

Black Women Philosophers Conference

Titles and Abstracts

1. Anita Allen: “Why I Write about Privacy”

Global human life has gone digital. The ways in which many people act, and are acted upon by others, rely directly or indirectly on digital technologies. Some of these technologies did not exist a few decades ago; others existed but without current and anticipated capacities for rapid, reliable, and high-volume data gathering, storage, and analysis. Transformative eras call out to academic philosophy for a response—for example, the rise and fall of Nazi Germany, the civil rights movement, called out for a response. In the turbulent and transformative middle of the twentieth century philosophers were called upon to contribute clear-headed thinking to debates about peace, justice, and equality, and controversies surrounding colonialism and post-colonialism, poverty, nuclear war, gender, race, and sexual orientation. In the current period of rapid change, academically trained philosophers should be in the business of identifying conceptual and normative issues created by digital life, and of suggesting good and better ways to address the practical problems such as increased surveillance and reliance upon discriminatory algorithms. To do this, philosophers will need to forge bold new perspectives for which there may be no obvious or direct grounding in the canonical texts of our discipline. One of the most widely acknowledged and debated set of questions and concerns generated by digital life relate to privacy or, more broadly, to data protection. These questions and concerns are at the center of my work.

2. Kathryn Belle: “1949: Claudia Jones (“An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women!”) and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) 70 Years Later”

This paper imagines a debate between Claudia Jones (“An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women!”) and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*), paying particular attention to Jones’s triple oppression analysis (of Black women as simultaneously raced, classed, and gendered) that centers Black women’s experiences. In contrast, Beauvoir often takes what I have termed an analogical approach (e.g., analyzing gender oppression against white women as analogous to racial oppression against Black men), centering white women and almost altogether ignoring Black women’s experience.

3. Myisha Cherry: “Breaking Rules through Rage”

It has been argued that members of oppressed groups break “feeling rules” when they express anger at injustice. For this reason, philosopher Alison Jaggar and law professor Janine Young Kim refer respectively to emotions such as anger as “outlaw emotions” and “affective transgressions.” But I think more can be said. I shall argue that rage at racial injustice not only breaks feeling rules but “racial rules”—emotive, cognitive, and behavioural rules that enforce white supremacy, entitlement, and respect. Such rule-breaking threatens racial domination projects. This helps to explain why some are resistant to and critical of rage—particularly the apt, motivational, and productive kinds—and why a person who has such rage is a resistant figure.

4. Emmalon Davis: “Procreative Justice Reconceived: Undermining Propaganda and Averting the Moral Gaze”

This paper develops a two-part critical analysis of Tommie Shelby’s account of procreative responsibility in his *Dark Ghettos* (2016). First, using Jason Stanley’s (*How Propaganda Works*, 2015) notion of undermining propaganda, I articulate two ways in which undermining propaganda—a rhetorical strategy employed by Shelby—risks undermining itself. As I show, the ideals of public reason (namely, reasonableness, rationality, and impartiality) are insufficient to guard against the risks inherent in employing the strategy. I argue that public reason must be guided by a practice of descriptive and conceptual accountability. This practice precedes deliberation about responses to social problems; it requires that descriptions and conceptual framings of the problems themselves be informed by and acceptable to those whose experiences are centrally deliberated upon. Second, I argue that moral evaluation of the oppressed is neither politically nor ethically neutral. I argue that in the absence of descriptive and conceptual accountability, the “moral gaze” of the philosopher is more likely to be a source of than a solution to oppression. I apply these observations to Shelby’s account and offer tools for reconceiving procreative justice for the oppressed.

5. Nathifa Greene: “Race Talk and Land Distribution in Trinidad & Tobago after Caroni (1975) Ltd.”

After the national sugar cane industry in Trinidad & Tobago was decommissioned in 2003, the figure of the indentured laborer was depicted as an Indo-Trinidadian in some political propaganda, mobilizing antiblack race talk to claim land leases. This figure of the indentured laborer played on a racial binary between Afro- and Indo-Caribbean peoples. This particular binary is not taken into account often enough in analyses of race talk in the Americas, alongside the black-white colonial racial binaries that shaped Caribbean racial realities.

6. Devonya N. Havis: “Blues Alchemies and the Ethics of Refusal”

This paper examines ethical-political interventions that, in the spirit of Michel Foucault’s recuperation of parrhesia, engage in transgression and refusal as a means of exposing injustice. I will explore how such forms as the spirituals, blues, jazz, and writers in those traditions invoke a parrhesiastic aesthetics that has liberatory effects. The work of Black aesthetics in this regard might best be understood as exercising practices of freedom under conditions of unfreedom. “For the art—the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom,” Ralph Ellison observes. To what extent do these forms constitute political refusals and alchemical acts of creation?

7. Janine Jones: “Disappearing Black People through Failures of White Empathy”

White empathy for black people tends to fail. I argue that the construction of black people’s minds in Manichean opposition to that of white people’s is at the root of white failures of empathy for black people. I propose that rather than seeking to empathize with black people, white people self-empathize. More specifically, I argue that it is nearly impossible to perceive or to know some other minds as minds within contexts of

oppression. I introduce a model of self-empathy that introduces the reconstruction of historical selves as essential to empathetic practice. Such construction effects a departure from models of empathy that rely solely on the self's perception, memory, and imagination, and includes what the self could not have perceived or remembered in experience.

8. Axelle Karera: “Black Feminist Philosophy and the Politics of Refusal”

In many ways, explicitly naming oneself a Black feminist philosopher remains a daring act of self-identification in professional philosophy. Black women, indeed, are drastically outnumbered in philosophy. Scholars who identify as Black feminist philosophers and whose work is directly invested in assessing, clarifying, and theorizing Black women and girls' life-worlds are even more outnumbered. In this paper, I attempt to provide an account of Black feminists' philosophical commitments. I try to show the ways in which Black women philosophers have refused to render their own philosophical contributions invisible. I attend to the choices they make in their various endeavors at countering what the Black feminist philosopher Kristie Dotson names a “process-based invisibility.” I borrow Audra Simpson's formulation of the “politics of refusal” as a conceptual framework to account for the ways in which Black feminist philosophies have been more than merely corrective to philosophy's supposedly neutral and universalist claims. As a framework, Black feminist philosophers' “politics of refusal” intends to depict how Black women philosophers doing philosophy for Black women and girls refuse to sell themselves short, refuse institutionally imposed intellectual trajectories, and refuse to respond to philosophy's “call to order,” all in their attempts to lay down uncompromisingly Black feminist research agendas in philosophy. Ultimately, I show how Black feminist philosophers are redefining conceptual understanding of agency, freedom, and resistance.

9. Michele Moody-Adams: “Repairing the Raft and Staying Afloat: Philosophy, Race and Gender”

Some of us become philosophers to understand the world as a prelude to changing it. But we frequently discover that we must change philosophy itself to create conceptual space for our philosophical projects. The black woman in philosophy is often like Neurath's mariner who must repair her vessel while staying afloat in open water. When we discover that we are partly constituted by some of the ideas and values under scrutiny, we realize that we must examine, reshape, and replace those ideas and values one “plank” at a time. I will discuss some of the ways in which my work on everything from race and gender, moral relativism and culture, and a number of central problems in moral psychology, are meant to show how one might repair the vessel and stay afloat as a contributing philosopher.

10. Mickaella Perina: “Engaging (French) Caribbean Philosophy: Beyond Poetics and Politics”

A stimulating way, I argue, to think through the French Caribbean philosophical tradition and appreciate its distinctive contribution is to both engage with the concepts produced by its important figures and put them in conversation with each other. While French Caribbean writers seek to provide ways to understand the “Caribbean experience” in the context of plantation slavery, French colonialism, or global

imperialism, they question dominant habits of thinking and seeing and offer new ways of seeing, thinking, and being in the world. In this essay, I analyze key concepts taking seriously Edouard Glissant's conception of an alternative imaginative history in defiance of the regulative assumption of causality, orderly succession, and hierarchical system.

11. Camisha Russell: "Thinking Black Women with Working-Class Whites: Resistant Imagining for Polarized Times"

This essay explores concerns surrounding a larger project on the way black women and working-class whites are played against each other in the U.S. social imaginary to maintain a system that has and will continue to marginalize both groups. I first provide background on and an initial description of the project, situating it at an intersection between black feminist thought, critical epistemology, and a contemporary sociological work on working-class whites. I then locate some potential pitfalls of the project—practical, political, and philosophical. Finally, I argue that the project would best go forward using José Medina's concept of resistant imagination.

12. Jacqueline Scott: "Towards Toolboxes of Agency, Refusal, and Resistance: Healthier Alternatives to the Despair of Racialized Meta-Oppression"

I have coined the term "meta-oppression," and I use it to describe an existential state for many people of color: we have dealt with racialized oppression to such a degree and for so long that it has brought about an additional stressor. Just as prolonged anxiety can trigger a clinical depression, prolonged racialized oppression seems to be triggering a profound sense of resignation, weariness, and despair at the looming realization that American racism will not change significantly—ever. Because trying to cure ourselves of this affliction of meta-oppression has been ineffectual and has only exacerbated many of the symptoms, I argue that we should instead heal ourselves by embracing a type of racialized pessimism that allows us to affirm our racialized selves and communities. My offering here is not a permanent cure to racism, but an approach to a non-ideal theory that recognizes the pessimistic lives that many of us live and still offers a way to affirm our individual and group lives.

13. Kris Sealey: "Subjectivity Otherwise: Intersections between Creolization and Latina Feminism"

This paper offers some preliminary thoughts on important intersections between the work of creolist scholars and scholarship coming out of the Latina feminist tradition. I bring these two areas together across their shared commitment to imagining subjectivity otherwise—as (a) relational (b) avoiding essentialism (c) grounded in something other than the fear of the power of the other, and (d) conditioning the possibility of a coalitional politics. Despite the overlap between the metaphors and conceptual tools used by these intellectual camps to think through such questions, little work has been done to bring scholarship on creolization into conversation with Latina feminist scholars like María Lugones, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Mariana Ortega (to name but a few). This paper attempts to correct for this silo-ing, so that certain Caribbean conceptions of anti-colonial resistance might be strengthened by how Latina feminisms have conceptualized everyday acts of finding more liberatory conditions for living. For both intellectual traditions, fragmentation, paradox and contradiction matter when it comes

to understanding identity, and ambiguity and liminality matter when it comes to determining mechanisms for belonging in the aftermath of colonial violence. Hence, bringing these two traditions into conversation allows us to generate better accounts of alternative, decolonial futures.

14. Jameliah Shorter-Bourhanou: “Maria W. Stewart, Black Feminist Ethnologist”

Antebellum black thinkers were critical about racist ethnological claims that sought to disparage them. Scholarly engagements with this history have exclusively focused on black male thinkers. In this paper, I argue that black woman thinker Maria W. Stewart (1803-79) is an ethnologist. In my exploration of Stewart’s speech, “An Address Delivered to the African Masonic Hall” (1833), I aim to show that she provides a black feminist approach to ethnology.

15. Anika Simpson: “Black Feminism and Marriage Abolition”

The patriarchal facets of the marital institution have been well established within the philosophical canon. One can sympathize with longstanding calls to reform, if not abolish, the institution in the hopes of ameliorating gender harm. In this paper, I will establish that marriage is not simply an institution that is oppressive to women, writ large. I will argue that marriage is an enduring project of settler colonialism that serves to advance anti-black racism. I also aim to illustrate how the marital institution provides a critical organizing lens to further African-American philosophical inquiry that centers queer black feminism.

16. Briana Toole: “Holding Resistance Hostage: When Resistance is Futile”

In this paper, I identify a family of rhetorical or conceptual strategies that disrupt the capacity of resistance movements to bring about social change. This phenomenon, which I call undermining, accomplishes this by disrupting the connection between an act of resistance and its target—the social change that act aims to bring about. Though resistance can be a powerful negotiation tactic for those who are in the social margins, undermining functions so as to “hold resistance hostage,” thereby creating an environment in which resistance is futile. I have here two goals. First, I aim to draw out the various maneuvers by which undermining occurs. Then I aim to situate the harm of undermining in relation to discursive injustice and “white talk.”

17. Yolonda Wilson: “Race, Pain Management, and Epistemic Credibility”

Pain is the sort of phenomenon that can be difficult to assess in others. One might take verbal and nonverbal cues, such as utterances or facial expressions, as cues that someone else is experiencing pain. One might also witness an event that one knows would be painful to experience, such as watching someone accidentally hit their thumb with a hammer, and intuit that hitting one’s thumb with a hammer is painful. However, data show that the pain revealed on black faces experiencing painful stimuli does not register as pain in subjects viewing the faces. Additionally, black patients’ pain complaints are taken less seriously in clinical environments. I argue that epistemic credibility is at stake in the failure to appreciate and adequately treat black pain and that appreciating the epistemic problem is an important first step in addressing the racialized gap in pain management.