

Presidential Address
 Reflecting Philosophy of Education: Will I Ever Be an “Appropriate Subject of Philosophy”?

Kal Alston

Syracuse University School of Education

Incident

Once riding in old Baltimore,
 Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
 I saw a Baltimorean
 Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
 And he was no whit bigger,
 And so I smiled, but he poked out
 His tongue, and called me, “Nigger.”

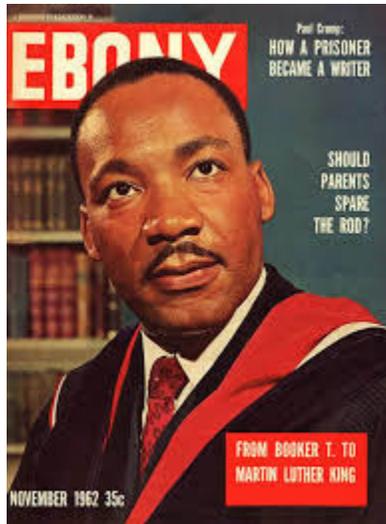
I saw the whole of Baltimore
 From May until December;
 Of all the things that happened there
 That’s all that I remember.

Countee Cullen¹

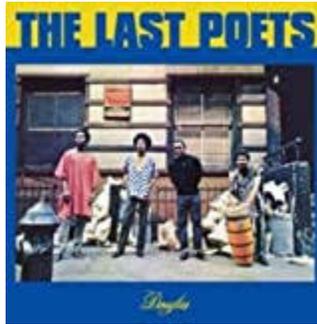
INTRODUCTION

Why start off breaking my own linguistic and social rules about the “n-word”? I learned this poem as a child—we did public “recitations” of mostly Black literature. (Although my first kudos came at three years old with *’Twas the Night Before Christmas*), of all the poems I recited in my childhood, this one is lodged firmly in my memory and heart. In my real life, despite having been born in Greensboro, North Carolina and moving to an all-white suburb of Philadelphia at the age of five, I don’t think I ever was called the “n-word”—at least to my face. The assumptions of the Black boy that

his joy and open-heartedness would be both recognized and reciprocated are the product of childish inexperience or perhaps the consequence of crossing the Mason-Dixon line in the 1930s. It lodges in the spaces in me that remain “heart-filled, head-filled with glee” even as I am simultaneously heartbroken and frustrated. I was that child in the 1960s who was taught to approach my world with the confidence that that world was changing and that I had a role to play in that change, just as my parents had had in their respective worlds. In those days, I also believed in Jesus, Santa Claus (kinda), Eartha Kitt, Mahalia Jackson, and Martin Luther King, Jr.



I lived the “respectability” life that my students sneer at now, with black patent leather maryjanes and dinners debating the Vietnam War, second wave feminism, and the dangers of that other MaryJane. I believed in jazz and blues, the Last Poets, meritocracy, AND the inevitability of the success of integration. I was a child of Brown, the Civil Rights Act, and Title IX. I knew only enough history to **know** that “We Will Overcome” and “This Little Light of Mine—I’m gonna let it shine!!!” were the real truth.



That boy in Cullen’s poem didn’t make it out of his Baltimore sojourn intact, and I didn’t make it out of the ‘70s without the beginnings of the end of certain dreams.

This paper is the outcome of an incursion into discussions among and between half a dozen Black women in philosophy. Like well-trained philosophers, they pose lots of questions about what philosophy can possibly be and what can they possibly be *in* philosophy—as Black women. Those conversations are alternatively with themselves, each other, Black men in philosophy, their students, and their (white) colleagues and teachers. I seek to join my fortunes to theirs but find dead ends, holes, and follies at the same time that I recognize myself in their pain, joy, and strategies for survival.

The encounter with one’s chosen lifework when in the skin and bones of the inappropriate body sets the context for examining the possibilities of philosophy of education and what it possibly has to say to the racial disaster of American education. In this paper I address specific Black children and turn inside out James Baldwin’s famous “Talks to Teachers” in which he addresses white teachers. This paper concludes with a specific accounting of the Black philosopher of education to several Black children who may well have cause to rebuke me (and my fellows). In this paper I address *you* and ask how our practices and passions allow for epistemic violence that causes real harms.

Can they (and I) find joy and hope—in the face of history? Perhaps the glee of Cullen’s young boy and the optimism of Maybelle

and Percel's young girl do not set quite the right mood.



For, although I am happy to be here with you today, I come bringing something of a Lamentation. For voices unheard, lives unrecognized, opportunities lost, and futures forestalled. However, I hope to end with a rationale for *struggle* with hope for the philosophy of education.

PART I – WHAT TO THE BLACK WOMAN IS PHILOSOPHY (OF EDUCATION)?

I think I want to save Philosophy of Education, and I am not sure why. Maybe chiefly for myself because I believe it is part of my “self,” despite all the testimony to the contrary.

I forgot to remember my own “Incidents.” They comprise literal memory, phenomenal remembrance, transgenerational throbs through my bones.

An Incident in Chicago 1988: My beloved dissertation advisor tells me that he couldn't always get my writing; it was too much like “jazz.”

I didn't take that as racial or racist. I still don't. I do now see

it as a communication that I was not at the center of the project of philosophy of education, insofar as he understood it to be a proper project, that I was at least *an* other or perhaps *the* “other.” Perhaps an inappropriate subject. Of course, I also see from hindsight that he himself was written out of “philosophy” and so may not have had my border and identity problems in his mind at all. Maybe even if he hadn’t said it (repeatedly in one way or another), I still would have entered the profession believing that I was not a “worthy” inheritor of the Dead White Men rather than understanding that my resistance to the proscribed path to intelligibility was the result of a dawning insistence on loving what I was meant to.

An Incident in Syracuse 2010: A beloved former boss of mine, in a meeting during which I informed him that we needed an institutional Title IX officer and that I had written an ad for such a position, evinced shock— “What do you know about athletics?” he asked.

Of course, he was revealing both his ignorance of the scope of Title IX and a mis-recognition of my feminist and educational equity *bona fides*. But why does it stick like a burr in the memory? After all, I fixed it, of course. It sticks because it is a painful reminder of the discounting of my professional expertise *and* my everyday embodied knowledge about race, racism, gender, patriarchy, and all the cracks and nexuses into which those good people poured the hot lava of mis-recognition and unintended dis-respect.

This summer, I stated my challenge baldly:

I find that ‘this’ essay must, however, ask the same rude question that I was asked many times in my doctoral studies (by Black and non-Black interlocutors): Why would any Black woman want to study philosophy (of education)? Sometimes the question was asked as a hostile interrogatory: Why are you here where you cannot believe you belong? Sometimes as

a perplexity: What good is philosophy for Black life? (unlike other projects that are easily injected into ‘the’ community, i.e., medicine or sociology).²

From the start, in this Society, I was *accused* of doing sociology because I wanted to account for bodies—gendered and then raced; I was disrespectful of the codes and boundaries of what WE value here—and was therein *convicted* of being an inappropriate subject of philosophy.

I am not the first, nor the last. George Yancy wrote of the idea of the “inappropriate” subject of philosophy—meaning “subject” as both the practitioner and the approved topics: “It is unsettling to read a text, to engage it, to feel its texture, its spine, and yet to realize that such a text [...] wasn’t written for your eyes, but written on the assumption that you were not one of its “appropriate” subjects, *could not* have been one of its “appropriate” subjects/readers.”³ Yancy refers there to Kant, but feel free to populate that bracket with anyone you fancy in the Western tradition, even to the contemporary world. Camisha Russell makes explicit the structures of philosophy that are the conditions for recognition, inclusion, and “participation of black women within it.”

1. Canon (what are *real* philosophical questions?)
2. Textual orientation (written, in particular languages) [What are the seminal texts?]
3. Logic/argumentation (excluding certain discourses altogether)
4. Rules of practice (lecture and argument v. dialogue and collaboration)
5. Abstraction, universality (no subjective, concrete)
6. Individualistic view of reason
7. Norms of grad education (replication)
8. Academic tenure and promotion (no rewards for mentoring)
9. Politics of US HED (delegitimizing humanities)⁴

Some of these categories emerge every year as we structure our work and identities in the Society and in the field. Russell uses an expanded version

of these nine structures to understand her own elision from the grounds on which she seeks to be acknowledged as a Black Feminist Philosopher. This is an elision that captures the experiences of others, such as V. Denise James:

It is also a self-designation that has at times drawn blank stares, looks of confusion, outright derision, and at least once, disbelief in the tenability of such a pursuit from the person to whom I offered it as a description of my work. The astute senior philosopher looked me over and asked, “A black feminist philosopher? Is that possible?” I must admit there are times that I have my doubts.⁵

She counters that professional skepticism with a reminiscence in the same mood of confident pleasure with which Cullen’s eight-year-old toured Baltimore. Of her “before” time, she says:

It appealed to my love of the written word and my youthful rebellion against the popular view that my generation was anti-intellectual. While sitting in a classroom reading the texts of the Western philosophical canon with a dozen other young, black women, I did not once think that I was incapable of philosophical thought or that philosophy as a professional discipline was founded upon and happy to continue to support a series of practices that silenced, marginalized, and excluded black women. Dynamic, committed, and all male, philosophy professors fostered my love for philosophy in those early years.⁶

As Kristie Dotson reflects on the inadequacy of the limitations of the canon, “Too often, people who voice skepticism about canonical questions and methods find they face a recurrent question: ‘How is your project “philosophy?”’ . . . The question ‘What is philosophy?’ is a deeply philosophical question.”⁷

And I reflect back to her: When such questions get asked, there is a rejection of the very premise of the critique implied in your project!! There is not a good (acceptable to the interlocutor) answer that does not accede to the canons/traditions that are being called into question.

George Yancy is, perhaps, our generation's Black people's philosophy MC/bricoleur. In 2008, he moderated five Black women philosophers in a public forum discussion (Anita Allen, Anika Mann (Simpson), Michele Moody-Adams, Donna Marciano, and Jacqueline Scott).⁸ They referenced the importance of Adrian Piper, Angela Davis, Georgette Sinkler, and the first U.S. Black woman to receive a PhD in philosophy, Joyce Mitchell Cook, as their indication that they were not the first of their kind—although almost all of them were mentored by white men (even at Spelman College) who saw them in full. Camisha Russell, Kristie Dotson, and V. Denise James are all in the next generation or two in the field, and right now they have “entered the chat.”

Marciano emphatically rejected the traditions of philosophy and philosopher-life that felt, for a long time, like a disconnection from the phenomenal experience of being herself.

To want to be Socrates or Plato, or whoever your white male embodiment of philosophy is, may seem ambitious at best or foolish at worst. But it is not trivial, especially for a [B]lack woman.... [T]o be a [B]lack woman in philosophy is an anomaly. We must remember that woman is herself an anomaly in the canon, but to be [B]lack and a woman is to be the extreme opposite of philosophy's canonical figures. The [B]lack woman's intellectual capacity and philosophical engagement is believed to be nothing less than a void.⁹

Not only did that void pose an almost unanswerable question, but Marciano confesses to a love of philosophy, but not a love of philosophy that “appears” to arise out of the “purity of the mind and not from the observations and confusions we confront in the living of life.”¹⁰

Marciano jokes that she wishes she could have remained a philosophy student rather than a philosophy teacher. But Jackie Scott teaches her students to push beyond the abstract language that they have been taught is philosophy and the alienation—to themselves and

their home communities—that abstraction can bring: “I try to think about philosophy vertically. I talk about philosophy in a way, using the technical vocabulary, but always insisting that my students be able to explain the philosophical ideas to a person who has read the text once and hasn’t fully understood it.”¹¹ Anita Allen suggests that she is intentionally changing her philosophy courses through feminist pedagogical methods— “emphasizing context, perspective, and narrative . . . My hope is that students will come to understand philosophy as a product of experience.”¹² Her view, shared by many of her fellow interlocutors, is that they have—whether they cast it as feminist, as many of them do, or not—a different set of obligations to philosophy itself. In their efforts in teaching and writing, they seek a kind of inclusion for others that they did not experience themselves. There is not one road, but as they share their stories and commitments on that panel or elsewhere in their work, there is no gasp, except of recognition. Not one simple melodic line of facing racism and/or sexism, but a series of contrapuntal phrases.

Their specialties range from Black feminist philosophy to legal ethics to Nietzsche, 19th century philosophy, pragmatism, and African American studies. And as these Black women philosophers reflect on their entry into the field, their education, and their ability to navigate very different career trajectories, the structural themes that Russell outlines in her article continue to bob to the surface. In their journeys to the center of the discipline, they recount the microaggressions, macroaggressions, and just plain aggression aggressions that did not stop them but formed the Incidents that they may forget to remember—in order that they move forward in their scholarly, personal, and professional lives.

As they think about their students and what they can give one another, they know that there have to be multiple modes of memory and languages and the allowance for different communities and individuals to be read, heard, and understood. The necessity for this multiplicity is so that their survival does not always have to take a

miraculous intervention. And they tell of such, some by their close-in mentors and friends, by reading Angela Davis, by staying alive to how they commit to change the field, the university, and the world—and in one case a last-minute phone call from John Rawls.

Michele Moody-Adams captures the felt spirit of these multiple testimonies—heard and unheard—when she reminisces on an undergraduate Plato course from her youth: “Even to this day. . . I draw on a very vivid image of the conversation in the *Symposium*—you know, an image of philosophers seated around a table, talking about important ideas and eating good food and enjoying good wine. This is what philosophy, at its best remains for me: the food of life.”¹³

As I read this paragraph, I nod my head (and doesn’t that gathering sound dreamy?!?), but I add that when I read this discussion and read the other articles here and write myself into this ongoing colloquy, I not only long to drink wine, but to sing out in call and response—with syncopation, the skips and the rhythm of silences in my philosophical practices. Not abstract but concretized in all that my body knows and rarely says in daily life that I know drives some people crazy. But it is the expression that makes me feel my most philosophical

An Incident in Syracuse 2020 (pre-Pandemic): Kristie Dotson came to SU and gave a job talk for a joint position in Philosophy and Women’s and Gender Studies. In hindsight maybe I should have put “job talk” in scare quotes because she completely befuddled the left side of the room (where the philosophy faculty and graduate students sat). She befuddled them even more than when George Yancy came to town—at least he was explicitly naming his racial critique of philosophy. I think, instead of giving a version of her famous paper on epistemic violence, she refused the linguistic comforts of that paper and performed and intoned her racial critique of philosophic practice. She refused to occupy “job talk” body and stance (she came from behind the lectern) and instead embodied and testified her epistemic violence story situated in the real world—I wanted to stand and give her the

slow clap of appreciation. All the questions came from women's studies folks except for a couple of "brave" philosophy graduate students who actually seemed pretty affronted by the whole thing. Four of the then five Black woman full professors at my university took her to dinner afterward. I loved her in every way, but I was pretty sure that she would never take up residence in the Hall of Languages. I wasn't sure that she actually was trying to get there either. (Long story short: she stayed "home" at Michigan State). I was sad for us, but I also totally saw the philosophy, the deep, rich questions, enquiry, and critique in her performance, and I knew that it was illegible to my colleagues. But I was delighted that neither her light nor her joy was dimmed by that lack of recognition. Maybe this was her declaration that she was ready to thrive, as she put it in a 2011 essay, and accept her role as the "weed that grows between the cracks" of the sidewalk—a concrete flower—and assert that she will continue to grow in this environment that was never meant to sustain her.¹⁴

When I read Dotson and the others' critiques of the philosophic project, I remember that philosophy of education has its own challenges of the same and different kinds. Some derive directly from the racism that bounds the discipline and sets its exclusionary practices. Others derive from various attempts to keep our considerations of education somehow removed from those practices. When I recognize myself in Kristie or Jackie, I feel pulled up because I cannot forget the ethical responsibility to children whose lives have been destroyed by systems that prescribe a specific form of forgetting that allows—no, is constituted by—relentless racism. So, what is my job, beyond description, beyond analysis, beyond critique? I overcame what I regarded as racism in theatre casting in elementary school by writing a barn burner of an essay, "No Black Pansies," and I overcame what I regarded as bias in theatre casting in college by becoming a director so I could call the shots, and I wrote a thesis about the absurdity of power and theatre itself. Is it any wonder I believed I could *write* myself beyond the borders of race? How do I atone (Can I?) for a life of compensat-

ing for that racism, for believing in the magic of my own enjoyment of philosophy, for thinking that thinking or writing alone would help those that philosophy in fact helped me never to see?



PART II – WHAT CAN EDUCATION MEAN IN THE SHADOW
OF THE AMERICAN DREAM? FIVE QUESTIONS FOR JAMES
BALDWIN

You are free
You had Obama
We love [Insert the name of the Last Dead Negro]
Or the sacrificial Negro [Eugene Goodman]
Or the magical Negro [Amanda Gorman]
Why must you keep harping on the past?
Reparations? For what?
You got Beyonce and Jay-z and Oprah, right
When you get money, you just waste it on pink forehead diamonds or
endless Birkin bags.
When you get (yourself) killed, there must be a reason.
Why you so mad?
--Kal Alston 2021

This section is an excerpt of my (long-imagined) conversation

with James Baldwin, who would have turned 96 this year.

Kal: Mr. James Baldwin, what can education mean in the shadow of the American Dream?

JB: The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.¹⁵

But for the black man with the attaché case, or for the black boy on the needle, it has always been the intention of the Republic to promulgate and guarantee his dependence on this Republic. For although one cannot really be educated to believe a lie, one can be forced to surrender to it.

And there is, after all, no reason *not* to be dependent on one's country or, at least, to maintain a viable and fruitful relationship with it. But this is not possible if you see your country and your country does not see you. It is not possible if the entire effort of your countrymen is an attempt to destroy your sense of reality.¹⁶

Kal: Mr. Baldwin, what, then, is our modern challenge in protecting that sense of reality?

JB: In the case of the American Negro, from the moment you are born every stick and stone, every face, is white. Since you have not seen a mirror, you suppose you are, too. It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6, or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you.¹⁷

Kal: Mr. B, presuming that this discovery happens for some when they go to school, what happens in the educational process afterward?

JB: So is education with a small e different from Education with a large E. In the lowercase, education refers to the relations that actually obtain among human beings. In the uppercase, it refers to power. Or, to put it another way, my father, mother, brothers, sisters, lovers, friends, sons, daughters civilize me in quite another way than the state intends. And the education I can receive from an afternoon with Picasso, or from taking one of my nieces or nephews to the movies, is not at all what the state has in mind when it speaks of Education.¹⁸

A high school diploma, which had almost no meaning in my day, nevertheless suggested that you had been in school. But today it operates merely as a credential for jobs—for the most part nonexistent—that demand virtually nothing in the way of education... *The educational system of this country is, in short, designed to destroy the black child.* It does not matter whether it destroys him by stoning him in the ghetto or by driving him mad in the isolation of Harvard.¹⁹

Kal: James, if the system is so designed, what can I or anyone else who cares about educating Black children and helping them survive do?

JB: Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced, not by Khrushchev [Putin], but from within. So any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen.²⁰

Kal: Jimmy, what is the road ahead for that child? And for us in Amer-

ica?

JB: He is part of a country where anyone can become President. [H]e is also assured by his country and his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization—that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured.²¹

Therefore, the truth cannot be told, even about one's attitudes: we live by lies. And not only, for example, about race—whatever, by this time, in this country, or, indeed, in the world, this word may mean—but about our very natures. The lie has penetrated to our most private moments, and the most secret chambers of our hearts.

Nothing more sinister can happen, in any society, to any people. And when it happens, it means that the people are caught in a kind of vacuum between their present and their past—the romanticized, that is, the maligned past, and the denied and dishonoured present. It is a crisis of identity. And in such a crisis, at such a pressure, it becomes absolutely indispensable to discover, or invent—the two words, here, are synonyms—the stranger, the barbarian, who is responsible for our confusion and our pain. Once he is driven out—destroyed—then we can be at peace; those questions will be gone. Of course, those questions never go, but it has always seemed much easier to murder than to change.²²

PART III – NOTES TO NEGRO YOUTH: THE NATION NEEDS YOUR GIFTS

The missing children. The unaddressed children. The lost children

Kids Who Die

This is for the kids who die,
Black and white,
For kids will die certainly.
The old and rich will live on awhile,
As always,
Eating blood and gold,
Letting kids die.

Kids will die in the swamps of Mississippi
 Organizing sharecroppers
 Kids will die in the streets of Chicago
 Organizing workers
 Kids will die in the orange groves of California
 Telling others to get together
 Whites and Filipinos,
 Negroes and Mexicans,
 All kinds of kids will die
 Who don't believe in lies, and bribes, and contentment
 And a lousy peace.
 Of course, the wise and the learned
 Who pen editorials in the papers,
 And the gentlemen with Dr. in front of their names
 White and black,
 Who make surveys and write books
 Will live on weaving words to smother the kids who die,
 And the sleazy courts,
 And the bribe-reaching police,
 And the blood-loving generals,
 And the money-loving preachers
 Will all raise their hands against the kids who die,
 Beating them with laws and clubs and bayonets and bullets
 To frighten the people—
 For the kids who die are like iron in the blood of the people—
 And the old and rich don't want the people
 To taste the iron of the kids who die,
 Don't want the people to get wise to their own power,
 To believe an Angelo Herndon, or even get together
 Listen, kids who die—
 Maybe, now, there will be no monument for you
 Except in our hearts
 Maybe your bodies'll be lost in a swamp

Or a prison grave, or the potter's field,
 Or the rivers where you're drowned like Leibknecht
 But the day will come—
 You are sure yourselves that it is coming—
 When the marching feet of the masses
 Will raise for you a living monument of love,
 And joy, and laughter,
 And black hands and white hands clasped as one,
 And a song that reaches the sky—
 The song of the life triumphant
 Through the kids who die.
 (Langston Hughes, 1938)²³

“It has always seemed easier to murder than to change,” writes James Baldwin.²⁴ The word “murder” sounds so active, though the action is sometimes contained in the last part of that sentence. Death comes by doing nothing to change the effects of the system that a) benefits you, or b) has convinced you that it is for the best or that you will someday benefit, or c) has bought or beaten you into compliance. In the meantime, the children are dying, whether fast by gunshot or slow by lead in the water or by the poison of shame when, exhausted from studying and surrounded by books and notes, you are wakened by the Yale University campus police demanding your ID to prove you belong in your dorm lounge.

Here is a pop quiz.

Please identify, compare, contrast the following:

#xxxxxxWhileWhite

Dined on Burger King purchased by arresting officers (after you gunned down nine people in church)

Ordered to jail with organic food options to end the pain of a hunger strike (after your arrest for taking part in a violent insurrection in your Nation's

Capitol Building)

Released to leave the country for a “work retreat” in Mexico while on bail (after being indicted for taking part in a violent insurrection in your Nation’s Capitol Building)

Given a Bible by the judge to save your soul after being convicted at your murder trial (where you killed your neighbor after illegally entering his home)

Kept free to move interstate on bond, withholding your address from prosecutors, drink underage, with agreement of the judge (after shooting and killing two non-violent protesters in public)

#xxxxWhileBlack

Left uncharged for three years on Rikers Island for want of cash bail, tortured (for allegedly stealing a backpack; you kill yourself after release)

Questioned for more than twenty-four hours without parent or counsel, as a minor, until you confess to a crime you didn’t commit (you are convicted and sent to prison until the emergence of suppressed evidence [and the malfeasance of the prosecutor] frees you to a wrecked family and life)

Shot at a traffic stop when you inform that you have a properly licensed handgun in the car (in full view of your partner and her child; the officer goes free)

Shot, holding a phone, in your grandmother’s backyard (twenty gunshots from two officers, who were looking for a car vandal; never charged)

Shot and killed in your neighborhood park, holding a toy gun, within two seconds of police arrival (your killers do not even administer first aid to your dying body)

It Has Always Been Easier to Murder than to Change

Trayvon, do you ever sit at the table with C. Alfred Anderson and

Some of the other Airmen and wonder at the heavens

Do you chortle about stuff and send love to your mama, Sybrina?

I hope so when every year Black Twitter reminds us of how

old you would be if . . .

Theaster reclaimed the site of your death from the forgetting that Cleveland hoped for, Tamir,

“This site of trauma needed a home. In the name of Tamir and in the name of beauty, we can use this now sacred space to have some Black joy and be critical, radical, and disruptive. Mourn and celebrate.”

We will always mourn and celebrate you. I will. Your death broke my mother’s heart. I saw your gazebo on the South Side. Mourn and celebrate what has been recaptured in art.

It has always been easier to murder than to change.

When they took the clippers to you as if you were a sheep, we felt each loc fall like a lash.

We matched you tear for tear. Your sacrifice for your team felt familiar and rank.

We understood your mourning.

We stood with you when the others yelled from social media comfort, “It’s just hair; it’ll grow back.”

Somehow our hair is never “just hair”.

To the eight year old Black children at Killian Elementary in Columbia, South Carolina:

You do not have to surface your intergenerational trauma

Do not complete the assignment, “My Life as a Slave.”

Do not discuss being kidnapped from West Africa,

Do not discuss riding on a slave ship and being sold at auction.

Do not draw pictures and discuss life with ‘your’ slave owners.

Don’t let them drag you 114 miles to the Market in Charleston where our ancestors were put

ashore

Unless they are prepared to be accountable

And, still, do not fill out that worksheet; it is not educational

The people asking you are not teachers

Even if that is how they get paid.

It has always been easier to murder than to change.

There are twins, Malik and Miles.

I do not know them. But they are juniors at MIT, slaying it in their bioengineering labs

I do not know them. They help me to slide into joy that is not joined to mourning.

I hope to hear about their exploits in genetics research when I am an old lady.

You can hear right now the exploits of two Black girls who are not twins.

Naomi, whose 11-year-old voice thundered from the stage at the March for Our Lives,

‘I am here to acknowledge and represent the African American girls whose stories don’t make the front page of every national newspaper. Whose stories don’t lead on the evening news.

I represent the African American women who are victims of gun violence. Who are simply statistics instead of vibrant, beautiful girls and full of potential.’

And Mari, who demanded that the nation (and the president) turn to look at the poisoning of

the people in Flint

Living in a system designed to save money by sacrificing the bodies and minds of people

conditioned to take what they can get,

Little Miss Flint said no. She raised money. She sat in Congressional hearings. She designed water filters. She reminds us that the water crisis in Flint is not

over. She sends water filters to frozen Texas.

It has always been easier to murder than to change.

Mari expects to be President one day. She may have to fight Amanda Gorman in the primaries of 2042.

We have to hope that the poet is right, that we are

‘a nation that isn’t broken
but simply unfinished’

I fear that the finishing is not simple, nor is it acknowledged

I cry, pray, and teach on behalf of each and every one of these Black children, dead or alive, persecuted or celebrated, visible or invisible.

We know from the testimony of all our ancestors – Frederick, Anna Julia, Sojourner, James, Toni, Maya and all ‘em

It has always been easier to murder than to change.

It has always been easier to murder than to change.

It has always been easier to murder than to change.

And still I write.

Kal Alston (2021)



Dread Scott “A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday” on display at

the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art (UC Davis).
Taken by the author October 2017.

PART IV – NOTES TO PES: WHAT IS OWED BY PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

The artist. . . cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being. Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that the visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and all our achievement rests on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven.²⁵

Though it be a thrilling thing to be merely young and gifted in such times. It is doubly so to be young, gifted and black. Write if you will: but write about the world as it is and as you think it OUGHT to be and must be—if there is to be a world. Write about not only exotic disappointments—but ordinary ones. Write about the sit-ins; write about the lady who bored you on the airplane; write about how the stars seemed viewed from earth. Write about love; write about hatred pride jealousy. In short, write. . . Good luck to you. The Nation needs your gifts. Perfect them!²⁶

The price for this [the opportunity to move beyond Old World concepts of race, class, caste] is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record. . . . Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, make

freedom real.²⁷

Kal Alston, 1995: 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 racial biases in philosophical positions or in the profession?²⁸

I have to end where I began. The description of “the work” of the artist that Baldwin and Hansberry describe and prescribe as an antidote to our willed ignorance could be the work of philosophy of education. Or maybe I should simply claim it for myself.

Why are we in this business: loving wisdom but ignoring what we could know if we but tried a little harder? And what is this “education” whose constitution inspires such love if it doesn’t extend to the love of its most vulnerable subjects?

We are not loving wisdom or any viable notion of education as long as we refuse to look at our history—our complicity—our love of what we can do without giving up anything, without sacrifice, without seeing the consequences of not knowing.



Summer Freedom School Students (Community Folk Arts Center) at the Auburn New York Home of Harriet Tubman

I apologize to the ancestors both known and unknown for assuming I knew their lives and histories by reading words, pictures, or stories from my limited horizon. I used to say that I could understand “where my parents came from,” but they could never understand me. Now as I see multiple generations misread my story, I know that my youthful ignorance was purposeful, used for my own misunderstanding of the life I was living and the choices and mistakes I was making. I must forgive my “ignorant” turning away. But not forget, not forget the cost.

I propose that we engage in ongoing exercises of radical recognition—using any means necessary and available to each of us individually and as participants in this field that *needs us to look outward as well as inward*.

I will be the one in the Old Philosopher of Education Home exhorting us to use whatever tools we have at hand, including the various texts (written, spoken, testified), and in gratitude for all we have been given and have taken—commit to using their deepest analysis

and critique to change the structures and institutions in which we dwell. I will call on you to embody the most complex versions of love to the work and to keep struggling through the struggle—in the hope that we can remember what it is tempting to forget and make freedom real.

As I close, I want to especially acknowledge Maybelle and Percel Alston, James Baldwin, Adrian Piper, Carrie Mae Weems, Ruby Dee, Ava Duvernay, and Octavia Butler—in addition to all the artists and activists whose work continues to chastise and inspire me and to push at the imagined limits of my work.

1 Countee Cullen, “Incident,” in *The Black Poets*, ed. Dudley Randall (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 92.

2 Liz Jackson et al., “Philosophy of Education in a New Key: Snapshot 2020 from the United States and Canada,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2020): doi:0000-0001-5648-2887. See in particular Kal Alston’s section, “Why ‘I Can’t Breathe’ in Philosophy of Education.”

3 George Yancy, “Introduction: Inappropriate Philosophical Subjects?” in *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 9.

4 Condensed from Camisha Russell, “On Black Women, ‘In Defense of Transracialism,’ and Imperial Harm,” *Hypatia* 34, no. 2 (2019), 185–186.

5 V. Denise James, “Musing: A Black Feminist Philosopher: Is That Possible?” *Hypatia* 29, no. 1 (2014), 190.

6 James, “Musing,” 190.

7 Kristie Dotson, “Concrete Flowers: Contemplating the Profession of Philosophy,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011), 406.

8 George Yancy, ed., “Situated Voices: Black Women in/on the Profession of Philosophy,” *Hypatia* 23, no. 2 (2008): 160–189.

9 Yancy, “Situated Voices,” 165.

10 Yancy, “Situated Voices,” 166.

11 Yancy, “Situated Voices,” 184.

- 12 Yancy, "Situated Voices," 185.
- 13 Yancy, "Situated Voices," 163.
- 14 Dotson, "Concrete Flowers," 408.
- 15 James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers" (1963), in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library, 1998), 678–679.
- 16 James Baldwin, "Dark Days" (1980), in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library, 1998), 795.
- 17 James Baldwin, "The American Dream and the American Negro" (1965), in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library, 1998), 714.
- 18 Baldwin, "Dark Days," 790.
- 19 Baldwin, "Dark Days," 795.
- 20 Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," 678.
- 21 Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," 679.
- 22 James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal" (1964), in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library, 1998), 698.
- 23 Langston Hughes, "Kids Who Die" (1938), in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1, The Poems: 1921-1940*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 138. This poem came back into public consciousness after the trial and acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin. See for example "'Kids Who Die'—A Poem by Langston Hughes," *Sankofa*, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://www.sankofa.org/dispatches/11-kids-who-die-a-poem-by-langston-hughes>.
- 24 Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 698.
- 25 James Baldwin, "The Creative Process" (1962), in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library, 1998), 670.
- 26 Lorraine Hansberry, "The Nation Needs Your Gifts," *Negro Digest* 13, no. 1 (August 1964), 26.
- 27 Baldwin, "The Creative Process," 672.
- 28 Kal Alston, "Race Consciousness and the Philosophy of Education," *Philosophy of Education* 1995, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 149.