percent philosophy people there, was a disaster for me. My position as an assistant professor is in philosophy and women’s studies and I know people in both departments.
- Rozena: What is so destabilizing about what I said? Besides, I have never considered philosophy to be stable to begin with. Well, a part of me wants to laugh as I am thinking about the many philosophers who I read who consider

themselves as far away from the term “stable” as one can imagine; they are as unstable as they can be, and want to be, with or without the hospitalization in psychiatric wards, which many have seen the inside of more times than I am sure their readers would care to remember.

Sarah : Well, considering your non-interest in what I am saying that is where I will be soon, I suppose. I just think you have no idea how disturbing your talk was. Maybe that sort of approach works in Black environments but here we do things differently.

Rozena: And why should I be interested in how you do things? Please tell me! Is this really about me doing Black philosophy in a White environment?

Sarah : That is not really what I meant.

Rozena: What did you mean?

Sarah : I feel really awkward. This is very upsetting and I don’t think you realize it. I... I don’t think I have enough words to say how I feel.

Rozena: What is upsetting? Me being here at a predominantly White university, in an all-White philosophy department, speaking about Black consciousness as a legitimate discipline of study—one that is instrumental to the way that I approach philosophy and, which I consider a philosophy to begin with? Is that the destabilizing part?

Sarah : *Silence. Looks at me—sighs and heaves.*

Rozena: I can wait until you’re ready to talk.

Sarah : I read Steve Biko years ago. I obviously did not get out of it what you got out of it. I took a class on South African history during my undergraduate years so I am not completely ignorant of the role Biko played in South Africa.

Rozena: Well, I am pleased to hear that you read Biko. It is not only in the context of South Africa that his work is relevant, it is his overall analysis of the system of White domination that is important and clearly his insistence that we examine agency. Speaking of agency: isn’t that what Merleau-Ponty does? What Jean-Paul Sartre does? So, what exactly is the upsetting part?

Sarah : *Sighs.* It’s also the way that you smiled when you talked—a kind of mocking smile when you made certain points.

Rozena: Well, I apologize for not looking miserable when I talk about Black consciousness. Is that it? Your concern, it appears, is not only about the content of what I said but also about the delivery. I am surprised that your department would have such strong protocol for Black professors who come here as speakers considering that you only have White professors in philosophy and two women of color in women’s studies. If you’re here to

talk to me about how Black consciousness meets White consciousness then you're doing an excellent job.

Sarah : Even the way that you're dressed—I read you as upper-class and powerful and you totally railroaded people last night.

Rozena: Railroaded! So, now you draw an analogy between yourself and Jewish people who were railroaded to concentration camps?

Sarah : Oh, for God's sake it's just an expression!

Rozena: Expression of violence, death, and genocide. And, oh, about my clothes—this is offensive and out of order. It is not my problem that you don't know the difference between class and style. You should encourage your philosophy department to send out a list of rules to Black women speakers, as I hope I will not be the last one, where you state the way that we should behave, what we should wear, and even a segment that you can call, "how to look miserable when delivering philosophy papers."

Sarah : *Walks to the window. Stumbles over the books, gets up, runs her fingers through her hair, sits down again with the books on her lap then puts them on the floor.* I think you said some pretty damaging things and now you're pretending that you delivered a scholarly paper and that there is nothing wrong with upsetting people or destabilizing them.

Rozena: Let's be clear here: what I did was deliver a paper on Black consciousness and philosophy, Black consciousness as a philosophy for that matter, and how I came to my work on White consciousness. I sent the title of my paper three months ago. I examined the work of Jacques Derrida, vis-à-vis a few of his key texts and talked about "White Mythology," and about Biko's reliance on Jaspers's work on metaphysical guilt, his reliance on Fanon, Fanon's relationship with Sartre, Biko's engagement with existentialism, and how my research work on White consciousness came to take its shape, which as it happens, took place within White feminist organizations. Where is the unscholarly part? Oh, and among the African men and women in philosophy I cited I also cited a number of Black women and women of color in philosophy in the United States. I noticed the professors in the front row sitting with you were writing non-stop.

Sarah : I was there, remember? There are many people here with German heritage and you talking about Jaspers's work on German guilt made a lot of people uncomfortable. We've just had Yom Kippur or the Jewish Day of Atonement as you called it, which you seem to connect to Freud's death. I admit that I did not know that he injected himself on the Jewish Day of Atonement in 1939! I think your talk was just too much. I feel even more uncomfortable now. I simply don't know how many ways to tell you this. I don't know what to say anymore.

- Rozena: Uncomfortable? It is not my place to make anyone comfortable. By the sound of it, you've learnt quite a lot. If you are all so comfortable in philosophy then perhaps the problem lies there. I am trying to work my way to the destabilizing and upsetting part—the part where you say that I have upset people because my approach is not how you do philosophy, in other words my pedagogical position. Oh, and what is this about me being too much—well, perhaps people like you are not enough... not enough to prevent White consciousness from being revealed.
- Sarah : *Sits up. Stands up, sits down again, rubs eyes and moves back in the chair rocking back and forth.*  
 Okay. Maybe uncomfortable is not the right word. I read Jaspers and I read what he had to say about German guilt. There isn't a White woman who did not feel guilty after your talk. I have read Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Césaire, and Fanon, all of the people you made reference to and again, there isn't a White woman I know who did not feel unsettled by your talk. Yes, fine, you made your point: I do not read any North African philosophers...
- Rozena: What about North American philosophers who happen to be Black or women of color?
- Sarah : Okay, fine, I only know Linda Alcoff's work of all the women you mentioned. Does that make me a racist? You see, again, I feel totally unsettled. I felt like shit last night and I did not think it could get any worse.
- Rozena: I am not here to make anyone feel settled. The fact that you clearly feel “settled” in philosophy is highly problematic. You came to this country as colonizers, or settler-colonials as we would say in South Africa, and if you have felt settled within the white pages of philosophical texts it is time you start questioning your settlement. Go and talk to Native people at the nearby reserve and hear what they say about your settlement. I am not here to ensure your settlement. Well, that is not going to happen. As for you only being acquainted with one woman of color's work in philosophy—go and do your homework. You see, this is what happens when you invite Black women who do philosophy—we unsettle you.
- Sarah : *Looks at the floor throughout. The chair her feet are resting on falls over. She collects it and sits down again.*  
 I think your topic was misleading to begin with.
- Rozena: Excuse me?
- Sarah : Well, maybe not the topic but your CV was circulated among various faculty members. It says very clearly that you do violence against women work, and you had been involved in feminist activism in South Africa—I remember our discussion very clearly when we made the final decision to invite you. I for one thought you might focus on female, genital mutilation and speak

about a philosophical approach to violence against women in African countries or something like that since the title had Black consciousness in it.

Rozena: You actually thought that Black consciousness is about female, genital mutilation? Well, I am so sorry to have disappointed you. Clearly, I have not lived up to the expectation that when Black women speak in philosophy departments about our work we are supposed to drag our African sisters into the talk and into the text by the genitals! Yes, I can see that would have made people like you very comfortable. I suppose it would have been less destabilizing.

Sarah : I came here to interview you about your talk, to talk to you about White consciousness but not like this. You are putting me in the middle of this. You and I are both feminists, we are both philosophers but you are leaving no room for me to address you as a feminist.

Rozena: But you are in the middle of this. You are in the middle of philosophy's insistence to remain White and European. Even the mention of Jacques Derrida as Algerian got your eyebrows raised—you were sitting in the front, right in front of me. Then yesterday in the workshop it came up again and he was spoken about as French because of how he dressed and how he spoke—that he sounded more French than African French, not in the workshop but outside in the corridor. This is absurd! How would any of you know since most of you admitted that you had never left the country and besides, what difference does it make! What does African French sound like? Perhaps your students, like you, were taught that Algeria was in the south of France. I hope my geography lesson was useful. Certainly the few Black students present at the talk and at the workshop seemed very interested in that particular aspect of how philosophy has claimed Derrida and deconstruction as White and European.

Sarah : *Sighs. Nods.*

Rozena: You told me in no uncertain terms that this is not how you do philosophy... here, at this university. You know how to *do* philosophy... you and all of the White professors in your department. I don't because I talk about Black consciousness and not about female genital mutilation in Africa. This is what you'd rather discuss with me not with your White colleagues. Let's bring the Black woman here in philosophy and let's make sure she keeps her hands off our philosophy... so that's it, right?

Sarah : *Sighs.* I don't think you appreciate the fact that I have been holding back my tears. Feminists talk to each other about what they share in common not what keeps them apart.

Rozena: But we have racism and the history of White supremacy in common; we have both lived in a world dominated by racism and White supremacy. Would you prefer me not to talk about it?

Sarah : I have worked hard to get here, to be hired by a philosophy department and I took a risk to come and talk to you. I just wonder if you appreciate my position and my work as a feminist philosopher?

Rozena: Why should I appreciate anyone's position whose main concern is with maintaining and reproducing White supremacy, which comes from reproducing White Mythology? Everything you have said is about reproducing the very same philosophy you've studied—not only as a European canon but as philosophy period... the one and only. That is the only philosophy that you know. Philosophers in Europe showed not even the slightest concern for the enslavement of Black people in their backyard—they proceeded with their writing as though Black people did not exist and when we did, it was as people with no memory, as Hegel so eagerly wrote, because "Africans had not mastered the art of writing in European languages." Well, now you have your African who writes in English and speaks to you in English right in front of you—so what's the problem?

Sarah : I think the problem is I can't get my head around any of this. I have never heard anyone put this work to me in this way. I don't have words to respond to you. This is new to me.

Rozena: Africana philosophers have been doing this for at least thirty years. What I am doing is nothing new. It seems as though my work has entered a space where Africana philosophy and Black existentialist philosophy has been kept out. Go and read the work of the Black women and the women of color I mentioned. Stop treating us as a shock—we are here to stay.

Sarah : Look, I would like to keep in touch. This is all just too much to take in. I was up until all hours last night trying to get my head around this. If it was not tears I was wiping away then it was written responses that I prepared but that did not quite work. There are parts of your work that I find fascinating and then there are parts, the bulk of it I think, that I feel has taken me over as a shock for which I have no words. I don't know what to say to you anymore. That's all I have to say.

*End of recorded research segment*

As a point of departure, I shall tackle what I believe are the salient features of the dialogue above—it is the question of pedagogical practice—of what happens when race takes center stage in philosophy:

1. It brings forth the possibility that when one situates race within the *construction* and the *production of knowledge* that one believes it ought to be there; when one presents it in the presence of White scholars for whom the process is foreign, alien, or intimidating, one is placing them in positions of alibis, witnesses to their own demise, without their consent.

2. When agency is asserted—one's own agency as Black and its treatment under White supremacy, especially in resisting it—then one is pointing to the agency of philosophers who do not situate their race and therefore by implication holding them accountable for perpetuating and maintaining White supremacy without having to say so. Given their understanding of philosophy, this draws them out of philosophy into a terrain for which their lack of language is revealed. If one thinks within a language—a language of White, Western metaphysics—how can one think outside of it?
3. One is interpreted as saying that no discipline, no body of knowledge, even philosophy, can exist without understanding race because its history is written into every act of social, economic, and cultural production—and this interpretation, whilst accurate, situates White philosophers as painful listeners, reluctant diggers and excavators whose tools for such a purpose do not exist, and who are thus forced to create them through improvisation, at the very moment the problematic woman utters them, and who then inevitably fails.
4. Whether intentional or not, this places White philosophers in a defensive mode—some might even argue a guilty or shamed mode—and thus suggests and reveals, by the sheer presence of the Black philosopher and her analysis grounded in the history of Black consciousness, the limitations of White scholars and how these limitations might foster silence, because the limitations are at first experienced as the absence of words with which to express them. If *they* do not have the words to say it, *philosophy* does not have the words to say it.
5. One has brought autobiography, a pedagogical tool from less significant literary traditions—the African and African American traditions—into philosophy where it is ill-deserved and misplaced.
6. And thus in reflection of the point immediately above, in articulating the autobiographical as central to the construction of knowledge, one is saying that race, the subject as raced, lies at the heart of knowledge as wisdom—the latter constituting the very definition of philosophy.
7. Black presence through which philosophy is articulated—Black presence as the vehicle with which Black consciousness as the blood injected as ink with which to write it—inscribes philosophy onto the physical presence of those who see it as in-progress, who witness it as its alibis, and it is here where the problem lies for White scholars who struggle with its presence as onlookers, as silent conscientious objectors... for when Blackness does not come in the shape or form of the downtrodden or the defeated, as the “Blackness of Blackness,” it reminds White scholars that the measures employed to stamp out Blackness have failed, and they, therefore, represent that failure.

I shall reiterate my last point: It is the Black preacher in the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* who articulates it from the pulpit: “Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ‘Blackness of Blackness’” (Ellison 1952/1995, 9). Over the years I have seen the citation used in many different contexts. I am drawing on it here as a means to suggest that when race takes center stage in philosophy, placed at

the center of the philosophical discourse and delivered on a stage, a performative space like a lecture theater, by a Black woman infusing Black consciousness into philosophy and delivering it as a gift to White philosophers, it is the “act of Blackness”—“acting Black” and “not acting Black” that becomes the focus. The “act of Blackness” when encountered and observed is scorned upon, and as such taken up by the very core of the agents of White consciousness who in the form of liberal, educated philosophy scholars assert liberal faith by pointing to everything but our Blackness and instead to the manner, the method, the mode of delivery, the attire within which the delivery was made (the costume, so to speak), the inability to follow traditional protocol and speak like a philosopher, that attention is drawn to. As is demonstrated by the many reactions Sarah reveals through her body, many of which she verbalizes and others she cannot find words for, all is revealed: that philosophy and philosophers mask race, hide it, forbid it, repress it, in order to produce philosophy by the only means they know how—without it.

When race takes center stage in philosophy and the subject’s history of racism doesn’t (the “Blackness of Blackness”), it places the subject above racism—undetermined, unscathed by racism—why else would she be here—and as such, since she has not declared the roots of her subjugation nor the mechanisms of her overcoming, she has no business talking about race... she does not qualify. What qualifies is genital mutilation and violence against women within Black communities, which Sarah is expecting to hear even in a philosophy context where the Black subject as the speaking subject, as the thinking subject, the subject who produces knowledge from her subject location, is denied Black presence when articulated with prowess, especially when *that* articulation claims to be philosophy.

Let me take this matter further by examining the deconstruction of the subject and on whose behalf the freedom of the subject is fought for—let alone *by* whom. Sarah is interested in the suffering of Blacks: the Black South African who endures violence under a regime that Sarah is not part of and can distance herself from, just as she is interested in hearing about African women who are denied sexual pleasure because of the brutality of genital mutilation, a practice commonly spoken of as one inflicted by older African women upon a younger generation. The Black subject as a suffering subject, the Black subject who experiences violence and inflicts it, is what Sarah is willing to discuss within philosophy.

In 1992 Jacques Derrida was invited to give the Oxford Amnesty International lecture. It was hosted in a packed lecture hall at Oxford University; Alan Montefiore did the welcoming and introduction and remained in dialogue with Derrida for the duration of the hour after posing one main question for him to address:

This is about the deconstruction of the subject—the ethical and political problems posed by the disillusion of the deconstruction of the subject. In terms of the liberal tradition, taking the human being to be the subject of his or her own experience, life, activities, responsibilities, and so on, does this subject, the subject whose freedom Amnesty International seeks everywhere to defend in the name of

human rights or the so-called rights of man, does this subject still exist? If not, what sense can be made of this freedom that we are so concerned to protect? (Derrida 1992)

After looking around the room, Derrida proceeds to thank the organizers for the invitation. He responds right away on the question of deconstructing the subject: “First, to analyze historically in a genealogical way, the formation, and the different layers that have built the concept [the subject]. Every concept has its own history; every concept of subject has a very long, heavy and complex history” (Derrida 1992). As Derrida proceeded to address these complexities, what remained clear were his assertions of the historical and genealogical analysis of the subject and an attempt to focus on a universal understanding, perhaps a universal translation, of what the subject means; even when Montefiore tried to steer the conversation toward “the reconstruction of the subject,” Derrida insisted that it was not possible to ignore the subject’s history—and I would argue, one’s implication within the very subject whose rights one wants to protect. Derrida asserted quite vigorously that an attempt to reconstruct the subject cannot do the subject justice because the subject’s genealogy and history are what give the subject its existence.

Sarah was expecting to be informed by a discourse of Black consciousness where violence features prominently; she also insisted on wanting to speak to me as a feminist with the assumption that, in addressing gender inequality, mine and hers would meet, and that it would meet outside of the construction of race. Her understanding of my subject location is one that is schooled in the masking of White Mythology much the same as hers. The Black subject, in her estimation, is one that exists as an appendage of a history of racism and colonialism, for which she is not responsible, and for which, in taking the higher ground that philosophy offers, affords her the possibility of keeping her nose high in the air, at the height of mental production, above the stench of the spilled blood of racism.

In *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*, Jane Lazarre draws our attention to how White scholars refuse to locate their White identities.

I have heard numerous white colleagues and friends insist as well that they do not experience whiteness at all, because they are Jewish, or working class, or simply an outsider by personal temperament, as if awareness of skin color privilege might threaten the validity of equally real constraints. “I am not a white person,” I have heard white people say. I am a writer—a teacher—a woman—a shy and insecure woman. (Lazarre 1996, 34)

Sarah was insisting that I had not understood how hard she had worked in order to get her job in philosophy. Her ability to acquire a job in a philosophy department is due to her ability to understand the rules of philosophy, and the rules by which she understands her subjectivity—without once locating it. She is traumatized somewhat

—her struggle to keep back her tears—by what is clearly, as far as she is concerned, a wave of new knowledge and concepts with which she is not familiar. Africana philosopher Charles Mills starts the introduction to his 1997 book *The Racial Contract* by telling us how philosophy is taught. Whilst Sarah, an assistant professor, cannot be excused for her arrogance or ignorance, Mills's words resonate deeply with many Black philosophers:

White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today. You will not find this term in introductory, or even advanced, texts in political theory. A standard undergraduate philosophy course will start off with Plato and Aristotle, perhaps say something about Augustine, Aquinas, and Machiavelli, move on to Hobbes, Locke, Mill and Marx, and then wind up with Rawls and Nozick. It will introduce you to notions of aristocracy, democracy, absolutism, liberalism, and representative government, socialism, welfare capitalism, and libertarianism. But though it covers more than two thousand years of Western political thought and runs the ostensible gamut of political systems, there will be no mention of the basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years. And this omission is not accidental. Rather, it reflects the fact that standard textbooks and courses have for the most part been written and designed by whites, who take their racial privilege so much for granted that they do not even see it as *political*, as a form of domination. (Mills 1999, 1; italics in original)

#### PUTTING THE BLACK SUBJECT ON TRIAL

Thinking through Sarah's many responses to my talk—her insistence on treating me like the guilty party without really revealing my crime—I recollected two texts that brought a particular kind of reminiscence to me. First is Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, written between 1914 and 1915, which tells the story of a man who is arrested for a crime whose content or nature is not revealed either to him or to the reader. The second is *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, written by Kenyans Micere Mugo and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, which I acted in and as a result I am familiar with the content of the play, which made an enormous impact in my life. Both the texts I cite drive home the significance of acts of resistance that are committed, which do not even have to be named—as Sarah chooses not to inform me of the atrocity I had committed—and the fact that any act of rebellion, whether through speech, writing, or the imagination, when it offers an account of Black presence through the language and analysis offered through revolutionary movements like Black consciousness, despite the omnipresence of White supremacy, British colonialism, and American imperialism—is immediately branded as vicious or malicious.

Although I do not suggest any particular similarity between myself or the revolutionary leader Dedan Kimathi, I cite the work here merely to point to the historical

trials, punishment, exile, and murder committed against revolutionaries like Kimathi and Biko, who through the very act of language, performed in the flesh, challenge their colonizers—on their own terrain, with their own language, with an analysis of what that language forbids—then reveal what it harbors. My work has been enormously informed by both Biko and Kimathi. Kimathi was buried in an unmarked grave after his hanging, which took place shortly after he was captured in the forest. His colonizers could not make him flesh, could not humanize him, and his Kenyan compatriots in writing the play, which offered him the trial he never received, drew attention to his ability to reveal the extent of British colonialism with the best way he knew how—with words.

Sarah cannot make me flesh—she is focused on transforming my bodily presence into a thing, a machine of power that railroads people like her. Despite her knowledge of philosophy, which she eagerly cites, she cannot go to any particular discourse to tackle the crux of my argument. Instead she is concerned with what I have done, how I have destabilized philosophers in the room but cannot pinpoint my wrong, so to speak. My wrongs are in fact the very fact that I spoke a nonphilosophical discourse, utilized words that she cannot access, because they are words born from the historical development of Black consciousness—words born of struggle. When Sarah notes that she has also read Biko but did not “get out if what you got out of it,” not only was I puzzled, but I wondered whether we had read the same text? Biko was very clear: as agents of a system of White domination, White men and White women were first and foremost beneficiaries of the system. Biko’s understanding of agency, of how the mind is carried within the body, and the body—the flesh of consciousness, not just the philosophical concept to which individuals attach themselves simply by saying so—is what is crucial in understanding the role we play in either perpetuating, maintaining, and reproducing the very system we claim to be against or actively refusing it. In short, I cannot put Sarah “in the middle of it”; she has always been situated squarely in the middle of the construction of White consciousness.

My pedagogical practice was brought into question because White professors like Sarah have never had to think about how we receive their work, but somehow the manner in which I present and deliver my work suggests I have not thought about how White professors in philosophy will receive mine. The reception, as it happens, is part of the process by which White consciousness is inscribed. To break with White consciousness means to verbalize this absence of the knowledge with which to say it—and if this happens, the European tradition of philosophy will be dismantled, and White supremacy will be dismantled.

#### NOTES

1. I am in this particular instance also reminded of essays by Africana feminist philosopher Blanche Radford Curry and African American scholar bell hooks, both of whom are university professors and draw on their Black feminized presence within universities in their work.

2. We had recorded this session for three people who were ill. Later it was agreed that the entire class would have access to the recording and use it at our disposal.

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