**On Meta-Oppression, Deferred Dreams, the Fire, and Movin to the End of Rainbows**

Jacqueline Scott

Arrupe College—16 November 2020

Thank you all so much for inviting me to this particular cyberspace and into your community. I am so pleased to be here at Arrupe, in the land of the Potawatomi, the Peoria and the Kickapoo.

We all also a great debt of thanks to all of the organizers of this event—both seen and unseen. In particular, I want to thank my beloved former student and righteous colleague, Prof. Ahumada, her colleagues on the Arrupe Speakers Committee, Gwendolyn Gomez, and the students who participating in this talk.

In order to give you a better sense of this larger project, and by way of an introduction, I first want to give you an overview of it. Two questions have driven my research:

1. Given the social construction of race, how might we re-construct and/or re-value it (particular racialized identities) to serve the health of individuals and communities?
2. How do we get to this healthier place?

I have argued that in the US we have all been infected by racism and it is more productive to assume that this “disease” is both congenital and incurable. By adopting this pessimistic stance, we will avoid the historical pitfalls of endeavoring to formulate a universal “cure” for racism (and also avoid the disappointment/despair when the “cure” does not work), and will instead focus on first understanding this American disease of racism and how it affects us as individuals and racialized groups (diagnosis).[[1]](#footnote-1) The focus on a cure to racism has left many people of color feeling anger and resentment at continuing racial injustice, and despair that we will never get the justice promised us by our country’s political and social ideals. Some racially privileged whites feel anger and resentment due to disruptions in the comfort of their own racialized way of moving through the world (their racialized status quo). Other whites feel guilt and shame at their role (sometimes unwitting) in maintaining racialized privilege, and despair at their powerlessness to bring about racialized justice. This has left us all stuck in the pessimistic states of racialized anger, resentment, guilt and shame we see exemplified in daily news stories and in the communities around us.

 We then need to formulate “treatments” for the particular ways that racism has affected us as individuals and groups. These treatments need to be tailored to address the particular strengths and weaknesses of each entity—and avoid the pitfalls of the one-size-fits-all approach (as we have tried in the past)[[2]](#footnote-2). Philosophically, this entails thinking differently about the discipline of philosophy, and the value and function of race within philosophical arguments about human flourishing. The benefits of this approach are that it recognizes that racism has affected groups differently, and therefore focuses on addressing those differences with varying treatments. Once we understand ourselves, and our communities better, I argue that we then need to envision and enact creative disruptions to our current racial stasis by enhancing our current racialized virtues and minimizing our racialized vices. This part of my project will not only make theoretical arguments about this creativity, but also formulate practical specific ways we might undertake this task of interrupting and improving our racialized ways of embodying and enacting racialized identities. The goal of my project is to argue for ways in which “treatments” will help all of us to move from passively accepting our racialized country to actively re-constructing it.

 In this move from passivity to active re-construction, I contend that we must all be prepared to experience, seek out, and embrace racialized discomfort. The metaphor I use is to imagine that we all have racialized muscles. Those racially marginalized in society have over-worked the same racial muscles to the point of fatigue and injury, and those who are racially privileged have flaccid muscles that rarely get used. I argue that we in the US need to work out our racial muscles in the same way we work our physical muscles. This will involve discomfort, but if we do it well then it will lead to racial health. This health will not mean that we will need to do away with racialized exercise altogether (racial colorblindness), and instead we will continually need to find ways to work out and strengthen them. My contention is that while we might not permanently cure ourselves of racism, if we focus on strengthening our racialized bodies (both individual and communal), then we will be strengthening our abilities to withstand the worst effects of it (particularly crippling anger, resentment, guilt and shame), and engender new powers to enact healthier diverse communities.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 My talk today derives from a brief essay I wrote as the protests against anti-black racism broke out this past summer and as the backlash against them also broke out. In some sense, this essay is no longer timely and in other senses it is all too timely. By this I mean that we are not experiencing the intense heat of the protests and uprisings at this very moment, the heat is still here. Anti-black and other racialized oppressions have not gone away, and neither have those you are militating against them in hopes of achieving something like racial justice. I hope that our time together today will open up a conversation about what we might “take away” from the events of this summer as well as the whole US history of folks fighting and dying for racial justice, as well as creating spaces of vibrant racialized healing.

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

      Does it dry up

      like a raisin in the sun?

      Or fester like a sore—

      And then run?

      Does it stink like rotten meat?

      Or crust and sugar over—

      like a syrupy sweet?

      Maybe it just sags

      like a heavy load.

      *Or does it explode?*

—Langston Hughes (1951)

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, “No more water, the fire next time!”

—James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time” (1962)

& this is for the colored girls who have considered

Suicide/but are movin to the end of their own rainbows

—Ntozake Shange, f*or colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1975)

The above quotes date from 1951, 1962, and 1975, respectively. What does it say that what they seem to be describing speaks to our present condition 69, 58, and 45 years later? What we are seeing right now is the “fire” promised by Baldwin’s God. We are seeing Hughes’ “exploding raisins” of dreams long, long, long deferred, mocked at, trampled, and strangled; of nightmares from which many of us cannot wake up; and also of unrealized dreams which are the price of the realized dreams of others. We are also seeing Shange’s “colored girls” who are attempting to transform suicidal despair and are moving with righteous anger and purpose to “their own rainbows.”

Many folks are disgusted by the disruptions of the protests, uprisings, and “looting”. Are they equally, and even more disgusted by snippets of the bookends of anti-black racism to which they have been exposed in the videos of the death of George Floyd suffering under the knee of a police officer and in the video of Amy Cooper feigning feeling threatened by an African American man who did nothing more than ask her to obey that law?

I have coined the term “meta-oppression,” and I use it to describe an existential state for many people of color, particularly US black folks (though I am interested in learning if it also resonates with folks of other racialized communities): we have dealt with racialized oppression to such a degree and for so long that it has brought about an additional stressor. Just as prolonged anxiety can trigger a clinical depression, prolonged racialized oppression seems to be triggering a profound sense of resignation, weariness, and despair at the looming realization that American racism will not change significantly—ever. Depression is often characterized as anger turned inward. For many African Americans, we are often thwarted from expressing and processing our anger caused by oppression (because it is “disproportionate” to its cause, because it will lead to further oppression…). This is meta-oppression and it results in a type of pessimism that often leads to: Give examples of each

* despair about being able to enact any life different then than the one we are currently living
* decay of our epistemic authority and self-worth
* decline in the desire to actively enact our innermost desires to help us affirm our lives; to create values and make our lives meaningful; to move “to the end of [our] own rainbows”
* explosive violent expression of repressed anger, frustration and pain

I have written that racism is a disease. I mean this not merely metaphorically, but also literally. It is a disease which infects everyone in the US, but not equally. Some sufferers are asymptomatic and never experience any negative symptoms (but are still able to benefit from a type of immunity to its worst manifestations—this is racial privilege, as embodied by Amy Cooper), some suffer horribly from it, and some die from it. Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd died from racism (among a heartbreakingly large number of others). Those like Christian Cooper suffer from it, and if things had gone a bit differently when Amy Cooper called the police, he also could have died from it.

What we are seeing now in the protests and uprisings are expressions of meta-oppression, and in particular the violent anger of exploding deferred dreams. This is the anger of those who are deemed powerless, who feel that we/they are fed up, “tired of being sick and tired,” and who want that anger brought about by meta-oppression to be recognized and to see positive change.

I understand this meta-oppression as having historically taken root and intensified in the space between the ideal of the American Dream and the societal dream offered to most African Americans. I want to argue that this space between the two dreams that was brought to the fore for most non-black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement has become a chasm because of meta-oppression. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement, many of these Americans recognized the wide-spread nature of racialized injustices, but were unable, or refused, to acknowledge its systemic nature. So, the tendency was to blame these injustices on the most egregious racist actors (the KKK, white southerners), and then assume that with the Civil Rights acts of 1964 and 1968 as well as with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that the problems were solved; that America was “cured” of its racism. They argue that America has been cured and now we just need to wait for the rest of the symptoms to die off. On the other hand, there are groups who argue that racism continues to be an ongoing American problem that has negative ramifications for the material, social, and psychological well-being of people of color. In terms of dealing with racism, many of us feel as though we are running to stand still.

As a result of meta-oppression, many racially marginalized folks in the US feel as though there are only 2 options for expressing the broiling anger of meta-oppression: despair or violence. And neither one is a healthy option. This is the non-ideal world we/they live in. What do we do? We all need actively to create a multitude of other options.

It is ironic that this is all happening in the midst of a global pandemic. African American, Latinx, and Native folks are enduring increased diportionate mortality by Covid-19. This is due in part, because a larger percentage of people in these populations suffer from underlying conditions like hypertension, diabetes and heart disease. Meta-oppression is a contributing factor to these conditions.

The embodiment of racialized oppression comes as a result of threats to the body. When humans sense a threat to our survival, the amygdala part of the brain is activated, and it in turn, activates the body’s stress response system (stress hormones and nerve impulses), which increases the body’s blood pressure, heart rate, and oxygen intake. This all happens before we are consciously aware of the threat.[[4]](#footnote-4) As Shannon Sullivan has argued, over time, long-term continual threat responses “weather” the body. This is a physiological term which describes the gradual wearing down of the body’s systems by stressors that accumulate over time. Sullivan concludes that racism contributes to the weathering of non-white bodies as indicated by the disproportionate incidences of particular medical problems (cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, and accelerated physiological aging) among people of color.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This intertwining of the political and physiological is further intensified (it becomes meta-oppression) when people of color are told that these bodily problems are our own fault and that we alone must take responsibility for becoming unhealthy and for curing ourselves of it. This then compounds the stressors and they become traumatic: “Trauma almost invariably involves not being seen, not being mirrored, and not being taking into account.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Oppression affects racially marginalized folks in ways exemplified by the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd (active indifference to black lives) as well as by Christian Cooper (the silent killer of “weathering”—the continuous wear of unexpressed anxiety and anger). This is the moment in which we/I find myself—and this moment has been ongoing since the founding of this country. And so, are we really surprised that we see these socially disruptive manifestations of Meta-Oppression?

One way to start might be this: with Covid-19 it is now standard practice around the world for people leaving their homes to wear at least a cloth mask. This mask functions at two levels: in case the wearer is asymptomatic, it protects others from contracting the virus from them and it also signals to others that the wearer is being a good citizen and wants to care for others. It says: we are all in this together, we will recognize the responsibility for, and try to mitigate, any harm we might unwittingly cause others just by walking through the world and being near them.

In terms of the disease of racism:

* What is the metaphorical mask that the racially privileged might wear to protect others from their racism (and in particular the racism that is asymptomatic to them) and simultaneously to signal to others that they are willing to recognize that they might harm others; that they will attempt to take some responsibility for that and will try to mitigate it; that we are all together in this battle against the disease of racism?
* What would it look like to buy food for those who take the lead in diagnosing and treating racism (African Americans and other people of color), to cheer those “front-line workers”?
* What would it look like to give particular benefits (like insurance to cover the cost of medical treatment) for those who suffer most severely from the disease of racism?
* What would it look like to expend vast resources to understand the disease of racism; to formulate treatments to ensure that people don’t die from it; to devote vast resources to figure out how to prevent it from spreading?
* What would it look like for individuals to make sacrifices in their own lives, even though they do not perceive themselves as suffering from it, in order to protect those who are most vulnerable in our communities?
* What would it look for those who are racially privileged to be mindful of how their actions can have devasting effects on those who are more vulnerable? To readily accept, and even seek, discomfort/inconvenience in order to prevent further devastation for the most vulnerable, and/or to ameliorate the devastation of previous actions?

What it will not look like is to tell those who are “exploding” because of meta-oppression how they should express their anger, frustration, and pain. It will not involve focusing your criticisms and hand wringing on protests that do not take the form that you might like and are more comfortable to you, instead of focusing on the claims and arguments that the protestors are making.

As Baldwin argued in the quote above, in terms of the Civil Rights Movements of the previous century, the actions of black folks, and their accomplices, brought the rain and flood. Yes, some changes were made, and many were not. And for many African Americans, as we saw in the video book ends of Amy Cooper and Officer Chauvin, things got worse because there were no consistent, material, social, political, and psychological changes. This is why our present actions are not bringing “water.” This is the next time, and our actions are bringing the “fire.” So many of us feel as though this is our only choice. We are dying simultaneously quickly (police and societal brutality, Covid-19) and slowly (underlying health conditions and despair). Black folks are resisting these deaths, and in this resistance we aim to bring about our own transformation—“movin to the end of our own rainbows”.

Many of us, I think, both long to see this happen and are terrified of it, for though this transformation contains the hope of liberation, it also imposes a necessity for great change. But in order to deal with the untapped and dormant force of the weight of the world, America and all the Western nations will be forced to reexamine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes for so long.

—James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time”

Are these protests and uprisings, a decisive step in the “transformation” that Baldwin mentioned 58 years ago? I don’t know. I do know that if these actions are to be a decisive step for our nation as a whole, then it is not primarily up to black folks or people of color. It is primarily in the laps of whites—those with racial privilege.

And for those of you in that group, please know that those of us with less racial privilege will not be waiting for you to engage in this “re-examination,” to “release” yourselves from most of what you take to be “sacred,” and to “discard” the justifications for the relative racial comforts, anguish, and crimes you have been afforded by systemic racism. For make no mistake, *your* racialized comfort comes at the expense of racialized discomfort, unrelenting pain, deep-seated trauma, and the deaths of African Americans, in particular, and people of color in general. What decisive steps will *you* take in this transformation? In transforming yourselves, your communities, and our nation?

We have waited for you to engage deeply, broadly, and consistently in this transformation, and my hope and prayer (that is about all I can muster right now), is that we will no longer wait for y’all, and instead continue to, in the words of Gwendolyn Brooks in 1988, “blueprint/not merely our survival but a flowering…devising our next return/to sense and self and mending. And a daylight/out of the Tile and Jangle of this hour.”

1. See Jacqueline Scott, “Racial Nihilism as Racial Courage: The Potential for Healthier Racial Identities”, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 35, no. 1-2 (2014): 297-330 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. If we can discover and fortify the strengths of those whose bodies have been most ravaged by the disease of racism, while we might not cure the disease, we can figure out ways for their bodies to flourish despite (perhaps even because of) this chronic disease. In the last twenty to thirty years, we have moved from HIV being a death sentence to it being a chronic disease that, if caught early enough, can be managed so that HIV sufferers can live full, vibrant lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jacqueline Scott, “Effortful Agon: How to Think and Feel Differently about Race”, in *Oxford Handbook on Race*, Naomi Zack, ed., (Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. 411-419. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2014)p.60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Shannon Sullivan, *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Van Der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score,* p. 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)