



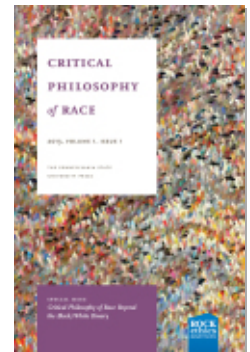
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Introduction: Critical Philosophy of Race Beyond the Black/White Binary

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INTRODUCTION

Critical Philosophy of Race Beyond the Black/White Binary

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Critical philosophy of race often examines race and racism within the philosophical canon, genealogies of race and racism, and ontological and phenomenological considerations for concepts like race and ethnicity as well as philosophical methodologies for (re)conceptualizing race and racism.¹ In many cases the literature has focused on constructions of Blackness and whiteness² in the United States to the neglect of other racial, ethnic, and diasporic categories such as Hispanic, Latino/a, and Asian/Asian American identity formation.³ Oftentimes scholarship in this area has also privileged anti-Black racism and white supremacy as focal points for racial oppression without regard for other forms of oppression such as nativism, xenophobia, and even anthropocentrism. Thus, there has been some philosophical interest, especially in the last decade, in identifying and problematizing what is described as the Black/white binary (hereafter BwB) as it relates to race, ethnicity, nation, various systems of oppression, and identity formations.⁴ For example, after receiving a passing mention in Paul C. Taylor's *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (2003), the BwB is examined at further length in Linda Martín Alcoff's *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (2006); Ronald R. Sundstrom's

The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice (2008); Falguni A. Sheth's *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race: Technologies and Logics of Exclusion* (2009); and several critical essays.⁵ This introduction to the special issue explores philosophical interpretations of the BwB in these four books, accompanying critiques of the binary, and what it might mean to think about race and racial oppression "beyond" the binary. I also provide short descriptions of the articles included in this special issue.

Philosophical Interpretations and Critiques of the Black/White Binary

In *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, Paul C. Taylor describes the BwB as "the US practice of identifying race relations with black and white."⁶ He asserts that this practice "has equated The Race Problem with The Negro Problem, and it has obscured the role that other races have played in the drama of the US racial order" (142). Taylor attributes this binarism to the fact that Blacks and whites have "for the longest time constituted the largest racial populations," leading to a prominent focus on "the problem of black folks under white supremacy" (143). But he is also careful to point out that "blacks in the USA occupied a strangely paradoxical position, as social and political outcasts who were integral, in large numbers, to the economic and, in the South at least, the private life of the nation. Simultaneously despised and essential, alien and intimate, African Americans were made a part of the country in ways that Indian wars and Asian exclusion acts made impossible for these populations" (143). This latter point emphasizes the different oppressive experiences of African Americans, Native Americans, and Asians in the United States that are not captured by the BwB.

Taylor considers the ways in which the BwB ignores, or makes interstitial, populations that are racialized differently, noting that "perhaps the most obvious elision in US race-thinking, apart from the question of micro-diversity with which it is closely allied, involves Latino and Latina peoples" (143). Latina America "consists in large part of racially mixed peoples, who have increasingly made their way to, or been engulfed by, a United States that doesn't quite know what to do with them" (144). Latino/as, according to Taylor, experience "outsider racialization," which constructs them as alien or foreign. Likewise, Asians in America are subject to outsider racialization, but they also experience "model minority racialization," meaning they are racialized in a way that constructs them as "exemplary, as a model for other

groups in their quest to live up to mainstream or majority values” (145). And yet, simultaneously Asian Americans are “held apart from whites as irremediably foreign” (145).

In addition to indicating what is absent from the BwB, Linda Martín Alcoff approaches this binary from the perspective of coalition building in *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, where she argues, “The black-white paradigm that dominates racial discourse in the United States inhibits our comprehension of the variety of racisms and racial identities and thus proves more of an obstacle to coalition building than an aid.”⁷ She, too, points out that Latinos and Asian Americans have been victims of nativist arguments and have been perceived as ineradicably foreign. For Martín Alcoff, theorizing race in the United States strictly through what she calls the “black/white paradigm” is “actually disadvantageous for all people of color, and in many respects for whites as well” (249). She considers how this paradigm operates both *descriptively* (describing racialization and racism in black and/or white terms) and *prescriptively* (enforcing the paradigm to control how race operates)—but neither its descriptive nor prescriptive reach addresses the complexity and plurality of racial identities adequately (249). This point is emphasized again when Martín Alcoff asserts that “the hegemony of the black/white paradigm has stymied the development of an adequate account of the diverse racial realities in the United States and weakened the general accounts of racism that attempt to be truly inclusive” (253).

Martín Alcoff summarizes five key arguments against the Black/white paradigm: (1) it has disempowered various racial groups from being able to define their own identity (having had descriptions foisted from the outside); (2) it historically ignores and/or marginalizes Asian Americans and Latinos (among others) in the public discourse on race and racism, resulting in a weakened analysis within the discourse; (3) it undermines development of effective legal and political solutions to variable forms of racial oppression by eliminating the specificities of the “black” or nonwhite group; (4) it proposes that all conflicts between communities of color can be understood through anti-black racism and white supremacy; and (5) for these reasons, it undermines possibilities for coalition building (255). To these five, Martín Alcoff adds the following two: (6) the BwB has resulted in an imaginary of race in which there is large white majority confronting a small black minority, reinforcing a sense of the inevitability to white domination and a sense of fatalism; and (7) the BwB mistakenly configures race as exclusively having to do with color, as if color alone determines racial identity and is the sole object of racism (255–56).

Along similar lines as Taylor, and building on the aforementioned work of Martín Alcoff, Ronald R. Sundstrom in *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice* discusses the conceit and fantasy of Americans who imagine that “the racial problems that we have are determined by the painful yet interesting history between whites and blacks . . . that black-white division is the United States’ core racial problem, and that solving black-white conflict is the master key to all of its racial problems.”⁸ Sundstrom problematizes the BwB by asserting that it dominates racial discourse and “has colored the U.S. reaction toward, and policies about, Native Americans, Asians, Latinos, and its colonial subjects, such as Puerto Ricans and Filipinos” (66). With some caution, Sundstrom agrees with critiques of the binary, explaining, “I support the primary complaint against the binary, that it does not engender accurate descriptions of the United States’ racial past or present, and it skews discussions of the future of race and racial justice toward perspectives and interests of blacks and whites” (66). On the one hand, he claims “incautious dismissals of it end up casting off the demands of justice that frequently motivate statements that seemingly support the binary” (66). On the other hand, he makes the much stronger claim “the black-white binary is rooted in a peculiar conception of black-white American nationalism and xenophobia that is ultimately hostile to American multiculturalism. Such a view is fundamentally illiberal, and the people of the United States should not capitulate to its desire that the false image of America as black and white not be upset” (66).

Sundstrom offers and rejects several iterations of the BwB, each worth reviewing. First, BwB “refers to the historical relationship between white and black racial identity in the United States” (66). This is problematic because relationships between nonwhite racial categories are overlooked along with the possibility of “anti-white racism” (66). Second, BwB is used to claim “racial patterns can be empirically described solely using black and white terms” (69). This version of the binary does not “capture the full spectrum of ethnic and racial diversity in American society” (69). Third, BwB “is a methodological focus on blacks, whites, or their interrelationship, to the exclusion of other ethnic or racial groups” (69). This methodology is objectionable because it focuses on white and Black Americans while professing to study American ethnic and racial patterns more generally.

Like the third version, the fourth version of the BwB holds that, “‘black’ and ‘white’ pick out prescriptive patterns of racial organization” (70). Again, the issue is the assumption that all racial and ethnic hierarchies and experiences can be represented by patterns of oppression by whites

against Blacks. Sundstrom elaborates, “The problem is that too many still see African Americans as *the* American metaphor and the key to the future of the country—this is the substance of the fourth version of the black-white binary” (71). Within this version of the BwB there is also an assumption that nonwhites and non-Blacks lack particularity—“that nonwhite, nonblack groups have, with each other as well as African Americans, identical accounts of (1) racial formation and (2) racial experience” (75). Additionally, it “conflates (3) experiences of group-specific racism,” which diminishes the seriousness of xenophobia and nativism, “forms of racism that affect Latinos, immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and Asian Americans” (76). The binary distances xenophobia and nativism from racism.

The fifth version of the binary Sundstrom presents is sociological: “Disparity between blacks and whites is the United States’ greatest social injustice and most pressing social problem” (73). He notes that while racism and discrimination against African Americans is “a fundamental fact of U.S. history” this does not mean “black suffering outweighs the suffering of other groups” (79). Put another way, “Recognizing the severity of anti-black racism and its centrality to United States does not require the assertion that black-white disparity and conflict have a sociological priority over other racial and ethnic divisions and disparities” (79). And the sixth is historical: “Black and white conflict is the United States’ primary historical racial problem.”⁹ Sundstrom notes that such claims have the appearance of dogma and don’t account for Native American claims. He elaborates, “The claims of the black-white binary are so totalizing that it would erase the importance of this history by assimilating Native Americans in the black-white system” (81). Furthermore, this binary erases “Native Americans’ claims of precedence and envisioning a state of national racial harmony that is at odds with Native American sovereignty” (82).

Finally, Falguni A. Sheth, in her critique of the BwB in *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race: Technologies and Logics of Exclusion*, notes that slavery, one-drop rules, and antimiscegenation laws are forms of oppression, colonization, and “racialization” that have pertained not only to relations between Blacks and whites in the United States, but also to other populations in U.S. and international contexts.¹⁰ In chapter 7, “Technologies of Race and the Racialization of Immigrants: The Case of Early-Twentieth-Century Asian Indians in North America,” Sheth shows how immigrants in general and Asian Indian immigrants in particular are ignored in the

“exclusive theoretical narrative of race as about Black and White” (157). Asians—including Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Indians—do not fit into the BwB, and Sheth explains, “Without an intrinsic tie to the dialectical framework of citizenship versus slaves/ex-slaves, immigrants, aliens, non-citizens, are cast as ‘foreigners,’ ‘outsiders,’ or ‘Other’ subjects of ‘Other’ nations” (158). What also gets overlooked in this framing of racialization and racial oppression—particularly in the post-Civil War and Reconstruction era—is the fact that the discourse around economic and political rights for the white working-class population during that period “are being advanced in opposition to immigrant labor rights, indeed at times – by leveraging the rights of immigrants” (160).

Offering a historical (and theoretical) context for the racialization of groups in the United States that are not Black or white, Sheth explores how these groups have not been taken up sufficiently in race literature. She explains that even with the emergence of Latino studies and Asian American studies “the determined creation of a space that registers the presence of other populations and immigrant groups has surprisingly left the general binary dynamic of the race framework theoretically/structurally unchanged” (160). According to Sheth, awareness of the presence of other groups (such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian immigrants) who have also been “raced” has in some cases augmented, but has not yet significantly shifted, “the still dominant Black-White narrative of American race consciousness to be a complicated racial structure that is composed of multiple races” (160).

Theorizing Race and Racial Oppression Beyond the Black/White Binary

The BwB does exist in the United States. That is to say, there is a strong history (and persistent presence) of specifically anti-Black racial oppression and white supremacy in this country. There seem to be anxieties around the BwB from all sides. Within the binary, some African Americans are afraid that their concerns are not being heard—displaced either by appropriations of civil rights rhetoric or by the political influence of new “majority minorities.”¹¹ But critics of the binary appear to be motivated by similar fears, namely that the concerns of racialized people of color not readily categorized as Black (or more specifically African American) are unknown, unacknowledged, and/or deemed unimportant, insignificant. The claim that the BwB does exist is one that I think would be easily conceded by Taylor, Martín Alcoff, Sundstrom, and Sheth. At the same time, I take each

of them to be arguing that the existence of anti-Black racism and white supremacy does not negate (and should not take precedence over) other forms of racial oppression experienced by racialized groups that are not Black or white.

So what does it mean to theorize race and racial oppression “beyond” the BwB? Let me begin by stating that it does not mean ignoring the BwB, anti-Black racism, and white supremacy altogether. As Sundstrom has noted:

Calling for the termination of the black-white binary is too easy. There are historical political and moral demands behind this binary that should be understood, positively transformed, and then incorporated. Otherwise those methodologies and perspectives that are offered as substitutions, whether color blind, multiracial, or *metizaje*, risk, at best, abandoning racial justice, or, at worst, further entrenching anti-black and anti-indigenous racism and social disparities. (88)

Thus, thinking and writing about race and racism beyond the BwB is not the same as terminating or eliminating the BwB. However, given the strong and convincing arguments made by Taylor, Martín Alcoff, Sundstrom, and Sheth, it seems imperative that those of us doing work in the critical philosophy of race cannot (should not) ignore the call to theorize racialization and racism(s) in more inclusive and complex ways. Toward that end, this special issue of *Critical Philosophy of Race* brings together insightful articles by philosophers who explore recent developments in the critical philosophy of race beyond the BwB.¹²

In “Color Blindness, Meta-Ignorance, and the Racial Imagination” José Medina uses contemporary epistemologies of ignorance, especially active ignorance and meta-ignorance, to examine the American notion of color-blindness that results in a kind of *cognitive and affective numbness* with respect to racial matters. He argues that the BwB that has dominated the American racial imagination has been a major contributor to meta-blindness about racial differences. Moving beyond the BwB requires an expansion of racial lucidity a more expansive social pluralism, and a *kaleidoscopic consciousness* (rather than only a double consciousness) that does not reinscribe the BwB in one’s racial imagination.

Ronald R. Sundstrom’s “Sheltering Xenophobia” differentiates racism from xenophobia while examining Islamophobia as a form of xenophobia. In addition to clarifying the meaning and significance of xenophobia

(also described as civic ostracism and contrasted with nativism), he also shows how one can have both civic insider status and racial outsider status. Sundstrom argues that the ways in which liberal Democratic nations imagine membership on the one hand and racism (or national narratives of racism) on the other ultimately shelters xenophobia. One of the ways in which the article gets beyond the BwB is in its engagement with current issues surrounding citizenship and immigration, considering, for example, how “Americans’ frustration with immigration from Mexico and Latin America combined with its fear of Arabs and Muslims to further transform the idea of sanctuary from a moral burden to a threat to national security.”

“Why Asian Female Stereotypes Matter to All: Beyond Black and White, East and West” by Kyoo Lee, begins with the question “How does it feel to be a problem?” and then considers the ways that W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Rey Chow, Elaine Kim, and Moustafa Bayoumi have each reflected on this question. Lee asserts that there is still a problem; in fact there are many problems. In particular she offers a nuanced analysis of the Asian female “problem” and (taking up stereotype studies) argues for the social ontological centrality of this issue of Asian gender stereotypes to both feminist theory and race theory. Additionally, postcolonialism (specifically, living postcoloniality) and anthropocentrism along with nature, culture, and history are brought together in compelling ways by Namita Goswami in “The (M)other of All Posts: Postcolonial Melancholia in the Age of Global Warming.” In light of the problem of climate change, Goswami calls upon humans to reject human exceptionalism and embrace our lives as animals. She pushes Paul Gilroy’s postcolonial project in *Postcolonial Melancholia* in a way that explicitly challenges the nature/culture binary and implicitly challenges the BwB. In confronting and undermining the nature/culture dichotomy Goswami notes, “This simplistic dichotomy evacuates our *historical* nature as animals to render separation from nature as the only possibility of being in a world. Acknowledging this animal life, which lives beyond yet remains intrinsic to our overdetermined cultural formation, enables us to gain a meaningful, hopeful, and fundamentally proportional presence in our world.” The implication for the BwB is that we need to consider not only systems of oppression beyond Black and white (a planetary humanism that emphasizes race) but also beyond the human/animal dichotomy (an expanded analysis of planetary suffering that is inclusive of other life/lives on the planet).

It has been a pleasure for me to bring together these insightful articles for the inaugural issue of the journal *Critical Philosophy of Race*. It is

hoped that this special issue will contribute to new trajectories in critical philosophy of race, including course offerings, conferences, and additional publications. I would like to express my gratitude to all of the contributors, to the journal's coeditors and staff, and to Linda Martín Alcoff for writing an afterword for this special occasion.

NOTES

1. See Kathryn T. Gines, "Reflections on the Legacy and Future of the Continental Tradition With Regard to the Critical Philosophy of Race" in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* (Volume 50, Issue 2, June 2012, 329–44) and Robert Bernasconi, "Critical Philosophy of Race" in *Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, ed. Sebastian Luft and Sören Overgaard (New York: Routledge, 2012).
2. I prefer to keep *Black* and *Blackness* capitalized, as *African American* is capitalized, though I use *Black* rather than *African American* throughout because it is a more inclusive term. Also, I prefer to keep *white* in lowercase as an intended disruption of the norm (i.e., using either capitals or lowercase letters for both terms). This preference is applied to the text in my own voice, but not to quotes of other texts.
3. Seminal texts in African American and Africana philosophy like Howard McGary's *Race and Social Justice* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Lucius Outlaw's *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Lewis Gordon's *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999) and *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Cornel West's *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Bernard Boxill's *Blacks and Social Justice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992); and Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House: African in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) emphasize constructions of race, the Black experience, and anti-Black racism but the concept of the Black/white binary is not prominent (or even indexed) in these earlier texts.
4. What I am calling the BwB has also been described as the black/white paradigm.
5. A small sampling of these critical essays includes: Linda Martín Alcoff, "Latinos beyond the Binary" in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48 (2009), 112–28; "Latino vs. Hispanic: The Politics of Ethnic Names," in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31 no. 4 (2005), 395–407; "A Response to Gracia," in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31, no. 4 (2005), 419–22; "Latinos/As, Asian Americans, and the Black-White Binary" in "Race, Racism, and Reparations." Special issue, *The Journal of Ethics* 7, no. 4 (2003): 5–27. Namita Goswami, "The Second Sex: Philosophy, Postcolonialism, African American Feminism, and the Race for Theory," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 13, no. 2 (August 2008): 73–91; David Kim, "What Is Asian American Philosophy?" in *Philosophy in Multiple Voices*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Kyoo Lee, "When Fear Interferes with Freedom: Infantilization of the American Public Seen Through the Lens of Post-9/11 Literature

- for Children,” in *Constructing the Nation: A Race and Nationalism Reader*, ed. L. Alcoff and M. Ortega, SUNY Series, Philosophy and Race (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 43–63; José Medina, “Whose Meanings? Resignifying Voices and Their Social Locations,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2008), 92–105; “Tongues Untied: Polyphonic Identities and The Hispanic Family,” *Ethnic Studies Review* 29 (2006), 1–21; “Identity Trouble: Disidentification and the *Problem of Difference*,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 29 (2004), 655–80; “Pragmatism and Ethnicity: Critique, Reconstruction, and the New Hispanic,” *Metaphilosophy* 35 (2004), 115–46; Mariana Ortega, “Othering the Other: The Spectacle of Katrina,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 2 (2009); and “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: Feminism and Women of Color,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2006); Sonia Sikka, “‘Learning to be Indian’: Historical Narratives and the ‘Choice’ of a Cultural Identity,” *DIALOGUE* 53 (2004): 339–54.
6. Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 142. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
 7. Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 247. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
 8. Ronald R. Sundstrom, *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 65. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
 9. Defined by historic events like “slavery, the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, lynching, Jim Crow segregation, the civil rights movement, and desegregation” (67).
 10. Falguni A. Sheth, *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race: Technologies and Logics of Exclusion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 4. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
 11. As Sundstrom explains, “This anxiety and fear is one of displacement: African American moral and political claims will be displaced by claims from Latinos, Asian Americans, multiracial groups, and immigrants who do not require extensive rectification and are, thus, less expensive and easier to satisfy; and their claims would be more politically popular than black claims because, well, they are thought to be closer and more appealing to whites” (84). Although Sundstrom offers a limited defense of the fear of displacement as warranted, he rejects fears of replacement, “There is nothing redeemable within this fear of replacement . . . neither blacks nor whites are justified in a presumption of dominance over America, whether demographic or in the realm of images or meaning” (87).
 12. This special issue was inspired by a conference titled “Critical Philosophy of Race: Intersections with Culture, Ethnicity, and Nationality Beyond the Black/White Binary,” organized by Kathryn T. Gines and hosted at The Pennsylvania State University. The conference, part of a new initiative at the Rock Ethics Institute in the Critical Philosophy of Race, was made possible by support and encouragement from Nancy Tuana, director of the Rock Ethics Institute and Professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies. Additional cosponsors also included the Africana Research Center, Department of Philosophy, Women’s Studies, Latino/a, Latin American, and Caribbean Studies, and Asian Studies.