Course description: The course will focus on contemporary issues in philosophy of race and racial theory. Topics will include: political philosophy and ethics pertaining to race, race as a social construction, the discourse of white privilege, police racial profiling and homicide, and contemporary literature. Written work will consist of one 10-15 page paper, proposed, submitted in draft, and final form, and ultimately suitable for conference presentation/publication.

Assignments and required readings: The following are our core readings. Except for the novels as final paper choices, all material will be provided on Canvas or via email before class. There will be a small amount of supplementary reading, TBA.

Letter grading. No more than one free absence and since the class meets only once a week, preferably no absences.

Course Objectives
- Acquire a familiarity with contemporary concerns in philosophy of race.
- Consider the philosophical aspects of a subject as practical as race.
- Critically engage with opposing perspectives and views in this subfield.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
- Knowledge acquired of a distinctive philosophical subject and its key figures.
- Exposition, Interpretation, and Criticism of the ideas of specific thinkers.
- Ability to contrast and compare different intellectual perspectives.

Schedule

Week 1. James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965)
We’ll view these two videos in class.
1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w
   Issues to note: Style and polish of speech, demographics of room, issue of effect of history on the present, questions of what has changed since 1965, Buckley’s somewhat sinister threat, importance of Baldwin prevailing.
   [General Discussion]

2. Cornel West, “Attica is All of Us”
http://www.democracynow.org/2011/9/12/attica_is_all_of_us_cornel
   Discussion of CW’s Black Prophetic Tradition, handout on syllabus.

Beginning with Week 2, a seminar format will be followed, with students presenting assigned material. I will help with these presentations and present additional/optional material.

Weeks 4-8.
We will read through the Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, vol. 35, 1-2, New School for Social Research, Special Issue, December 2014, Philosophy and Race.

http://blogs.newschool.edu/graduate-faculty-philosophy-journal/

Week 4. Editer’s preface, Yancy, Schaub and Sebastiani, Jiménez
Week 5. Bernasconi, Mills, Adler,
Week 6. Judaken, Henningsen, Critchley,

*Week 7: First Draft of Paper is due.* (If you have questions about how to use citations, See: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/04/

Week 7. Outlaw, Scott, Taylor,
Week 8. Harris, Plesner, Curry


Videos of shootings of Tamir Rice and Walter Scott:

Week 10
Student presentations of Beatty, Morrison, NYTimes race discussions, Discussion of Final Papers.

Paper topics:

10-12 page essay on any one of these, with reference to earlier readings. Depending on class size, the subjects will be evenly distributed.

1. Lewis Gordon on the future of African intellectuals: Part 3:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlSe5GUV3xg

last 10 minutes about education for south Africa is very good—you need only focus on that for the subject of the paper.

See also Myisha Cherry’s University of Chicago Ted Talk, “Anger is Not a Bad Word,”
https://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2015/05/26/myisha-cherrys-ted-talk/

What is Gordon’s suggestion to African intellectuals. What would the content of such a program be, on your view? Is Cherry’s talk on anger relevant?

2 and 3. With reference to the earlier material in the course, explain the title of either of these books. Include in your discussion ways that the content of these novels may exceed the stated intentions and beliefs about them, according to their authors.


4. *NYTimes* Stone, Opinionator, Series of Interviews on Race by George Yancy

Excerpt from Naomi Zack, *Applicative Justice: A Pragmatic Empirical Revision of Injustice Discourse*

**Cornel West’s Paradigm of the Black Prophetic Tradition**

It is important to keep Cornel West’s protean background in mind, for consideration of his major philosophical claims. West has had a very productive career, publishing fifteen or twenty books and maintaining a schedule of two or three talks a week for decades. His academic credentials are impeccable. He studied at Yale University, taught at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard University, Princeton University, and most recently, back to Union. His academic positions have been in departments of religion and African American Studies, but many philosophers of race have claimed him, also, and he has not completely repudiated that disciplinary ascription, although unlike most philosophers, he says about himself: “I’m a blues man in the life of the mind. I’m a jazz man in the world of ideas. . .”¹

West has been recognized as a public intellectual by people of all races and is one of the most well-known African-Americans of arts and letters in his generation, regularly presenting his thought in television and radio interviews.² West’s speech and writing are highly erudite, spanning the whole Western humanist tradition and stylized by his encyclopedic knowledge of black history, appreciation of black popular music, and insistence on Christian spirituality as a source of individual dignity. He has recorded hip-hop music, both solo and with a band called “Cornel West Theory;” he played the role of “Councilor West in the movies “Matrix Reloaded” and “Matrix Revolutions.” West’s mode of address consistently has the cadenced grandeur of a prophet of his times.³ His writing reverberates in his speech and after a while, in reading his prose, one hears him speaking.

The content of West’s discourse is literally reiterated throughout his publications, talks, and critical exchanges. Overall, he seeks to alleviate and redignify conditions of human suffering by proceeding from the experience of African Americans. His advocacy of socialism is motivated by an ethical interpretation of Marxism, combined with the ultimately
altruistic selfless love of others exemplified by Jesus Christ. But his resultant “radical democracy” is grounded on the suffering of African Americans. West describes himself as a “Chekovian Christian,” because human death and other tragedies are unavoidable, and he constructs and draws on the tradition of black prophecy to develop a dignified stance of hope in the face such gloom and doom.  

Similar to many liberatory theories, West’s paradigm of the Black Prophetic Tradition is both descriptive and normative. West has been developing this paradigm at least since the early 1980s and he is aware both of the nature of his own work as discourse and of historical vicissitudes in real life politics that result in uneven progress toward racial justice in reality. In his first book, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, he wrote:

> The object of inquiry for Afro-American critical thought is the past and the present, the doings and the sufferings of African people in the United States. Rather than a new scientific discipline or field of study, it is a genre of writing, a textuality, a mode of discourse that interprets, describes, and evaluates Afro-American life in order comprehensively to understand and effectively to transform it. It is not concerned with “foundations” or transcendental “grounds” but with how to build its language in such a way that the configuration of sentences and the constellation of paragraphs themselves create a textuality and distinctive discourse which are a material force for Afro-American freedom.  

West’s expressed intention here—and nothing that he has done since then would cause one to infer that he has ever waivered from that intention—is to create a form of speech that can become a real causal force for black liberation in the United States. In other words, West is here explicit about his belief in the power of cabalistic rhetoric and the existence of ‘magic words.’ In this way, he is like many other academics, but also unlike them insofar as his approach has religious overtones. There is an even greater distance between West and other philosophers. It seems reasonable to assume that a philosopher constructing a black tradition would refer to the texts of past black philosophers as a main source of inspiration, as well as reference. West instead turns to music and claims that the thought of Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Sylvia Winters is not in the same league of genius as the *intellectual* (not experiential) work of Duke Elington, Louis Armstrong, and above all, Sarah Vaughan.  

West has made it clear that he “ironically nurtured in the academy,” his interest in literature as opposed to philosophy and there is no reason to believe that the same is not true of his interest in music.
However, West understands that the timing between prophecy and what it delivers is difficult to predict. West staged an event in Riverside Church in November 2014, in dialogue with Bob Avakian, the Chairman of the Radical Communist Party, USA. The result was the 2015 film, “Religion and Revolution: A Dialogue between Cornel West and Bob Avakian.” West there says that the ruling class “won” over the past thirty years, but that progress is often interrupted by regress, so that after the breakthrough of the Civil Rights Movement, when a small number succeeded, there has been regress. In his Black Prophetic Fire discussion with Christa Buschendorf about Ella Baker, West distinguishes between immediate events in “market time” and “democratic time,” which in Raymond Williams’s terms constitutes a “long revolution.” We should understand that prophecy for West is not prediction of the future:

> The prophetic has little or nothing to do with prediction. Instead, it has to do with identifying, analyzing, and condemning forms of evil and forging vision, hope, and courage for selves and communities to overcome them. Radical democracy is visionary plebodicy—the grand expression of the dignity of the doxa of the suffering demos.

West himself regularly performs prophecy as a certain stance toward injustice and human suffering, that is, an willingness and ability to speak the truth about what for us mortals is evil. In his address to 3,000 people at Riverside Church in New York City, for a 2011 event commemorating the 40th anniversary of the 1971 riot in Attica Prison, West said about courage at the present time:

> The condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak. If you don’t talk about poverty, you’re not telling the truth. If you’re not talking about working people being pushed against the wall, with corporate profits high, you’re not telling the truth. If you’re not talking about the criminal activity on Wall Street and not one person gone to jail yet, you’re not telling the truth. Don’t tell me about the crime on the block with brothers and sisters and Jamal and Latisha out taken to jail, and yet gangsters who are engaged in fraudulent activity, insider trading, market manipulation, walking around having tea at night.

But prophetic inspiration also comes from the past, for West. He said about Ida B. Wells in his 2014 interview/conversation with Christa Buschendorf:
She stands between Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois and she knew both men personally. Wells was the pioneering figure in the anti-lynching campaigns of her day, and the way in which she courageously and undauntedly took up a difficult and dangerous struggle against prejudices about the “beastly nature” of the Black man, certainly renders her a worthy candidate in our series of long-distance freedom fighters in the Black prophetic tradition. . . . Ida B. Wells, in so many ways, teaches us something that we rarely want to acknowledge: that the black freedom movement has always been an anti-terrorist movement, that black people in America had a choice between creating a Black al-Qaeda or a movement like Ida B. Wells’s, which was going to call into question the bestiality and barbarity and brutality of Jim Crow and American terrorism and lynching, but would do it in the name of something that provided a higher moral ground and a higher spiritual ground given her Christian faith. . . she said: “We want a higher moral ground, but I’m going to hit this issue head-on.”

Not only is timing the fulfillment of black prophecy impossible, but there is no guarantee it will be fulfilled. At the close of his Attica address, West indicated that the willingness to continue the fight might be more important than winning:

We’re going to have a new wave of truth telling. We’re going to have a new wave of witness bearing. And we’re going to teach the younger generation that these brothers didn’t struggle in vain, just like John Brown and Nat Turner and Marcus Garvey and Martin King and Myles Horton and the others didn’t. And we shall see what happens. We might get crushed, too. But you know what? Then you just go down swinging, like Ella Fitzgerald and Muhammad Ali.

The title of West’s Riverside Church address, “Attica Is All of Us,” was cashed out in this talk and subsequent talks and publications. For West, Attica is all of us after 9/11, because it was the beginning of the “niggerization” of all Americans. He has repeatedly claimed, following Malcolm X, that the oppression of a people is equal to what they will accept without resistance;

America been niggerized since 9/11. When you’re niggerized, you’re unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, hated for who you are. You become so scared that you defer to the powers that be, and you’re willing to consent to your own domination. And that’s the history of black people in America.
However, it is not only American black people who have been niggerized, according to West, but all post-9/11 Americans who live in fear:

The Black prophetic tradition has never been confined to the interests and situations of Black people. It is rooted in principles and visions that embrace these interests and confront the situations, but its message is for the country and world. The Black prophetic tradition has been the leaven in the American democratic loaf. When the Black prophetic tradition is strong, poor and working people of all colors benefit. When the black prophetic tradition is weak, poor and working class people are overlooked. On the international level, when the Black prophetic tradition is vital and vibrant, anti-imperial critiques are intense, and the plight of the wretched of the earth is elevated. What does it profit a people for a symbolic figure to gain presidential power if we turn our backs from the suffering of poor and working people, and thereby lose our souls?  

The symbolic figure who has gained presidential power, to whom Cornel West repeatedly refers in these terms is, of course, President Barack Obama, “the first black president of the United States.” At first, West sounded hopeful about Obama, disclosing after his 2008 election: “I hope he is a progressive Lincoln, I aspire to be the Frederick Douglass to put pressure on him.” In other words, black prophecy might require the human agency of those inspired by it, in order to activate “the material force for Afro-American freedom.” If this is a correct inference, then West does not fully believe that the discourse of the black prophetic tradition can directly cause change and that would reduce this discourse to a form of secular rhetoric and persuasion.

In recent controversies with other black intellectuals, public figures, and activists, West’s criticism of President Barak Obama’s political, military, and economic policies has been operatic: “Ferguson signifies the end of the age of Obama,” because of the injustice of the “Jim Crow US prison system that does not deliver justice to black and brown people.” In claiming to represent global suffering in the tradition of Frantz Fanon, West has referred to Obama’s “empty neutrality, moral bankruptcy, and political cowardice.”

Philosophical Aspects of West’s Prophecy

“My existential soulmates and intellectual sources are more life-wrestling artists than academic philosophers.” It is easy to understand what West rejects about academic philosophy, its cold abstraction and dryness. He works in a number of dimensions, writing
and speaking for academics, college students, and general readers, and delivering public discourse for wider audiences. His thought is available on an official website and a YouTube channel with over 80,000 entries. His public prophecy and public political criticism have the same content as his writing and speech on college campuses. Therefore West’s writings about the black prophetic tradition and his public political criticism can be taken together as part of a cognitive structure that is grist for abstract and dry philosophical criticism. West’s basic historical insight is that black Americans have suffered unjustly, from pain and death inflicted by whites, as well as from their own nihilism, a spiritual failure to use the strength from their belief in God to face up to their ills courageously, and with dignity. Talking about black history and current battles is in itself, according to West, a valuable and worthy activity. However, his ideas and reaction to their rejection, taken together, indicate that he does not hold participation in this discourse to be morally optional, but, rather, that it is obligatory for certain people, namely black men in power. West expresses bitterness and rage when those in political office and activists such as Reverend Al Sharpton, who he thinks should join him in the black prophetic tradition, choose not to do so. Such castigation may be part of the exhortation that goes along with preacherly aspect of West’s role as a public prophet, but it is problematic for those of us who value the detachment of academic philosophy.

But what if West is right about the wrongness of the American path in moral humanistic terms? Rightness or wrongness makes no difference if others choose not to live within the black prophetic tradition, whether they do so in order to remain addicted to drugs, or to preserve their political careers, or because it does not fit into their life styles. The point is that in not being willing to accept disagreement or lack of interest from some people, West has turned a profound construction of an historical liberatory black tradition into an insistent ideology. West does not have the usual defense of the intellectual who claims that what he does as a person should not be used as an attack on his ideas. Because West, as a public prophet for a people, has made himself an integral part of the content of the prophecy he preaches, he has become like Midas in making black prophecy inert and lifeless in its impermeability to those who may not be with him, but are not necessarily against him.

For instance, not all advocates of black liberation within the United States or critics of the racial imbalance of the US criminal justice system agree that it is necessary to change American foreign policy or the structure of global finance, in order to correct the ills of racial bias. But the globally holistic nature of West’s critique does make it seem as though such fundamental institutions must be overthrown for the correction of social injustice. For a
specific example, already broached at the beginning of this chapter, homicide resulting from police racial profiling would be reduced if police had more cautious rules of engagement for approaching suspects. 22 This is not to say that a full understanding of contemporary racism in the United States does not require or would not be facilitated by a sweeping analysis such as West’s ethical Marxism, but that correction of specific conditions of suffering may not. It is an empirical question whether some things can be fixed without overthrowing everything, but West’s insistent ideological stance blocks such questions from being asked.

However, such academic criticism of West’s paradigm of the black prophetic tradition is not the end of the story. By over-reaching into real life public political discourse, from history, religion, and alleged philosophy all rolled up into one, West forces political philosophers to think about new subjects that include what thinkers who exceed the academy say and the boundaries between truth and freedom. This provides a new dimension to contemporary political philosophy, as well as it reaffirms the power of spoken discourse within its own realm, and might weaken skepticism about magic words. West’s written and spoken utterances remain on the verbal side of discourse, but in taking the contemporary world as a subject, he has opened a window out of the academy for cultural analysis and criticism. When West refers to historical black figures in constructing the black prophetic tradition, he brings accounts of their lives and ideas into the ‘magic-word’ aspect of his own discourse, which is also a new approach to intellectual history.

To do philosophy or present other complex thought in public, and for the public, is not an easy task, because it calls for communication skills and non-specialized language, which many academic philosophers have not yet developed. The degree of controversy centered on matters of race in which West has immersed himself, in a public auditorium with many reactionaries, probably carries personal risks and stresses that would be beyond the capability to sustain, of even the most highly skilled ninjas of academic politics. 23 Time will tell whether others who identify or are claimed as philosophers successfully emulate West’s kind of project. If enough of them do, West’s prophetic discourse may come to symbolize their endeavors.

Cornel West has written that for real change to occur, leaders have to be willing to act in public, to be arrested, and to be killed. It helps if they are charismatic and if members of the group they represent love them. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prime example of a charismatic organic intellectual in West’s sense. 24 West’s stated conditions for becoming an organic intellectual are an empirical claim about what is necessary, although not sufficient. If the Left did indeed lose in the decades following
the civil rights movement, as West has also claimed, then that in itself would indicate that these necessary conditions are not sufficient for lasting, sustainable change.25

West contrasts the contributions of Ella Baker to those of King, describing her as “an unassuming person who helps the suppressed to help themselves.” Baker’s organizing work included her service as secretary of the NAACP, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, and co-founder of the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee. Baker knew both Du Bois and King and was skilled at grassroots organizing, but she did not write essays or books or produce mesmerizing speeches. She talked about humility and service alongside everyday people and insisted that members of a movement motivate themselves.26

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2 The Cornel West Site: Youtube.Com had 87,300 entries on March 29, 2015. https://www.google.com/search?sourceid=navclient&aq=&oq=youtube&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4ADRA_enUS481US481&q=youtube&gs_i=hp..0.0l5.0.0.0.9504...........0.xjQdne3A0cA&q=cornel%20west%20site%3ayoutube.com


7 Ibid, p. 361.


9 Cornel West with Christa Buschendorf, Black Prophetic Fire, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014, pp. 100 ff. (I will say more about Raymond Williams in Chapter 6.)


14 Ibid.

15 *West with Buschendorf, Black Prophetic Fire*, p. 165.

16 Overlooked in Obama’s status is the mixed race identity with which he began his campaign in 2007. For discussion of issues related to that transformation, which would only confuse matters to being into the current text, see Naomi Zack, “The Fluid Symbol of Mixed Race,” *Hypatia*, 25th Anniversary Issue, 25:4, Fall 2010, pp. 875-890.


18 West has been involved in ongoing controversy within the African American intelligentsia, concerning federal programs that he believes harm the poor and fail to support black people. “Ferguson Signifies the End of the Age of Obama,” *CNN News International*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PD_ixQlrvc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PD_ixQlrvc), November 27, 2014.

19 Ibid.


21 See notes 27 and 28, supra.


