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Interview: Paul Taylor. Pragmatism and the Philosophical Critique of "Race"

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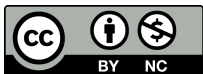
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Above Musicians join anti-apartheid demonstration, midtown Manhattan, New York City. [photo: Chris Huestis]

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interview: Paul Taylor

Pragmatism and the Philosophical Critique of "Race"

by Owen Dwyer, Arnold Farr

and Chad Staddon • November 1995

Paul Taylor was invited to the University of Kentucky to give a lecture and seminar on the general topics of race, racism and racial(ised) politics in the US. His lecture, entitled "The New Negro" discussed philosophical issues related to the politics of identity and argued for the retention of race as a political category.

Paul Taylor was invited to the University of Kentucky to give a lecture and seminar on the general topics of race, racism and racial(ised) politics in the U.S. His lecture, entitled "The New Negro" discussed philosophical issues related to the politics of identity and argued for the retention of race as a political category. Taylor is currently an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Kentucky, and a member of the Affrilachian Poets, a Lexington-based writer's collective. He did his undergraduate work at Morehouse College and his graduate work at Rutgers University (under the tutelage of Peter Kivy, Howard McGary, and Cornel West). At present he is working on a critique of various philosophical accounts of race, preparing to publish chapters from his dissertation (which explores the implications of John Dewey's aesthetic theory for philosophical aesthetics and cultural studies), and assembling a collection of poetry and short fiction with the other Affrilachians.

In this interview we sought to explore Taylor's pragmatist perspective on the constitutive relations between experience and social identity, the "New Negro" and the contemporary politics of race, including the recently conducted "Million Man March" in Washington, DC.

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reVisioning Justice

professed pragmatist perspective on the constitutive relations between experience and social identity, the "New Negro" and the contemporary politics of race, including the recently conducted "Million Man March" in Washington, DC.



dC: A White lady asked once this question of me; how does she prove that she and I are of different races? And then she came up with an example to complicate matters more; what if she was an Arab or some other dark-skinned person (other than an African-American) living in Forsyth County, Georgia? What if she was treated the same way that I would be treated as an African-American? In a way she is not Black, she's just not of the same race that I am, using "race" in its original sense. But in a way she *is* Black because she is treated as a Black American in Forsyth County. Is the historical account of race enough to make a distinction there or is more needed? How would you address that kind of problem?

PT: The historical account isn't enough and I don't take it that my account is purely historical. History lays the groundwork for other elements that I employ. At one time I was very concerned with questions like that. Another incarnation of the discussion that I gave yesterday was centered on the project of providing the resources to identify people racially. In it I stressed two points; jointly *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions. The former was the idea that you're Black if you would be identified as a Black person. The latter condition was that you had to have a certain kind of biography, a history of certain kinds of experiences. With those two conditions in place, we have a better idea of what to say about someone like a Palestinian in Forsyth County who is treated a certain kind of way. This person might not have the right kind of history because of the very narrow logic of hypo-descent that is in place in the US South. Even though she is treated in a certain way, she doesn't satisfy the other sufficient condition, so therefore she is not Black exactly. That's the kind of thing I would have said. In fact, I guess that's in part what I would still say.

The reason I hesitate is because I am not as concerned with those questions anymore. It's not so crucial for me to identify people. I'm not trying to provide the resources for those sorts of determinations.

There's another element to worry about though, and any account I give is going to be really fuzzy around the edges. There are lots of

people about whom we don't really know what to say, such as the Palestinian woman in Forsyth County, Georgia. I'm quite content to say in those cases that there is a certain sense in which this identitarian project is going to have the feel of arbitrariness, but as I said yesterday it's not arbitrary, it's *contingent*. What *is* arbitrary is precisely where we draw the line, but the general feature of the line, that excludes some people and includes others, is going to be connected with this contingent history. As a good pragmatist, I'm content to say that you have to choose but the choice is not arbitrary.

dC: I wondered as well about the weight you place on biographical experience. Inasmuch as we can think about situations where crossed identities are being constituted, the relations between identity and experience become more complex. I can think of at least two examples drawn from filmic representations. One example involves Mina Nair's film *Mississippi Masala* (1991), where an important component of the story revolves around the question of who is "Black," and subsequently, what do such determinations mean? The same theme is treated in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) as well. Recall the scene where the Black protagonists are rioting because of the murder of one of their comrades, Radio Raheem, by police. Approached by the rioters, the Korean store owner brandishes a broom to protect his shop against them saying, "Don't hit me. I'm one of you. *I'm Black also.*" Similarly, in *Mississippi Masala* blurred racial identities are implied by the direct experiences of racial oppression undergone by the Indian protagonists in Idi Amin's Uganda and, later, in the US South. These filmic explorations make me wonder about this thing called "experience?" Certainly you can have an externally-described experience, a more or less "official" history of Black America (perhaps as represented in the writings of Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver), but that may not map onto the experience to which you yourself, or your peer circle, relate. I was left thinking that this foundation of biographical experience that we are talking about is, perhaps, somewhat more fuzzy and harder to pin down. Maybe that's why you are less concerned about it in your current work?

PT: Not exactly. I think I have more interesting things to say about experience now than in the past because I now work with John Dewey's philosophy of experience. I have more philosophical resources to deal adequately with the idea of experience. But I see the problem that you are trying to get at, and it's the kind of problem you get from a lot of Harlem Renaissance-era novels. Consider Nela Larsen's *Passing* (1929), in which you have people who we might

think of as Black, except that they have very light skin, and they pass themselves off as White people. But they are very serious about it and they go all the way and they never come back to the Black community; they just go on with their lives as White people and nobody knows the difference. In such cases, the question becomes, what do you say about such a person? She genuinely doesn't see herself as Black, and no one else sees her that way either, because of this accident of physiology that she happens to get away with passing as White. I take it that that's the kind of thing you're worried about? What I've said about those people is that there is a certain kind of psychological dynamic you have to go through to get yourself in that position. You have to tell yourself certain kinds of stories about yourself. You have to, at some point, internally describe yourself in such a manner that legitimates your position as someone who engages in these sort of behaviors. At some point that person identifies herself as passing—or other people do—and that's the crucial thing for me because *that's also a Black experience*. That's one of the kind of racialized experiences that I had in mind.

dC: How are we to know what is the 'real' history? Whose history do we listen to? What counts as experience? What counts as history? Mostly importantly, who decides?

PT: I had a feeling I didn't answer the question. The original question was difficult, involving the recognition that history is the outcome of certain kinds of interpretive processes. Once you recognize that, then the question becomes, "how can history be a stable ground upon which to build a philosophical or political project?"

dC: Is that indeed part of your project, to define a racial identity partially due to historical experience?

PT: The more I hear this question the more interesting it gets. While history is the outcome of interpretive processes, and this is cause for concern for some people, it's cause for concern only if you believe that there is something beyond interpretation, that there is a "true" history to be told. There isn't and it's silly to be hoping for it. Some people think there should be some sort of history that I can unfailingly grab onto like this glass (PT picks up a water glass from the table, eds.). But there isn't. There are only interpretations that generate things that sort of look like "glass." That might seem to be a problem but it's not -- because experience, like history, is interpretive. Experience then becomes a series of narratives that you tell yourself about things that have happened to you. The consequence of this is that all experience and history is interpretive, though one must quickly add that this

doesn't open the door to boundless relativism. I can't offer just any interpretation of history. It's going to be constrained by things. I can't give it any old meaning because this interpretive process happens *in a community* which will not accept certain interpretations. And once you appreciate that history is an interpretive process that takes place *in a community*, then you don't worry so much about the fact that it's an interpretive process because it's bounded as a community project.

dC: Is there a way of forming a racial community by not just talking about history but by talking about a non-history. I read some Walter Benjamin last year and also Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992), and what stood out for me in those books was the idea of White identities being constituted by a "hidden identity," a non-history of African-Americans. White identities relying upon a strategic effacement of Black identities. An Africanist presence inside, hidden within the White identity. What Toni Morrison did was go back to several novels, written by White people about White people, and construct—from them—a Black history.

dC: There could be at least two moments to this process. The first is a Foucauldian moment which goes after the substantive aspects of that history and looks for those moments, those critical junctures, when images of Whiteness and Blackness are constructed in particular ways or (more to your point), certain connections *and* elisions are established as normal. For instance, the colonialist association between "Whiteness" and "progress" perhaps. Thinking about it geographically, the settling of the American West as a White project, a project of White occupation which at the same time was an elision or putting aside of all other possibilities, Native American possibilities, Hispanic possibilities, Black possibilities, etc.

PT: That makes sense. That's part of what I have in mind. I'm surprised that my reference to history has merited so much attention. I don't mean the sort of things that Asante would mean. Asante would mean that there is a history of Black people just like there is a history of Molefi Asante and it belongs to all of us—just as my biography belongs to me. I don't mean to imply such a fundamentalist account. I mean something a lot more flexible and broad than that. Part of what I mean is the sort of interpretive history we are talking about through which we can tell a story in various ways at various points in history. The history of philosophy, for example, can be told in certain ways. It may be said that it begins with Thales without even mentioning the contributions of the Egyptians. At this historical moment it became useful to tell certain stories about the history of Egypt. In the Enlight-

enment, for example, it became important to link ourselves to this classical heritage and it was a bad idea to link that classical heritage to anything else (such as earlier Egyptian or Arabic philosophising). Consequently it becomes important to remove or obscure the connections between classical cultures and other cultures in the ancient world. Part of the account that I want to construct is the account of being the kind of people who keep having this done to you.

dC: You seem to be pointing to a concern with the discursive modalities of the historical-geographical imagination. This speaks to a second Derridean, moment, to that critical historiography which would go after modes of Western modernity, modes of constructing history *as such*, as themselves fully redolent of a certain normativity of class, race, and gender dominations. I'm thinking particularly of Hayden White (1987), who talks about different ways, or tropes, of writing history: "chronicles" versus "annals". He suggests that the medieval choice in favor of chronicles is politically and socially loaded. The idea is that after this crucial juncture, historical moments are suddenly clipped together with an overriding discursive linearity. That's a brief summary of course, but it seems that this other level of critique is possible, which involves not so much looking for the lost voices or their agonistic expression (as a Foucauldian approach might do), but rather going after the intellectual-cultural edifice itself.

PT: The kind of work that I am familiar with tries to do similar things from a different kind of angle. William James and John Dewey both engage imagined critics who assume that pragmatism undermines the possibility of historical knowledge. William James constructs an imagined dialogue between himself and a critic who he calls the "anti-pragmatist." The anti-pragmatist asks James to explain how, if James is correct, do we ever know that Caesar was killed? James replies by saying that you need to deflate your conception of knowledge. You can't get the kind of fundamentalist knowledge that you want from any kind of inquiry, much less an historical inquiry. My account simply makes historical inquiry continuous with these other sorts of inquiry, such that the propositions or judgments that we would make about a historical fact are going to be contingent.

**The New Negro, Conservative Politics,
and Color Blindness**

6 dC: Is there a political imperative to creating the "New Negro"? It seems that much of your interest in developing the concept of the

"New Negro" stems from recent talk on both the right and the left about abolishing the concept of race altogether. On the right, this abolition stands in favour of some insidiously naive "colour blindness," and the left it marks an attack on the ontological status of race—possibly just as naive but perhaps not as insidious!

PT: That's the primary reason why I bothered. It seems to me that there is at least this: the access to existing institutional power. Even if we accept the claim that we have to stop talking about. The simple fact is that people organize themselves in these ways already. Trying to tell people that they should not be identifying themselves in this way simply because it relies on bad biological or absolutist notions is a bit akin to swimming upstream. It seems a strange project to engage in.

dC: Yet race seems at times to be a constraining rather than an enabling concept, or at least the concept has been thusly attacked by bonafide anti-racist forces recently—setting aside Democrats and Republicans like Pete Wilson who have held up a sort of naive 'color blindness' as something to strive for. What's the political project involved in constructing this new progressive concept of race?

PT: Well, the way I conceive of race, it isn't a narrow category at all. It has a great deal of internal complexity which is to say that it allows for the existence of all sorts of sub-groupings—classes, ethnicities, genders; you get all of that inside this category and I don't mean to flatten any of that. The point is not to flatten difference. The point is to simply identify and recognize the fact that there are certain political and social facts which suggest that it is productive and reasonable to identify ourselves above-and-beyond all these other identities as part of the same group, as part of a racial group. Moreover, the project of constructing a racial community in this way is continuous with certain kinds of historical patterns that we have already discussed.

Pete Wilson's bid for the Republican presidential nomination is interesting because it highlights a number of the complexities involved in race. For example, it highlights the local nature of racial politics. Wilson's arguments about federal Affirmative Action programmes—insofar as I understand them—carried him as far as they did in California because there is a certain kind of dynamic going on there, i.e., there are Asian immigrants who are doing well and still receive benefits from Affirmative Action and people are very unhappy about that. In the eyes of many people in California, Affirmative Action didn't have anything to do with Black people. That's one reading of it. Interestingly, when he tried to take his message to the entire country it

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didn't go as far.

Another thing that it highlights is the shift from what Paul Gilroy refers to as "hierarchical racism" to "crisis racism." The idea is that even when we stop talking about race and we stop talking about inferiority, we still get the same patterns of exclusion, or ones that are very similar, but they are (re)coded in new ways, e.g., it's not so much that the woman from Nigeria is inferior it's just that I don't want her here with me, she's different. The resonance that the Affirmative Action debates have in this country possesses an element of this sort of crisis racism.

I did also want to touch on the ideal of a color-blind society. One of the reasons that I was so excited about engaging in the project of reconceptualising racial politics is that I think it's important to complicate the philosophical appeal of color blindness, of the Kantian noumenal self that underlies all determination, which attempts to efface issues of race. That kind of idea is at the core of liberal political theory and is very much in evidence in the work of Michael Sandel. He says, for example, that Rawlsian liberalism presupposes a self that can distinguish itself from all of these determining features. For me the important point here is that the ideal presupposes a moment of self-identification that is unattainable and philosophically sort of silly.

The punch line is inevitably that difference is ineradicable as a matter of historical fact. We have this trope of difference which undergirds all of our experiences and lives. I think we should recognize this and deal with it. For some of us there is not much of an alternative. For me, for example, I do not have an ethnic alternative. I can't be an Ibo or a Hausa or Fulani or Maasai. I can't do that. I'm a Black American. If you want to call that an ethnicity that's fine, but to call it that and leave it at that obscures the fact that there are certain sorts of things and sorts of interactions that I can enter into when I go other places in the world that do not have anything to do with ethnicity. I can go to Haiti and have people embrace me in a certain way that wouldn't happen if I weren't a Black American. My sister can go to Ghana and have people say "welcome home," which simply wouldn't happen to her if race was just some narrow local phenomena. So it's a local phenomenon that has a global aspect to it. That's one of the things that happens when you have human difference upon which communities identify themselves within the boundaries of those differences. That's a good thing, I think. For this reasons I say that color blindness is silly. We don't need color blindness. People have to identify themselves with things and they will. It's nice to talk about cosmopolitan personalities and nomad subjectivities, but that's kind of empty talk to me,

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you need *something*, and this is one of the somethings we can use.

dC: There's a certain sense too in which the ideology of color blindness is in fact a kind of conservative normalcy. Yet another attempt to deny the difference that difference makes. The political, social, and everyday significance of human difference is often subverted as the very foundation of an attempt to get back to the idea of the disembodied noumenal self. In that sense it's profoundly conservative.

PT: You're right and I talked about it a moment ago with reference to philosophical underpinnings, but I'm glad you raised the political point—it's probably the more interesting stuff. The talk about color blindness only takes on a certain resonance at a certain moment in history when you can, for example, take the language from the civil rights movement to reject the gains achieved through the use of these very rhetorics. So color blindness takes on a certain resonance at an historical moment because it serves conservative political purposes. It doesn't interrogate the fact that we weren't color blind for a very long time. They say, for example, that the US Constitution is a color-blind document. Well, no, there's this little thing about "three-fifths of a person." It's profoundly conservative. It's deeply insincere. Perhaps I gave too much credit to the philosophical underpinnings because there's this political stuff which is just ridiculous.

dC: It's an attempt to overlook a history that has already set in motion its own consequences; it's caused quite a bit of damage, and I would argue that it's caused psychological damage to an entire race—I'm talking about Black-self hatred. It's an attempt to wipe out this history and then say "pull yourself up by your boot straps." But we didn't have any boots on! In fact, we'd have done it but the boots—so to speak—were taken away. It's racism, a racism that changes forms to adapt to what the Civil Rights Movement has accomplished. And this racism is harder to recognize. You don't have to worry about walking and somebody calling you "nigger"—that's not the main problem anymore.

PT: Racism is gone!

dC: Not quite.

PT: No more racism!



dC: In your articles "Context and Color-Confrontation: Cress Theory and the Necessity of Racism" and "So Black and Blue: Re-

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sponse to Rudinow” I get the sense that you are emphasizing the context in which certain subjective statements about the “reality of the world” were made. Why is it so important to do that?

PT: As a good Deweyian I focus on context. Furthermore, what I do with statements is treat them as “natural growths” and examine their conditions of emergence and continuation. If it worries you that people say things like ‘White people can’t play the blues,’ then figure out why they say it, what conditions give rise to it, perpetuate it, etc. Then figure out what to do with the conditions, how to alter them; *that* is politics.

dC: What do we get politically when we try to understand the context from which a statement emerges?

PT: You get a more nuanced and productive local discourse, perhaps. You don’t get “Donahue discourse.” You don’t get people jumping up and shouting what they feel and not caring what others have to say about it. You get something like empathy; something like what Cornell West means when he says we have to understand each others’ pain in order to keep from causing each other more pain.

dC: It seems that when you emphasize context and understanding it creates the possibility for differentiating between an opinion and the person who expresses it. For example, let’s say you find a statement to be offensive. If you conflate the person with the statement you essentialize him or her. If on the other hand you seek to know the context in which that statement was made, you don’t necessarily excuse what they say but nor do you demonize them individually.

PT: And on the other side of the equation, not only do you demonize the person, you subjectify the opinion, and you fail to appreciate the extent to which that opinion is dependent upon certain kinds of structures of discourse which exist beyond the individual. It’s an opinion that people share and offer and use as a tool of rhetoric in a systematic fashion, and you just treat as something that came out of this guy’s face. If it’s worrisome or offensive to you, you should take it more seriously.

That’s the kind of thing we’re peculiarly unsuited to deal well with in American politics because people are just individuals, right? People are not embedded in any structure. They’re just there and they say what they say. Of course it’s not that simple. People are socialized into certain ways of thinking and speaking and they can reconstruct those ways of thinking and speaking in ways that express their individuality, but that doesn’t mean that they are completely independent of those

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structures. They are the “agents of novelty,” Dewey says. They can revolutionize those discourses but they are not separate from them.

dC: Regarding your response to Rudinow, how do you guard against the charge that you are, in effect, excusing the use of essentialist categories? How do you deal with that sort of reading of your argument about Blues authenticity?

PT: You make the distinction between excuses and explanation. Then you say that I’m worried by this the same way you are; I say in the piece that I think the “Black Blues Authenticity” (BBA) thesis is false, but we ought to figure out why some people adhere to it. So, it’s not so much that I want to excuse it. I think they have reasons for saying it and these reasons are important and interesting and we ought to interrogate them. The reasons have to do with things like the systematic expropriation of what we might think of as Black forms of expressive culture, and the deployment of those forms, as they are appropriated to the monetary gain of certain people and detriment of others, and this happens in a systematic fashion over and over again. This is one of the things that I think motivates the BBA claim. That’s a complicated process that we should understand.

dC: Let me give you another reading of your Rudinow response that perhaps will push you to clarify your point. Quoting from your paper, On this Deweyian approach even a performance that cannot be immediately identified as White may fail to produce the ‘authentic’ blues performance feeling. If the listener does not know the racial identity of the performer her experience may be stunted so that the proper feeling does not emerge right away and upon discovering later that the performer was white she can not recruit the memory into present consciousness in a way that generates the proper quality.

PT: That’s horrible. Sorry about that.

dC: I don’t think so. It pushed me to think about the degree to which your explanation of a reaction to a musical performance could be sued to explain or excuse other “performances.” Allow me to paraphrase from the passage I just read to you, only this time I’ll substitute a different sort of performance—that of an accountant filing a client’s tax return. Supposing that the accountant is Black and the client is White, how does this strike you?

On this Deweyan approach even the performance such as doing my taxes cannot be immediately identified as White because it may fail to produce the “Authentic Accounting Performance” (AAP) feeling. If I do not know the racial identity of the accountant, my experience may

be stunted so that the proper feeling does not emerge right away, that feeling of my taxes being done correctly because I have certain notions about what it means to be White or Black. Upon discovering later that the accountant was indeed Black, I cannot recruit the memory into present consciousness in a way that generates the proper quality.

PT: One thing to say is that in the initial case we're dealing with an aesthetic experience and for Dewey these were subject to a special analysis. We tend not to think of having one's taxes done as an aesthetic experience. So there's that. The upshot of the aesthetic experience for me is the qualitative enjoyment of it and appreciation of its beauty as it unfolds. Presumably that's not the upshot of getting your taxes done; rather, you merely avoid paying as much tax as possible.

dC: True, but I'm trying to get at the person who, because his or her accountant was Black, would not feel comfortable, and would wonder if there were mistakes just because they are Black. I'm trying to see if your argument makes it possible to excuse that racist response.

PT: I don't think so. In part because it's not an aesthetic experience and the only way to get to that conclusion of an aesthetic experience is simply to appeal to some preconceptions of the skill or ability of the person in question and I try very hard to distance those kinds of readings from the BBA thesis. A component of this unfolding aesthetic experience of a White performance frustrates listeners so that it doesn't unfold properly.

dC: How about this: I'm in my Black accountant's office and I see her diplomas on the wall. She's dressed professionally. And yet I still don't get the feeling of security and trust that I expect to feel when I go to the accountant.

PT: The other thing that I should say, I think that accounting does not have the same history as a racialized idiom of performance as the blues does, assuming that the blues does. In the same way that chamber music, while it is identified as a European form of music, doesn't have a history as a racial project, it wasn't the kind of thing that you put out there as evidence of racial superiority, as the paradigm of the expressive capacity of a racial group. It can work that way but it doesn't have a history of being articulated for that purpose. Even less so than accounting chamber music has a better claim to that status than does accounting.

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Million Man March

dC: I would like to consider now a question dealing with the Million Man March. One thing that I think we have to address is the exclusion of women from the March, and the potential problems with the theme of atonement in the Black community. To some extent, the structure of the Black community still hasn't changed, and by that I mean, women in the Black church tradition continue to experience second-class status. As a result, there the perception that if there's something wrong it's the men who will correct it, the men who will get together and have a march, devise plans, etc. How are you going to address that kind of issue with respect to further emancipation of Blacks, taking due account to feminist and other concerns about the exclusivity of Black political action. More concretely, what are the positive outcomes of the March?

PT: Well, the drawbacks are the ones you pointed out. In a certain sense, Louis Farrakhan convened the March. The Nation of Islam, which he heads up, is deeply patriarchal, so it's not surprising that this characteristic is repeated in the form of the March. Even worse, as you point out, there are respects in which the broader Black community is in fact extremely patriarchal and that comes from various sects of the Black-church tradition—the history of identifying ourselves as a people by reference to certain Biblical narratives and then borrowing all of this extraneous baggage along with it. Worse still, there's the fact that the Black community is embedded within a larger patriarchal American society. You get all these themes which are tunneling through all of this. That's indeed a problem.

But it doesn't have to be a problem across the board. I mean that there is some reason to think that Black men face certain problems not encountered by other people, even Black women. To the extent that that is so, it may be useful for them to convene together, in the same way that it is useful for alcoholics to get together in Alcoholics Anonymous and nobody complains that, well, I'm not an alcoholic and I want to come in too. It may be useful in the same way for Black men to get together. However, that fact has been overlaid with all of these patriarchal themes and inflated into a different approach and the approach becomes, as you say, Black men are faced by certain problems and that's even more worrisome because Black men have to save the whole community. So we have to save the Black man before they can fulfill their role of saving the community.

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I think if it were possible to separate the Alcoholics Anonymous approach—that there are certain people who have been disproportionately impacted by certain kinds of forces and that we should get them together to talk about it and deal with it—if you could separate that idea from all this other garbage, that would help. If you could separate the idea that Black men are the standard bearers of the Black community and that they are the salvation of the group, it would be almost a seamlessly good thing. Then the struggle becomes trying to separate that stuff out. You sit Farrakhan down and say that yes, Black men go to jail more than others, but that's a problem in and of itself and you don't have to overload it with all of these other things, specifically the idea that the fate of race rests on the fate of these people because they are special somehow. The struggle, the political struggle, becomes one of separating these themes.

dC: Or as you put it in the paper on Cress-Welsing theory, separating the "theodicy" from the "therapy" as two moments that structure.

PT: How do you see the theodicy coming in?

dC: That whole sense of immanence, religious-historical immanence which some folks wanted to pack into the event as something separate from, very simply, a group of men getting together who happen to have a shared experience and for whom it would be useful to reflect upon that shared experience.

PT: In some senses, yes, I thought that the Million Man March was probably a therapeutic endeavor, but I don't know how much any sense of theodicy has a role to play. You could say that the imposition of all these extraneous themes is motivated in part by an attempt to deal with the theodicy, the idea is that all these horrible things have happened to us and we have to be a certain kind of people to deal with these questions. Dealing with this has been bound up with the tradition of describing ourselves with reference to certain Biblical texts, which necessarily brings in an element of theodicy.

dC: The political problem for the Black community that comes out of this interpretation is how far can one convince people like Farrakhan to separate those two moments. How far can you expect them to actually move?

PT: Well, then the question becomes a question of liberal politics. Look, Farrakhan is a minister and that's what he's always going to be; he leads a religious group. So, when you're trying to figure out how to bring Farrakhan to the table and separate out the theodical elements of his story which say things like "White people are the devil," you

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have to figure out how to cultivate in these people a certain kind of internal morality. You need to explore how this morality can overlap with moralities from other groups in useful ways, in the public space. You have to ask those kinds of questions and deal with that when you want to figure out how to get Farrakhan in without some of his more contentious ideas.

dC: The question, therefore, is not how far you can change him, but rather who else should be at the table. Make sure that Farrakhan is there, and so is Cornell West, so is Jesse Jackson, so are a myriad of other people who would create that overlapping sense of morality of which you speak.

PT: I think that's the only way to do it. That's why it's important to talk to Farrakhan because if you don't talk to him he's just going to become more extreme. Bring him to the table so that he's held accountable to a community of people who are trying to achieve a common goal. And you have to be sensitive to the fact that he's walking a political tightrope himself. The internal politics of the Nation of Islam keep him from being more progressive, than he could be. He's made noises about being more progressive but there's a more radical element within the Nation that will blow up if he backs up too quickly from certain kinds of core themes and ideas.

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