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History of African-American Political Thought and Antiracist Critical Theory

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How should we understand the relationship between the study of the history of African-American political thought and the current practice of antiracist critical theory, a philosophical but equally interdisciplinary enterprise that aims to advance the cause of racial justice? In *In the Shadow of Du Bois* (Gooding-Williams, 2009), a book that focuses on the political thought of W.E.B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass, I argue that the history of African-American political thought belongs to a broader, Afro-modern tradition of political theory, an impressively rich body of writings bound together by several thematic preoccupations, including the political organization of white supremacy, the nature and effects of racial violence, and the possibilities of black emancipation. What might we make of the relationship between the study of this history and the enterprise of antiracist critique? *Shadow* never explicitly addresses this question. As we shall see, however, its readings of Du Bois and Douglass tacitly speak to it.

Following Sally Haslanger, I use ‘antiracist critical theory’ to describe the institutional and ideological critique of “unacceptably unjust” practices of “racial oppression in general and white supremacy in particular” (Haslanger, 2012). Institutional critique highlights the features of a social practice relevant to normative evaluation and explicitly adduces normative concepts to evaluate that practice. Ideology critique exposes, analyzes, and critically examines the conceptual and narrative frameworks that organize our practices. Driven by an emancipatory interest in comprehending and remedying racial injustice, antiracist institutional and ideology critique draws inspiration from antiracist social activism, aspiring, in Karl Marx’s words, to clarify at least some among “the struggles and wishes” of the age (Marx, 1967).

The question as to the relation between studies of the history of African American political thought and the current practice of antiracist critical theory—including much of contemporary African American political thought—will strike many professional philosophers as at once strange and familiar. It will strike them as strange, for antiracist critical theory and inquiry into the history of African-American political thought have gained but a toehold in the profession. It will strike them as familiar, for the question raised is a version of a more general yet notably commonplace question: How should we understand the relationship between inquiry into the history of philosophy and current practices of philosophy?

Reversing the trajectory of my remarks so far, I divide the remainder of the present essay into three parts. First, I sample a portion of the mainstream, philosophical literature that, during the last thirty years or so, has analyzed the relation between inquiry into the history of philosophy and current practices of philosophy. Second, and more briefly, I examine a recent discussion of that relation that references inquiry into the history African American political thought, the normative concerns of antiracist critical theory, and the study of one of Du Bois's essays. Finally, I recur to *Shadow's* interpretations of Du Bois and Douglass, which I adduce to show how the study of the history of African American political thought can contribute to the project of antiracist critical theory.

The History of Philosophy and Current Practices of Philosophy

Published in 1984, *Philosophy in History* (Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner, 1984) is an anthology co-edited by Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner. In the anthology's introduction, its editors frame their analysis of the relation between the ongoing practice of philosophy and the study of philosophy's history with reference to a dispute between, on one hand, intellectual historians who charge analytic philosophers writing the history of philosophy

with anachronism, claiming that they read “current [philosophical] interests back into the past,” and, on the other hand, analytic philosophers who charge intellectual historians with antiquarianism, accusing them of “not getting at the *philosophical* point’.” Responding to this dispute, the editors suggest that we forget the “bugbears” of anachronism and antiquarianism, insisting that “[i]f to be anachronistic is to link a past X to a present Y rather than studying it in isolation, then every historian is always anachronistic,”--adding that “conversely, if to be antiquarian is to study X without regard to...[contemporary] concerns, nobody has ever succeeded in being antiquarian.” Considering just this suggestion, one might very well conclude that Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner mean to side with analytic philosophers against the intellectual historians, because, they propose, anachronism is inevitable, antiquarianism impossible. But that would be the wrong conclusion to draw, for the pivotal point of their argument is to *refocus* the intellectual historian’s critique. Insisting that “[a]nachronism’ is...not the right charge to make,” the editors of *Philosophy in History* claim that the analytic philosopher’s approach to the history of philosophy goes astray, not because it is anachronistic, but because it is anachronistic in the wrong way; that is, because it approaches the history of philosophy in the spirit of a pre-Kuhnian view of the history of the hard sciences, according to which “questions do not change, but answers do.” By contrast, the editors argue, the major task of a Kuhnian “historian of a scientific discipline is to understand when and why the questions changed. The principle defect of the kind of history of philosophy to which analytic philosophy has given rise is its lack of interest in the rise and fall of questions.”

In order to throw into sharper relief the issues raised by the introduction to *Philosophy in History*, I turn to two of Daniel Garber’s essays (Garber, 1989; Garber, 2001 and 2005). Because Garber’s scholarship focuses on early modern European philosophy, it would seem to have little

bearing on the study of the history of African-American political thought. As we shall see, however, his persistent defense of an approach to the history of philosophy that embraces the antiquarianism of the intellectual historian has a general significance that extends well beyond his particular historical interests, and it finds a parallel in recent work on the political thought of W.E.B. Du Bois.

In his 1989 essay, entitled, "Does History Have a Future? Some Reflections on Bennett and Doing Philosophy Historically," Garber invokes Jonathan Bennett's "use" of the history of philosophy and, in particular, Bennett's study of Spinoza's *Ethics*, to motivate his account of an alternative but complementary use to which the history of philosophy can be put. Bennett recommends the history of philosophy, because studying that history can help discover philosophical truth. So conceived, Garber writes, "the history of philosophy is a kind of storehouse of positions and arguments, positions and arguments that we can use as guides and inspirations to the positions we should take, or illustrations of dead ends we should avoid" (p.14). But, according to Garber, Bennett's approach to the history of philosophy courts danger. First, because regarding the history of philosophy "as contributing to the discovery of philosophical truth, we are led to emphasize those portions of a philosopher's work that speak to our interests, that address our conception of where philosophical truth is to be found leaving other aspects of the work aside." And second, because our interest in philosophical truth often leads us to reconstruct an historical figure's position "in terms that make sense of it to our philosophical sensibilities, whether or not the reformulation captures anything the philosopher himself would have acknowledged." In both cases Garber worries that "the focus on philosophical *truth* distorts our *historical* understanding of the figure and his position"(pp.16-17).

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Garber insists that, while his discussion of Bennett's approach to the history of philosophy sounds like a criticism, it is not, for "if our goal is philosophical truth, then historical veracity can have only instrumental value at best; it is of value only insofar as it helps us attain our principal goal." Notwithstanding this disclaimer, it is difficult *not* to notice the affinity between Garber's description of the use of the history of philosophy that Bennett exemplifies and Rorty's, Schneewind's and Skinner's *explicitly critical* description of the use of the history of philosophy that the analytic philosopher who is anachronistic in the wrong way exemplifies. For what both descriptions depict is an approach that judges the writings of philosophers past to merit serious attention only if they express insights that bear on the interest of present-day philosophers in discovering the correct answers to questions having philosophical currency.

It is also difficult not to notice the affinity between the alternative to Bennett's approach that Garber proposes and the alternative to wrongly conceived anachronism that Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner advance. For contrasting his method—what he characterizes as "disinterested" history of philosophy—to Bennett's, Garber writes that "Bennett's history of philosophy seeks philosophical truth, *answers* to philosophical questions...[while] mine seeks the *questions themselves*." Declining, again, to criticize Bennett, and avoiding the adversarial attitude animating the introduction to *Philosophy in History*, Garber concludes that "[w]e cannot ignore the ways in which past thinkers are involved in projects similar to ours...At the same time, we cannot ignore the ways in which they differ from us...the way in which they ask different questions and make different assumptions. Both are important to a genuine historical understanding of the philosophical past, but just as important, we as philosophers can learn from both."

In "What's Philosophical about the History of Philosophy" (Garber, 2005), Garber's makes a more forceful case for his approach to the history of philosophy, maintaining that, "in times like

these, where the analytic paradigm is in what many consider a crisis,” the disinterested history of philosophy that he now calls “antiquarian history of philosophy” has a distinctive contribution to make. Here, like Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner more than twenty years earlier, Garber himself invokes Kuhn, arguing that when the paradigm of “normal philosophy,” or “the ‘normal scientific’ phase of philosophical research,” suffers crisis, “the antiquarian...the most history-bound historian of philosophy...can provide the philosopher with fresh views of the subject. He can show the philosopher alternative ways of conceiving what philosophy is. Realizing how philosophical problems, as well as the very concept of philosophy, have changed over the years can help us free ourselves from the tyranny of the present, essentialism with respect to the notion of philosophy itself. It can also help us to see some of the philosophical problems that grip us in new ways.” Writing now with a more insistent and expressly more polemical tone than he had still advanced in 2001, when he republished “Does History Have a Future” as the first chapter of *Descartes Embodied*, Garber boldly proclaims in conclusion that “History of Philosophy, if viewed as a repository for more than assorted arguments and errors, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of philosophy by which we are now possessed.”

Garber’s altered tone likely reflects the sense of crisis he expresses, but may also involve what Robert Brandom represents as a feature of the “sociology” of American philosophy circa 2002, the year that Brandom’s *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Brandom, 2002) appeared, and a year after the publication of *Descartes Embodied*. “A generation ago,” Brandom writes, “the history of philosophy tended strongly toward *de re* readings” —i.e., towards readings that, in contrast to *de dicto* interpretations, comprise ascriptions “relative to a context (from a point of view) that is *not* restricted to commitments the interpreter takes it would be acknowledged by the author of the text.” By 2002, however, the profession had witnessed a sea change, “for there...[had] been a

substantial backlash to this practice, in favor of immensely patient and textually informed *de dicto* readings” (pp. 104, 107).

Brandom’s *de dicto* readings correspond roughly to Garber’s antiquarian history of philosophy, and his *de re* readings to a philosophical truth-seeking approach to the history of philosophy that Brandom, like Garber, associates with Jonathan Bennett. Perhaps Garber’s 1989 essay and Rorty’s, Schneewind’s, and Skinner’s introduction helped to begin the shift from one approach to the other, and perhaps the new insistence with which Garber later advances his cause reflects that shift—which he himself helped to initiate.

Whereas Garber (1989/2001) first mounts a largely epistemic argument for the disinterested history of philosophy, proposing that his approach contributes to historical understanding and philosophical learning, he later (Garber, 2005) more radically implies that disinterested, antiquarian history can do two things: 1) bring to light alternative (“fresh”) ways to conceptualize philosophy; and 2) effectively alienate and distance us from the contemporary practice of philosophy—what I take him to mean when he writes of freeing ourselves from the tyranny of the present. It is with an eye to the possibility that work in the history of philosophy can have effects of *these* sorts that I should now like to consider an essay by Charles Taylor.

Taylor’s “Philosophy and its history” (Taylor, 1984) is the lead essay in the Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner volume, and, while Taylor never mentions Kuhn, his talk of “paradigms” and “models” suggests a broadly Kuhnian picture of the history of philosophy. Unlike the volume’s coeditors, however, Taylor is less interested to point out the defects in a particular way of writing the history of philosophy than he is to establish the central importance to philosophical criticism of genetic accounts of our philosophical models.

For Taylor, the history of philosophy is, to a large extent, the history of philosophical models. What defines a model is a “cluster of assumptions,” such as the cluster of assumptions that define one of Taylor’s favorite examples, the “epistemological model.” Taylor explains his concept of the epistemological model in many places, but in the essay in question limits himself to stating that it understands our awareness of the world “in terms of our forming representations—be they ideas in the mind, states of the brain, sentences we accept or whatever—of ‘external’ reality.”

One critical premise of Taylor’s argument is that our practices—including “our manner of doing natural science...our technology...some at least of the dominant ways in which we construe political life....[and] our ways of healing, regimenting, organizing people in society”—embed philosophical models. Extrapolating to non-scientific practices Kuhn’s idea (see Kuhn, 2012) that the practice of normal science is rooted in a scientific community’s common commitments, the shared constellation of assumptions, theories, techniques, and so forth that Kuhn called a “paradigm” but later a “disciplinary matrix,” Taylor holds that a wide range of our practices may well embed a single model as their organizing principle. Another important premise is that we tend to accept as unquestionable and too obviously true to mention the models that our practices have come to embed, so that it becomes quite difficult “to see what an alternative would look like.” From these premises Taylor argues that, to liberate ourselves from the presumption that an embedded model provides a uniquely intelligible interpretation of some subject matter—with respect to the epistemological model, a uniquely intelligible interpretation of mind-in-the-world—we require a genetic account of that model: that is, an account that retrieves the formulations through which the embedding in practice initially took place. Thus, the philosophical criticism of the epistemological model requires that one return to Descartes, for “if one wants to be able to see

this model no longer just as the contour map of the way things obviously are with the mind-in-the-world, but as one option among others, then a first step is to see it as something one could come to *espouse* out of a creative description, something one could give reasons for. And this you get by retrieving the foundational formulations” (pp.19-20).

Like Garber, Taylor thinks that the study of the history of philosophy can effectively distance and alienate us from inherited philosophical models, and, as a result, help us to begin both to appreciate alternatives to these models and to take seriously the “new issue[s]” that these alternatives seem to raise. Notice, however, that Taylor reverses the causal order that Garber’s remarks suggest. For Garber, antiquarian history of philosophy, precisely *because* it affords the philosopher fresh views of her or his subject matter, can help to liberate her or him from the tyranny of the present. But this emancipatory strategy is not likely to be effective, Taylor suggests, if the fresh views adduced by the antiquarian “look bizarre and inconceivable.” And they *will* look bizarre and inconceivable, he argues, unless the philosopher has already taken up a distanced and critical stance towards the inherited models that, “captured in the force field of common sense,” he otherwise accepts as unquestionable.

I have dwelt on Charles Taylor’s contribution to the Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner volume, for, as I detail below, it corresponds to the approach to Du Bois I take in *Shadow*. Before saying more about my study of Du Bois, however, and about my own approach to the history of African-American political thought, I wish briefly to consider Paul Taylor’s recent discussion of the history of African-American thought and its relation to some contemporary examples of antiracist critical theory. P. Taylor’s essay raises questions about that relation similar to those raised by Garber’s engagement with Bennett and by Rorty’s, Schneewind’s and Skinner’s critique of the use of the history of philosophy that Bennett exemplifies. Unlike *Shadow*, however,

the essay does not take up the possibility of giving a genetic account of philosophical models central to the history of African American political thought.

Paul Taylor on Historicism and Presentism

P. Taylor's "Bare Ontology and Social Death" (Taylor, 2013a) is importantly groundbreaking, because, as far as I know, it is the first contribution to African-American political theory that considers in general terms the relation between historicist readings (Garber's antiquarian and Brandom's *de dicto* readings) of the received Afro-modern and, more generally, Africana canon of political thought and presentist readings (Garber's philosophical truth-seeking and Brandom's *de re* readings) of that canon. In particular, P. Taylor's essay takes up Robert Bernasconi's and Chike Jeffers's historicist interpretations of Du Bois's "The Conservation of Races" (see Bernasconi, 2009; Jeffers, 2013; and Du Bois, 1997), arguing that Bernasconi's and Jeffers's readings of Du Bois effectively break with an entrenched scholarly tendency to treat "Conservation" first and foremost as an extended philosophical reflection on the concept of race.

On P. Taylor's account, Bernasconi's and Jeffers's articles are best appreciated against the backdrop of what he dubs "The Du Bois Debates," by which he refers a) to K. Anthony Appiah's defense of racial eliminativism by way of an interpretation of "Conservation" in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see Appiah, 1992); b) to a number of conference papers and published essays that, thereafter, critically responded to Appiah's interpretation of "Conservation"; and c) to Appiah's rejoinder to these criticisms, which, P. Taylor writes, "satisfied everyone, more or less," due to the distinction Appiah drew between race and racial identity. Appiah's interpretation of "Conservation" initially drew attention because it used Du Bois's essay forcefully to defend the core eliminativist thesis that we should abandon race-talk for the reason that there are no races.

The debates about Appiah's Du Bois interpretation waned when Appiah conceded that racial identities exist, even if races do not (Appiah, 1996)

Bernasconi and Jeffers respond to the Du Bois debates, P. Taylor notes, by charging them with presentism (Bernasconi more explicitly than Jeffers) —that is, by stressing that they “overlooked the distance between Du Bois’s actual preoccupations and our own,” thus missing an important “part of the lasting contribution” of Du Bois’s essay. For Bernasconi, bent on restoring Du Bois to his proper discursive context, this meant failing to see that “Conservation” is not at all about the concept of race, but about Du Bois’s interest in seeing mixed-race and pure-race Negroes unite around the same ideals—that is, his interest in black survival. For Jeffers, it meant paying too little attention to Du Bois’s interest in the future of black cultural life-worlds.

P. Taylor acknowledges the importance and force of Bernasconi’s and Jeffers’s historicist readings of “Conservation,” and even adds fuel to their anti-presentist fire by diagnosing the presentism of the interpretations they criticize—interpretations preoccupied with racial eliminativism in the manner of 1990s anti-racist critical theory—as motivated by the increasing prominence of “a wider anti-anti racist politics...[The] slippage between eliminativist argument and anti-anti-racist politics on the ground was, for some partisans to the early Du Bois debates, precisely the issue.” For these partisans, Taylor explains, the disturbing issue raised by Appiah’s reading of Du Bois was that racial eliminativism seemed to reinforce the conservative arguments for color-blindness that tended to animate anti-anti-racist politics.

Ultimately, P. Taylor suggests that we should not reject presentist readings of “Conservation,” or, for that matter, of any other contributions to the history of African American political thought, for presentist and historicist readings can complement one another, a position that echoes Garber’s 1989 essay. “It is important to get Du Bois right, to restore him to his

context,” P. Taylor insists. “But is also important,” he continues “to remember that he was trying to solve certain problems...and that if he were around today he would probably be keen to apply his prior self’s hard-won insights to contemporary questions”(p. 381). A valuable moral of P. Taylor’s argument is that the interests and purposes of the interpreter typically drive the interpretations of received texts, and that the identification of those interests and purposes can help to clarify both the conflict and the complementarity of alternative interpretations.

Gooding-Williams: *In the Shadow of Du Bois*

Returning now to *Shadow*, two broad purposes shaped the argument of that book. Focusing on Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois, 1997), *Shadow*’s primary purpose was to reconstruct *Souls*’s response to Jim Crow, or, more exactly, its answer to the question: What sort of politics should African Americans conduct to counter Jim Crow, a white supremacist regime that exploited black labor, restricted black suffrage, and segregated the races in schools, housing, and the use of public facilities (Du Bois, 1997)? *Souls* proposes, I argued, that a politics fit to respond to Jim Crow must satisfy two conditions.

One condition relates to Du Bois’s description of African Americans as “masses:” namely, to his characterization of African Americans as an aggregate of uncultured, pre-modern slaves or former slaves. The other relates to his description of African Americans as a “folk:” that is, to his characterization of African-Americans as a group united by a collectively shared ethos, or spirit. For Du Bois, a politics suitable to counter Jim Crow had both to uplift the backward black masses—to assimilate them to the constitutive norms of modernity—and to heed the ethos of the black folk. In other words, it had to be a politics of modernizing “self-realization” that expressed the spiritual identity of the folk—what in the book I termed a *politics of expressive self-realization*. Du Bois envisions black elites—the so-called “talented tenth”—as deploying the politics of expressive self-realization to rule and

uplift the black masses. Elite control of black politics can be authoritative and effective, he argues, only if it expresses a collective spirit that unites black people.

In addition to reconstructing and analyzing Du Bois's arguments for a politics of expressive self-realization, *Shadow* aimed—and this was its second, broad purpose—to cast that politics in a critical light. *Shadow* uses Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Douglass, 1987) and Douglass's depiction of an anti-expressivist, anti-elitist picture of black politics to throw into relief several limitations and blind spots in Du Bois's understanding of black politics. It also brings its readings of Douglass and Du Bois into conversation with contemporary, often Du Bois-echoing debates about the nature of African American politics, the relevance of black identity to black politics, and the plight of the black underclass.

Back of both purposes was an appreciation for the historically extended, philosophical authority exercised by *Souls* and, more generally, by the political thought of the young Du Bois. The conceptual and normative commitments shaping Du Bois's early political thought—his elitist understanding of black politics, his expressivism, and his conception of the Negro problem—have exerted considerable influence on African American political theory and activism in the 20th and early 21st centuries (Gooding-Williams, 2009). In addition, Du Bois's philosophical authority had been so compelling and far reaching that it had tended to overshadow and foreclose potentially fruitful, alternative possibilities for understanding black politics. The point of reconstructing Du Bois's philosophical response to Jim Crow was explicitly to grasp the conceptual and normative commitments shaping his early thought as elements of a coherent argument. In a related vein, the point of turning to *Bondage* was to recover for post-Jim Crow African American political theory possibilities for understanding black politics that the force of Du Bois's philosophical authority has tended to obscure.

To return to C. Taylor—that is, to restate *Shadow*'s reconstructive agenda in C. Taylor's idiom—the primary purpose of my book was to advance a genetic account of the young Du Bois's political theoretical model of black politics; that is, to retrieve his foundational, creative redescription of black politics, for which he could and did give reasons. I thought it was important to retrieve that model, because it seemed to me that, over time, our practices of construing and envisioning the possibilities available to black political life—and here I meant especially to include the practice of post-Jim Crow African-American political thought—had come to embed a number of unquestioned and difficult to question assumptions that echoed the writings of the young Du Bois.

To be sure, my point was *not* to suggest that the theoretical richness of Du Bois's oeuvre, early or late, could be reduced to these assumptions. Rather it was to highlight their centrality, to show how and why, despite some tensions between them, they appeared to hang together, and to gain some distance from them—at least enough distance to begin to regard them as optional. Like C. Taylor, but unlike Garber, it seemed to me that, to loosen the grip of Du Bois's early response to Jim Crow on African-American political thought and activism, and to begin to take seriously historical alternatives—that is, to begin to regard historical alternatives not as bizarre, but as plausible and as deserving consideration—it was initially necessary to engage Du Bois's thought on its own terms. Once engaged, it seemed reasonable critically to consider Du Bois's thought in the perspective of one of those alternatives—Douglass's *Bondage*—and to bring the thought of both thinkers to bear in evaluating contemporary contributions to African-American political theory (again, this was *Shadow*'s second, broad purpose).

Here, the purpose of my argument was not, as K. Anthony Appiah (2011) suggests in a review of *Shadow*, simply to “counterpose” Du Bois's errors to Douglass's insights; rather it was to consider contemporary African American political theory in a new light—that is, in the perspective of an account

of Douglass's political thought that questions several commitments that contemporary African American political theory takes over from Du Bois. Put differently, the point of my Douglass-inspired assessment of Du Bois's early political thought and its current avatars was ideology critique, understood as a feature of antiracist critical theory (again, see Haslanger [2012]). For the point of that assessment was to expose, analyze, and critically to revalue the conceptual framework that the young Du Bois has bequeathed to African-American political theory and activism in the 20th and 21st centuries. It is obvious, I hope, that I am not supposing here that the conceptual framework Du Bois bequeathed to us was racist, but simply that anti-racist politics, no less than the unacceptably unjust practices it opposes, can be a target of ideology critique.

A few words, finally, as to the character of my readings of Du Bois and Douglass. Are they historicist and *de dicto*, or presentist and *de re*? Are they predicated on commitments that Du Bois and Douglass did or would acknowledge, or do they depart from those commitments? My reconstruction of Du Bois's thought is, I believe, historicist and *de dicto*. In connection to this assertion, I should like to express three thoughts: first, that my reading of Du Bois can accommodate the insights for which P. Taylor rightly praises Bernasconi's and Jeffers's essays; second, and to borrow again C. Taylor's terminology, that because the point of my reconstruction of *Souls*'s political theoretical response to Jim Crow was to present it as a set of claims for which Du Bois could and did give reasons, I sought to interpret that response with reference to commitments and considerations that Du Bois did or would acknowledge; third, and finally, that I also sought to highlight the extent to which the thought of many of Du Bois's heirs still stems from commitments that Du Bois did or would acknowledge.

Regarding my reading of Douglass, many of the particulars of my argument—my interpretation of the fight with Covey (Douglass's struggle, as a slave, against the effort of Edward

Covey, “the Negro breaker,” to break him), as Douglass depicts it in *Bondage*, for example—were historicist and *de dicto*. But the larger argument, I think, is presentist and *de re* for a reason that I adduce in the introduction to *Shadow*: namely, that I insistently read *Bondage* with an eye to a range of questions prompted by my reading of *Souls*: What is African American politics?; Should African American politics take the form of political expressivism?; Is white supremacy best understood as a form of social exclusion? *Bondage* I interpret as giving answers to these questions, but I am hard put to defend the claim that, in attributing those answers to Douglass’s autobiography, in the terms I use to attribute them, I consistently appeal to commitments that Douglass would acknowledge. For example, my interpretation of the plantation politics *Bondage* depicts presupposes that politics generally, and African-American politics in particular, need not be understood *as rule*, as what some human beings do to others, deciding for them, or commanding them, but can usefully be conceptualized *as action-in-concert*, as what human beings do together, responding to one another’s initiatives (see Gooding-Williams, 2009). I doubt that Douglass would avow that presupposition. Still, I am committed to the claim that politics can be so conceptualized, and that *Bondage* depicts Douglass’s plantation politics as ruler-less action-in-concert.

In sum, then, and in keeping with P. Taylor’s insight that historicist and presentist readings can be productively combined—that they can complement one another—the argument and ideology critique that I advance in *Shadow* show that readings of both sorts can fruitfully expand both the study of the history of African-American political thought and our sense of the possibilities available to black politics.

Conclusion: History and Antiracist Critical Theory

The sweep of contemporary contributions to antiracist critical theory is extensive, and includes expansive genealogical and critical historical accounts of modern racism; astute conceptual analyses of the interplay of racial and gender oppression; systematic explanations of the roles that policing, prison growth, and segregation play in perpetuating racial inequality; and nuanced appraisals of recent black politics—including the “Black Lives Matter” movement. Not all these efforts take up the history of Afro-modern or African-American political thought, but many do, and when they do they typically complicate our understanding of the relationship between the issues that engage contemporary critical theorists and the issues that engaged some of their predecessors (Dotson 2013; Sundstrom, 2008; Shelby, 2005; Gooding-Williams, 2009). When they do not, we may well find that these efforts reflect an overly narrow range of philosophical and political imagination (Scott, 2012; Taylor, 2013b).

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