

ON SEEING AND NAMING THE WHITENESS OF PHILOSOPHY

On more than one occasion, I received an email message from Charles W. Mills advising me to be careful and that he was concerned about me. He would express such warnings and apprehensions after I would share with him something that I had written and that was published outside of academic philosophy channels proper. What Mills was communicating carried tremendous weight and advised thoughtful caution. Not only did I deeply respect Mills' philosophical originality, range, depth, and acuity, but I also appreciated his deeply caring disposition. So, in me there was tremendous admiration for a colleague, for a friend, who not only appreciated the integrity of philosophers who engage philosophizing in the spirit of parrhesia (or courageous speech), but who was also aware of the actual and potential dangers that such a mode of philosophizing risked producing. I also appreciated Mills' honesty in communicating his worries to me. This was not something that I generally received (or receive) from professional philosophers who were (are) also aware of some of my high-profile public articles.

As I think back about my initial discovery of philosophy, I had no sense that practicing it would occasion potential danger to myself or fear of backlash. For me, the field of philosophy was "apolitical." It was what those few who were committed to the life of mind did within the pristine halls of academia; it was fundamentally an intramural activity. After all, philosophy (and philosophers) epitomized the "purity of abstraction" and the search for "universality." That was certainly what I thought at that time. Philosophy was hermetic, leaving the social and the political complexities of quotidian life to those who didn't have the desire for "pure intellection" or monastic philosophical contemplation. Plato's Socrates, the one in search of *timeless* knowledge was my hero. I missed or avoided Socrates' condemnation and his sip of hemlock. Moreover, I had absolutely no idea regarding the *whiteness* of the field of philosophy, its pretensions, and how the morphology of its philosophical assumptions and problems were shaped by the dynamics of white power and privilege. I didn't see the debauchery, the fact that "a lot of philosophy," as Mills observed in *Blackness Visible*, "is just white guys jerking off."

At 17-years-old, I stumbled upon the field of philosophy in *The World Book Encyclopedia*. Prior to discovering that there was such a field, even such a word, I had already

by **George Yancy**
Emory University

been moved by a capacious sense of wonder. I felt a deep unsettling anxiety in the pit of my stomach, at the core of my being, that longed for answers to some of life's deepest questions. I wanted to know why we existed at all; why there were so many religious worldviews (and which one was true), whether God exists or not; and why we had to die (and if there was anything after we died). Initially reading about philosophy in *The World Book Encyclopedia*, I read brief introductions regarding the thoughts of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and others. Weeks later, I insatiably read through Bertrand Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy*. It was reading that text that led me to think deeply about Plato's theory of Forms, and what Russell said about Spinoza vis-à-vis the intellectual love of God.

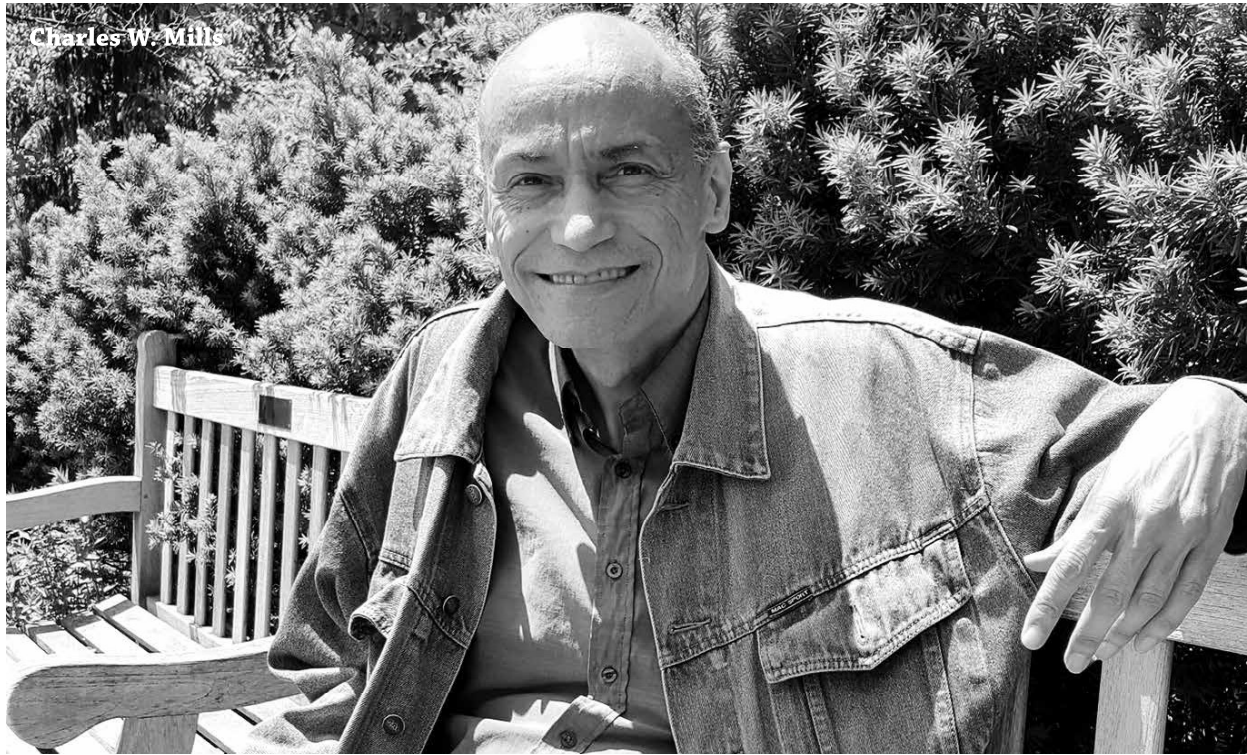
In short, I was enthralled by philosophy and ensconced in its ethereal nature. In philosophy, I had found my calling or philosophy had found me. I soared. I was "at home," and abstract questions within metaphysics were my forte. Locked in my room, I was in my element. What philosophy had to say of value to those outside the comfort of my room was nugatory. Again, though, I had not yet come to understand just how *alienating* philosophy could be, how its meta-philosophical assumptions were *racially* exclusionary and how being "at home" within the field of philosophy was a deeply deceptive trope. In retrospect, I came to feel misled regarding philosophy's conceptual purity. The anti-Black conceptual girders and beams within philosophy were hidden. I guess the joke (more like *yoke*) was on me.

Even before understanding the white racial dynamics of philosophy, which functioned, *inter alia*, to obfuscate and avoid the non-ideal conditions of anti-Black racism, there was this profound sense of melancholy, urgency, and dread that I felt. That deep unsettling anxiety in the pit of my stomach wasn't just unsatiated abstract wonder. There was a sense of passion in the etymological sense of suffering. That mood has never left me; it has deepened. I didn't just *think* about such metaphysical questions, I *felt* the weight of such questions; my body would literally shake. I later learned that Socrates was said never to have cried. Well, I cried. With tears streaming, and looking high into the sky, I would sometimes shout, yell out, as I sought to understand the conundrum of human existence and why we are here. There was

always a deep silence, a silence that left me feeling forsaken. This was no adolescent existential crisis. The silence continues, and the sense of abandonment resurfaces. I don't recall any of my philosophy professors (all of whom were white) openly disclosing such affective intensity, which, of course, doesn't mean that they didn't experience such intensity. I think that I was haunted by the silence from the gods of the philosophers, haunted by the reality that death always felt far too imminent, haunted by the plurality of religious beliefs that left me concerned about the souls of unbelievers and those devotees of different religions, especially given the assumption that not all of them can be right.

AS I THINK BACK ABOUT MY INITIAL DISCOVERY OF PHILOSOPHY, I HAD NO SENSE THAT PRACTICING IT WOULD OCCASION POTENTIAL DANGER TO MYSELF OR FEAR OF BACKLASH

And then there was the haunting by the sheer fact that I am, here and now, without any clear sense of why it is that I am. This fact left (and continues to leave) me with tremendous affective unease, and a deep sense of crushing meaninglessness. So, I suffer. When I teach philosophy, I try to communicate this part of myself to my students. They come to understand that, for me, the philosophical stakes are high. Perhaps this is why my students often leave my classes in silence. I want to leave them with the weight of impending death, and the voracious worms that await them/us. I want them to carry the weight of this knowledge, to look into that "abyss" and find courage, meaning, hope, and love. In stream with Black philosopher Cornel West, I'm compelled to bring attention to the funk of life, the putrefaction of corpses, the profound sense of human loss; I am a philosopher who is painfully aware of a blues-soaked cosmos that is also drenched with the complexity of mystery.



What does this have to do with Charles Mills? Well, metaphilosophically, everything. The suffering that I have come to identify with how I practice philosophy rejects the illusion that philosophy can be done from “nowhere,” one that presupposes a disembodied, emotionless, disinterested self. Rather, philosophy is always done from *somewhere*, an embodied *here*. And while early on I didn’t see what this meant in terms of processes and social forces of racialization, there was something that I *brought to* philosophy and philosophical questions, there was an intense affective framing, a process of mediation. I understood this. Indeed, I have since complexified this understanding. For me, as I see it now, doing philosophy carries formative traces of my affective disposition, my temperament, my hidden assumptions, the acuity of my philosophical imagination, my lived experiences, my historical context, the epistemic regimes and communities of intelligibility that I’ve inherited.

Indeed, doing philosophy, for me, is impacted by the historical facticity of my Blackness. How I think about

philosophy and do philosophy now is impacted by the reality of the horrors of anti-Black racism, the pain and gratuitous violence endured by Black bodies, the pervasive dehumanization of Black people, and the fact that they have been categorized and treated as sub-human and sub-persons according to a philosophical anthropology predicated upon whiteness. When I discovered philosophy, I was seduced by its claims to “universality,” to philosophy qua philosophy. I didn’t see the faces in *The World Book Encyclopedia* as *white*. I saw them as human faces, as philosophers *simpliciter*, as human beings. I had no idea that many of these philosophers supported unabashed racist ideas, especially anti-Black racist ideas. Isn’t this partly the way power works, though? I wasn’t supposed to see it. It conceals itself through machinations, manoeuvres that hide its questionable origins and taken-for-granted histories, discourses, mythopoetic constructions, and epistemologies. I didn’t see it coming.

Many of the same philosophers who I admired as a teenager (Hume, Kant, Hegel) were racists. While I fantasized about being like them, they “knew” that I was Black and thereby could not understand their works. For

Hume, Black people were parrots and had no original thoughts of their own; for Kant, to be Black from head to toe was clear proof that what a Black person says is stupid; and for Hegel, Black people didn't possess *Geist* or Spirit. Understanding that such hegemonic, anti-Black racist logics are embedded within the field that I loved – philosophy – generated more suffering. There was a sense of betrayal. One internalizes a sense of philosophical illegitimacy and incompetence. It became another site of suffering. Within the field of philosophy, as a Black person, I wanted, as Frantz Fanon puts it in *Black Skins, White Masks*, “to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together.” Instead, I was “sealed into that crushing objecthood.” To be in the company of white philosophers was to be a *thing* of curiosity, perhaps even scandalous: “Look, a Black philosopher!” Walking with Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* tucked under my arm came with its own internalized torment: “In Europe, that is to say, in every civilized and civilizing country, the Negro is the symbol of sin. The archetype of the lowest values is represented by the Negro” (Fanon). Think here of the toxicity of Black double consciousness that W. E. B. Du Bois characterized in *The Souls of Black Folk* as “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

WHEN I DISCOVERED PHILOSOPHY, I WAS SEDUCED BY ITS CLAIMS TO “UNIVERSALITY,” TO PHILOSOPHY QUA PHILOSOPHY

Throughout his rich body of work, specifically within the areas of ethics, social, and political philosophy, Mills is critical of the “view from nowhere.” His work powerfully demonstrates how the *whiteness* of philosophy, in its attempt “to illuminate the world, factually and normatively,” entails cognitive distortion, a form of evasion and epistemic violence that is linked not only to its monochromatic whiteness, but to “the

conceptual or *theoretical* whiteness of the discipline.” Reading the work of Mills reinforced, for me, the importance of calling into question the whiteness of ideal theory and how it “can only serve the interests of the [white] privileged.” That “view from nowhere,” for Mills, is a ruse which is actively maintained by those white philosophers who hide behind the structural (though contingent) normativity of whiteness. Mills argues that white experience is entrenched as normative, and that it is “so deep that its normativity is not even identified as such. For this would imply that there was some other way that things could be, whereas it is obvious that this is just the way things are.” In other words, “A relationship to the world that is founded on [white] racial privilege becomes simply *the* relationship to the world.” There is no slippage between one's relationship to *the* world and one's relationship to *a* world. There is only *the* world that whiteness has constructed as “the” world.

To read Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy* was to enter a philosophical discursive world that didn't tell the story of *white* philosophy. There was no engaged discussion of how anti-Black racism shaped the views of some of the most prominent philosophers of the Western philosophical tradition. “This omission,” as Mills would say, “is not accidental.” What does one expect given 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.” However, this doesn't free white people from taking responsibility for the violence of their domination. As James Baldwin reminds us in *The Fire Next Time*, “But it is not permissible that the [white] authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”

Decisions were made, assumptions were embraced, material, institutional, and epistemic structures were underwritten by whiteness, and Black people suffered under a *Herrenvolk* ethics where some were deemed persons (whites) and others were deemed sub-persons (Blacks). The fact that Black people were deemed “sub-persons” and were not thereby deemed moral is couched in a “moral” white universe in which moral ideals, as Mills notes, “were systematically violated for blacks.” From this, he argues, “A lot of moral philosophy will then seem to be based on pretense, the claim that these

were the principles that people strove to uphold, when in fact the real principles were the racially exclusivist ones.”

So, there I was, a young Black burgeoning philosopher who didn't fully understand that I was reading white philosophical discourses that moved away from what Mills referred to as the “disquieting questions” of racism. Such discourses are really based on the experiences of white people, white people who valorised their whiteness. Mills writes, “In affirming their racial identity, whites are in effect affirming their humanity and distancing themselves from the less-than-human [read: Black people].” By affirming unquestioningly white philosophy, I had, in essence, collaborated in my own degradation.

Mills' work brilliantly and unhesitatingly engages white philosophy by stripping it of an ideological cover. Within the context of anti-Black racism, for example, Mills begins *Blackness Visible* (1998) with the non-ideal “historical reality of a partitioned social ontology” where Black people experienced social death (daily) under horrifying conditions of enslavement, where they were treated as “a living tool.” The hegemony of whiteness and its binary structure “so structured the world as to have negative ramifications for every sphere of black life – juridical standing, moral status, personhood/ racial identity, epistemic reliability, existential plight, political inclusion, social metaphysics, sexual relations, aesthetic worth.” In short, whiteness constituted a totalizing system under which Black people had no rights that white people were compelled to respect. What Mills demonstrates is how the philosophical white cartography shifts once the veil is lifted, how “the existential plight, the array of concepts found useful, the set of paradigmatic dilemmas, the range of concerns, is going to be significantly different from that of the mainstream white philosopher.”

Mills pulls from the work of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to demonstrate the normative assumptions pertaining to what he calls the Cartesian self. It was Descartes who engaged in hyperbolic doubt as a method for ascertaining what he thought to be indubitable. After doubting his senses and the entire external world, even his own existence, Descartes reasoned that if he

doubts then he *must* exist. Hence, his famous *Cogito ergo sum* dictum. Mills argues that Ellison's narration sketches the phenomenological reality of what it is like to be Black and rendered invisible by white people who refuse to see you. To begin from that place of racial violence, where one is deemed invisible (or, on other occasions, hyper-visible) belies a Cartesian self that can assume in a leisurely manner its nonexistence, and the nonexistence of the world: “If your daily existence is largely defined by oppression, by forced intercourse with the world, it is not going to occur to you that doubt about your oppressor's existence [or your own] could in any way be a serious or pressing philosophical problem; this idea will simply seem frivolous, a perk of social privilege.”

MILLS' WORK BRILLIANTLY AND UNHESITATINGLY ENGAGES WHITE PHILOSOPHY BY STRIPPING IT OF AN IDEOLOGICAL COVER

On this score, Mills demonstrates the irrelevance of certain philosophical moves within the context of anti-Black racism. Under white supremacy, Black people become hyperalert vis-à-vis their body comportment within white spaces. Self-surveillance, unfortunately, is necessary as they are marked within those spaces as racially deviant and suspicious. Under such circumstances, the external world is all too real. As Black in the U.S., for example, it is not necessary to *do* anything wrong to be killed by the white state; it is enough that one is Black. So, one moves through white spaces with caution, tiptoeing to avoid the distorting prism of the white gaze that operates within what Mills termed “an invented delusional world,” a world in which George Floyd, for example, had to have a knee on his neck (for over nine minutes) lest he successfully overpowered three police officers.

Imagine that you are a Black person going to your class, Philosophy 101, a few days after witnessing (via video) the horrific killing of George Floyd. That day you are reading Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Your white philosophy professor asks you to consider what it means to assume that you don't exist. He assures you that Descartes' philosophical project was intended for any epistemic subject to engage. You try, but you can't. You hear the cries of George Floyd. You can't get out of your head the sound of his calling out to his dead mother – "momma!" You know that *you are* George Floyd, that he and you are fungible under white racist logics. You know that your day is coming; in your head, you hear your own voice: "I can't breathe! I can't breathe!" It suddenly occurs to you that the collective Black experience, one filled with death and white bloodlust, belies the perk of white feigned non-existence regarding yourself and the external world. You realize that you are not the generic (read: white) epistemic subject who is being addressed by your professor. Something is amiss. You feel it as an affront to Black life (*your life*) under conditions of anti-Black racism. This is where you engage in immanent critique.

Drawing upon your racialized Black experience, you point out the pretence, the privilege and arrogance of whiteness, of white philosophy *and* the white professor. Mills writes, "In large measure, this critique has involved telling white people things that they do not know and do not want to know, the main one being that the alternative (nonideal) universe *is* the actual one and that the local reality in which whites are at home is only a nonrepresentative part of the larger whole." In such a course, the normative whiteness of philosophy places under erasure the reality of Black experience. In fact, the meta-philosophical orientation of the course is complicit with a colour-evasiveness that sustains white cognitive distortion, and the hierarchically arranged raced polity. Everything remains as is. It is here that Mills is clear that African-American/Africana/Black philosophy "would see itself as antipodal to a philosophy that, in one formulation, 'leaves everything as it is'."

One of the core themes of Mills' extraordinary corpus is communicating to white people things that they do not know and do not want to know. This parrhesiastic practice, which Mills engaged with analytic precision and caustic humour, wasn't just meant for academic philosophers; rather, his aim was to critique and dismantle the global manifestations of whiteness. Like Du Bois, Mills was "singularly clairvoyant" in seeing the entrails of whiteness, its structural and psychic modes

of denial and self-deception, noting that this produces "*the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.*" Part of the irony is that the symbolism of whiteness (bringing light) does the very opposite – it obscures and propagates ignorance. Mills argues that this fact questions both the normative dimensions of colour symbolism and how that symbolism has been linked to modernity and Euro-identity, and how "whiteness becomes the identity of both enlightenment and of the human bearers of enlightenment." On this score, the symbolism of Blackness, raced and otherwise, signifies dread, doom, and darkness.

THE COLLECTIVE BLACK EXPERIENCE BELIES THE PERK OF WHITE FEIGNED NON-EXISTENCE REGARDING YOURSELF AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Mills not only deconstructs such a problematic and false symbolic order but reverses the dominant optics of modernity. After all, as he argues, "whiteness is a willed darkness; whiteness is segregated investigation." The question then becomes: who really produces the light? Mills writes, "It is not Blackness that needs illumination but Blackness that does the illuminating." In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, it is the unknown Black narrator who illuminates not only the meaning of his Blackness but illuminates the conditions under which he was made invisible. So, the light that he possesses is grounded and grows out of a specifically racialized abjection of the racialized Black body. Systematic race-based oppression is key to creating the agonizing matrix in terms of which racialized Black consciousness evolves and *resists*. In this context, Mills points to Du Bois' use of "second-sight" and how that gift illuminates the world of anti-Blackness. Through second-sight, one is singularly clairvoyant. Directly referencing Duboisian second-sight, Mills writes, "The attainment of 'second sight' requires an understanding of what it is about whites and the white situation that motivates them to view

blacks erroneously. One learns in part to see through identifying white blindness and avoiding the pitfalls of putting on these spectacles for one's own view."

THE FEAR THAT BLACK THOUGHT SEES THROUGH THE EVASIVE MANOEUVRES OF WHITENESS IS EVIDENT IN THE RECENT RESPONSES TO CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Again, though, Mills meticulously provides the anti-Black logics that are necessary for this insight. He argues that not any inferiorized nonwhite position will do, "but a peculiar location within the nexus of multiple oppressions created by white supremacy." Indeed, for Mills, when referring to the racial nightmare experienced by Black people, "No other group has had the distinctive combination of experience, group interest, motivation, brutal racial exploitation, lack of alternative identitarian resources, and intimate and quotidian familiarity with the ideologies and practices of the West to be better located to understand race from the inside." Mills also writes, "For no other nonwhite group has race been so enduringly constitutive of their identity, so foundational for racial capitalism, and so lastingly central to white racial consciousness and global racial consciousness in general." Ironically, racialized whiteness created the very conditions for both its invisibility and its illumination. On this score, Black people, Black philosophical thought, is dangerous to white normativity as it illuminates "modernity more thoroughly and relentlessly, more free from illusions, than its (typical) white antagonist."

As I wrote this quote, I immediately thought of the recent anxiety-ridden response in the U.S. (by mainly white Republican politicians and white conservative activists) against critical race theory and texts that explore such themes as white domination, white privilege, white unconscious racism, systemic anti-

Black racism, the history of white racism, institutional white racism, and white racism and mass incarceration. The fear that Black thought sees through the evasive manoeuvres of whiteness is evident in the recent responses to critical race theory. Mills identified this evasiveness and how it functions through specific forms of idealizing abstractions in social and political philosophy. He writes, "They whitewash, they white-out, crucial aspects of social reality, above all the fact of white racial domination and its holistic impact over the past few hundred years." In each of these contexts, this is an unabashed attack on Black thought, on the illuminating capacity of Black *philosophical* thought to lay bare the despicable history of whiteness vis-à-vis Black people. Whiteness would rather implode than to face its horrible history involving the mutilation of Black bodies, their castration, their flaying, their rape, and their continued oppression and dehumanization. James Baldwin long beseeched white people "to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it." The cost, of course, would be great. White people would need to un-suture, to open themselves up to the pain of accepting a history that they have created and from which they continue to benefit. It would require dethroning the assumption that whiteness is something "special" to possess – epistemically, anthropologically, aesthetically, theologically. Whiteness would need to be laid bare as the empty lie that it is, and its false god-like status revealed as a form of violent fanaticism and colour idolatry.

Am I optimistic? No. White people are not ready to face the emptiness of their shared white identity and admit to that identity's oppressive, parasitic relationship to Black people. There is nothing about white racialized history that makes me confident. Mills puts it this way: "Not just the material costs of reparations in the financial economy, nationally and internationally, but the costs to the Western psychic economy of admitting the magnitude of the wrong done to human beings represented as n****s for hundreds of years in Western consciousness, might just be too great for whites to bear." Perhaps it is this cost that is also too great to bear within philosophy departments where white political philosophy is practiced. Discussing the impact that his book, *The Racial Contract*, has had on the field, Mills says, "I think the objective answer that has to be faced is: close to zero."

This brings me back to the opening of this essay regarding Mills' warning to and concern for me. Mills was fully cognizant of the recalcitrance of white racism. Back in 2015, I wrote an article in the *New York Times* entitled "Dear White America" that went viral. It also generated tons of white vitriolic backlash directed at me. I became a target. Verbal assaults can take their toll: white death threats, fantasies of putting meat hooks into my body, being called a "nigger" more times than I would like to remember, being referred to as excrement, an ape, a monkey, being accused of insidiously plotting to have sex with white women, and much more. All of that from a letter that directly spoke to white people of love and the potential transformative possibilities inherent in a demonstration of vulnerability regarding their racism. It was my attempt to illuminate. For that letter, for that gesture of love, it was necessary for me to receive university police escorts to my classes. Mills showed genuine concern for my wellbeing. Given his own writings, I suspect it came from a space of shared experience.

WHITE PEOPLE ARE NOT READY TO FACE THE EMPTINESS OF THEIR SHARED WHITE IDENTITY AND ADMIT TO THAT IDENTITY'S OPPRESSIVE, PARASITIC RELATIONSHIP TO BLACK PEOPLE

The World Book Encyclopedia entry on philosophy didn't prepare me for this. Nor did it prepare me for the white racism of the philosophers I so admired. Philosophy was about ecstatic wonder and contemplation. These days I suffer. For me, practicing philosophy is to suffer. The reasons for this are obvious – sex trafficking of innocent children, their oppression and death, Black bodies that can't breathe, xenophobia, violence against LGBTQ+ people, millions of people dead from a pandemic, the emergence of right-wing populist neofascists, 100 seconds to midnight, and the apparent silence of the Divine. Rabbi Abraham Joshua

Heschel raises the stakes for each one of us when he asks, "If all agony were kept alive in memory, if all turmoil were told, who could endure tranquility?" Mills certainly understood the pervasiveness of Black social turmoil as experienced under the political, economic, phenomenological, and libidinal weight of whiteness. Indeed, he went to graduate school at the University of Toronto to study philosophy, specifically concerning race and imperialism. And he went intending to write a dissertation exploring social injustice. Mills was no armchair theorist. Unbeknownst to me, and many others, Mills, as communicated by philosopher Linda Alcoff during a Zoom wake in his honour, had been subjected to FBI surveillance in the U.S. This worry, according to Alcoff, was one that he carried even until about a week before he passed. As a philosopher committed to revealing whiteness and rethinking what a just polity would look like *after* rigorously addressing our collective non-ideal world, Mills has left us with a body of work that will enable us to slay the Leviathan of whiteness. But as he said, "it's going to be a long haul."

George Yancy is the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Philosophy at Emory University and a Montgomery Fellow at Dartmouth College, one of the college's highest honours. Yancy is the author, editor, and coeditor of over 20 books. He is cited as one of the top 10 influential philosophers in the last 10 years (2010-2020) based upon the number of citations and web presence. He has also published over 200 combined scholarly articles, chapters, and interviews that have appeared in professional journals, books, and at various news sites. He is well-known for his influential essays and interviews at the New York Times philosophy column "The Stone" and at the prominent political website, Truthout. He is also Series Editor of Philosophy of Race at Lexington Books. twitter.com/profgeorgeyancy