

## Introduction

### Key Concepts, Ideas, and Issues that have Formed Black Political Thought

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It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

In the United States, black political thought in its genealogical orientation, from slavery to present, is an appropriate mode of inquiry and analysis into the unequal positioning of blacks. In the form of a politically engaged critique, blacks' positionality as second-class citizens has produced and continues to produce an ongoing crisis of signification. In fact, the never-ending American issue is that, historically, blacks were not recognized as rights-bearing subjects. To put it differently, America's democratic creed of liberty and equality, which is equivalent to the exercise of freedom, a fundamental element of one's autonomy, was not extended to blacks, free or slaves. And today, blacks continue to be denied their rights of citizenship, wittingly amplified in the forms of racial profiling and institutionalized violence. When blacks' rights have been, or are curtailed, blacks are involved in public lectures, demonstrations, riots, and other forms of direct and performative actions, which are described and explained as actions "in crisis" or actions that are "provoking crisis." In this discussion, the term crisis designates a phenomenon that manifests itself when the systems and structures are called into question through oppositional strategies. Because of the radical ways in which blacks resist the normative working of institutionalized power and invoke alternatives, it is safe to say that these actions were and are crystallized into various forms of speaking and writing. Indeed, speaking and writing are acts of resistance. These are political practices.

*Black Political Thought: From David Walker to the Present* represents a critical compass to rearticulate the political based on the lived experiences of blacks in the United States, which cannot exist independent of past and present practices of inequality towards them. For this reason, this collection focuses on how and why blacks in the United States, as individuals and as a group, have historically conceptualized, analyzed, and responded to the ill will of ordinary whites and those in power who through laws, policies and customs, and cultural practice

have made blacks into inferior beings as a justification to deny them their rights of equality, in such a way that the interests of the dominant class are upheld and preserved, and which today have not disappeared. This carries several implications for America's development into a nation where identity markers such as race, gender, and class determine who are the rights-bearing subjects.

To appreciate the *critique* of the unequal position of blacks presented by the scholars in this collection, it is useful to think of what Homi K. Bhabha calls “a third space”<sup>1</sup> for interpretation and counterhegemonic critique of the foundational and institutional racial oppression that permits all other forms of discrimination – sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, Islamophobia, ageism, and xenophobia – to happen. Readers of Michel Foucault's “What is Critique?” will recognize that “critique only exists in relation to something other than itself.”<sup>2</sup> Any critique of blacks' inequality needs to inquire into what renders this kind of discriminatory practice possible. The authors in this collection look at the lived experience of blacks historically and currently as a critique of America's discriminatory practice. Through the lived experience of blacks, black political thought has been materialized, concretized, and is sustained. What we can learn from such a critique is, at least for me, what make the writers in the collection particularly suited for any book on black political thought. What it means to be black in the face of institutional arrangements, systems and structures, ontologies, ideologies and epistemologies, and cultural expectations that promote the interests of the dominant group in the United States is indeed paramount.

*Black Political Thought: From David Walker to the Present* is divided into six parts. Each section examines some of the key questions that have informed black political thinking. This collection engages with systems, structures, epistemology, ideology, and the discourse of black unequal positioning. It examines slavery and its discontents, the Reconstruction period, Black Nationalism, race and racism, feminism and difference, and past, present, and future issues, and how these issues have motivated and continue to motivate black political thinking. In fact, black political thinking is motivated in the writings of many black scholars by very specific problems and situations – political, social, epistemological, sexual, and economic – that positioned blacks as second-class citizens. This is precisely the underlying motivation for the writers in this volume. It is to help us make sense of the past, present, and future concerns that have and continue to inform and shape the political in black thinking. Black scholars Brenda E. Stevenson, Nikki L. M. Brown, Babacar M'Baye, Charisse Burden-Stelly, Sherrow O. Pinder, and Erica F. Cooper provide introductory remarks for each section.

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<sup>1</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 1997), p. 23.

## Part I: Slavery and Its Discontents

In this collection, slavery is the starting point for developing and shaping black political thinking. In the words of Brenda E. Stevenson, “black political thought in the nineteenth-century United States unequivocally centered on the inequality of African and African descended peoples, both enslaved and free.” It has often been remarked that the brutality of the slave regime and the ways in which slaves were treated as disposable bodies – where power was exercised over slaves through the use of severe punishments such as whipping, and practices such as underfeeding, starving, breeding, and killing – cannot be disavowed. However, these punishments and practices were not enough to make slaves into something other than human beings. The laws that were in place recognized that the slaves were people.

When Frederick Douglass asks in “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”: “must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man?,” his question is obviously rhetorical and he does not intend to prove that the slaves were indeed people. The institution of the laws, ideology, and cultural practice, which continuously dehumanized the slaves and undermined their personhood by upholding the idea that their lives were unlivable and not grievable clearly assumed that they were people. In fact, the daily acts of violence against slaves were to convince blacks that they were *less* than whites. Through physical, psychic, epistemological, and ontological violence, the white man became a “man” by legally and culturally overpowering blacks to his *will*.

In the face of slavery, blacks’ “vocation to be fully humans” and experience the rights and liberties that were accessible to whites was an endless fight. For the author of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, dehumanization “marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen [slaves], but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it [masters].”<sup>3</sup> But how long might the slaves be contented with their condition of servitude? It was inevitable that the slaves would eventually become disgruntled with their situation and struggle against the masters as was illustrated in the many slave riots. However, for the struggle to have any significance, the slaves must not become in turn masters of the masters but reestablish the humanity of both (themselves and their masters). In other words, by liberating themselves, the slaves would liberate their masters.<sup>4</sup>

Part I, “Slavery and Its Discontents,” draws on the writers’ diverse thought on slavery and its discontents based on their experience of slavery as a free or enslaved person. Stevenson in the introductory chapter explains how David Walker, Maria W. Stewart, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and Martin Robison

<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Delany, in varied ways, confronted the contradictions and tensions of their time. In fact, slavery became a living source of inspiration for blacks. Black scholars approached the subject from various critical perspectives. In her detailed analysis, Stevenson observes that “each work is meant to expose the varied and overlapping experiences, goals, and strategies of those men and women who dedicated their lives to the cause of racial equality.” Importantly, this brings us to the observation that thinking and writing can materialize, in the words of Hannah Arendt, “out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guidepost by which to take its bearing.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, experience is the foundation of the writings presented on slavery and its discontents. As slavery came to an end, the period of Reconstruction continued to cement blacks’ inferior status. The following section expounds on some of the issues of the Reconstruction era.

## Part II: Reconstruction

In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the American Constitution brought an end to slavery. The United States entered the Reconstruction era (1865–77). In *Black Reconstruction in America*, W. E. B. Du Bois provocatively asks: “What is the object of writing the History of Reconstruction? Is it to wipe out the disgrace of a people which fought to make slaves of Negroes? Is it to show that the North had higher motives than freeing black men? Is it to prove that Negroes were black angels?”<sup>6</sup> In fact, the political, social, and economic effects of Reconstruction raise the most interesting and challenging questions. And while these questions await negative answers, Reconstruction, Du Bois tell us, was “simply to establish the Truth on which Right in the future may be built.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it was important for those in power to extend, at least in theory, the principles of democratic governance to blacks and give them the basic educational skills and economic resources necessary for their future development. However, blacks remained at the mercy of popular prejudice arising from their previous condition of servitude. The unequal treatment that blacks experienced during slavery had been transformed into the Reconstruction era, an overriding issue for any collection on black political thought.

Nikki L. M. Brown in her introductory remarks on Reconstruction notes that the authors in this section, W. E. B. Du Bois, T. Thomas Fortune, and Booker T.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1961), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935), p. 775.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Washington, are elite black men. In fact, this may generate some disapproval given that black women were, certainly, speaking and writing about women's condition during and after slavery, in the Reconstruction era. Fannie Barrier Williams, in "The Intellectual Progress of the Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation," for one, draws our attention to the fact that black women worked hard to emancipate themselves from the ills of slavery and continued to suffer in silence and struggle "to keep hallowed their own person." And their struggle is not recorded in America's history. However, black women's "unwritten history is full of heroic struggles," Williams reminds us.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, how can we truly comprehend the Reconstruction period without including Du Bois' "Of the Dawn of Freedom," which, as Brown acknowledges, "offered the most famous pronouncement about racism in modern US history: 'The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color-line.'" Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal would later refer to this insoluble problem as the "American dilemma."<sup>9</sup> And even though blacks were no longer slaves, they remained segregated and lived on the social, economic, and political margin. Reconstruction did not solve blacks' unequal position. Indeed, with the enactment of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, during the Reconstruction era, black inequality, in the words of Brown, "took shape, most disturbingly, in the form of extralegal violence – race riots, lynchings, and intimidation by terrorist groups." In other words, the actions of the Ku Klux Klan and state racist laws like the literacy test, the poll tax, and the grandfather clause in place to curtail black men from voting perpetuated blacks' inequality. Furthermore, according to Brown, "extremist groups, a weak federal government, and outbreaks of violence between southern whites and blacks were so numerous that they became impossible to solve."

On the other hand, Booker T. Washington, in his essay, in Brown's words, "considered himself an energetic optimist, and he was sure that African Americans would grow into economic self-sufficiency." However, it is T. Thomas Fortune who draws our attention to the fact that blacks, voting for Rutherford B. Hayes equipped the Hayes administration to turn, in Fortune's words, "the colored voters of the South over to the bloodthirsty minority." With President Hayes in power, the Compromise of 1877 brought an end to the Reconstruction period. The United States, according to Brown, "was a meaner, crueler country for African Americans after Reconstruction" with the Jim Crow Laws in place soon after. Blacks continued

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<sup>8</sup> Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Intellectual Progress of the Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation," in *The World Conference of Representative Women*, ed. May Wright Sewall (New York: Rand, McNally & Company, 1894), 711–715. Available at [https://archive.org/stream/worldcongressof00worluoft/worldcongressof00worluoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/worldcongressof00worluoft/worldcongressof00worluoft_djvu.txt).

<sup>9</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

to be treated as second-class citizens. In fact, the 1886 canonical landmark case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, confirmed the status of second-class citizenry upon blacks, which corresponded to the readily available doctrine of “separate but equal” that equally carried the day. Blacks as well as whites fastened themselves to the doctrine, and blacks who failed to constitute themselves within its terms and posed an immediate threat to the white social body had to pay the consequences. For the most part, they died the victims of continued state violence and lynchings. Furthermore, blacks continued to be viewed as inferior to whites, were denied self-determination, and continued to experience relentless racism and its multidimensional forms of discriminatory practice. Black Nationalism, as an oppositional force against America’s racism, is important for thinking about the scope of black political thought.

### Part III: Black Nationalism

In time, Martin R. Delany, in his book *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered*, advocated for the self-sufficiency of blacks and called for “emigration of the colored people of the United States” to Liberia. Also, in the years between Reconstruction and World War I, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was one of the main advocates for the self-sufficiency of blacks in the United States. “These intellectuals,” Babacar M’Baye notes, “were nationalists because they believed that the marginalization to which they were subjected in the United States from slavery time to the 1950s contradicted America’s self-representation as a cosmopolitan nation that is founded on republicanism and democracy.”

Part III focuses on “Black Nationalism” as one of the responses to address blacks’ unequal position in a polity that professes democratic principles of equal justice and economic and political freedom within the rule of law for all citizens of the United States. The authors in this section are James Theodore Holly, Marcus Garvey, and Stokely Carmichael. M’Baye, in his introductory remarks points to the origins of Pan-Africanism as founded and consolidated within Black Nationalism, a long intellectual tradition “that is completely detached from black cosmopolitanism.” In part, Black Nationalism focuses on cutting the cord that binds blacks to the United States and enhancing their capacity for self-representation. In the words of James Theodore Holly, “self-government and civilized progress” can only be achieved by black emigration, at least for Holly, to Haytia (Haiti).

M’Baye, drawing on the relevance of Black Nationalism, “a theory founded on the shared struggle against historical forces that have prevented many black communities from establishing either a collective entity such as a country, a meta-nation, or another geographic political and economic entity for themselves,” is fundamental

for black political thinking. Certainly, Black Nationalism, as Michael C. Dawson acknowledges, continues to be “the focus of contemporary debate within the black community.”<sup>10</sup> More recently, the media’s exposure of Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s angry outbursts in opposition to racism was met with an enormous amount of hostility from the masses. Certainly, for Reverend Wright, racism is a facilitator for ills such as failing infrastructures, increasing joblessness, poverty, crime, violence, gangs, lack of access to adequate health care, and educational underachievement that decimate black communities and reduce poor blacks to a “death-in-life.” The death-in-life is a condition that is described “as ontological death, that is, the loss of their personhood.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, when Reverend Wright shouts from a pulpit, “God damn America,” he criticizes the institutionalized violence and the criminal justice system that is too often “excessively punitive and destructive in black communities.”<sup>12</sup> Far from uttering a cry of surprise, Reverend Wright offers an investigative account of America’s racism. We can see clearly, like other Black Nationalists – Stokely Carmichael, Marcus Garvey, and James Theodore Holly – that Wright’s obligation is not to the United States because the United States “is tainted by worldly sin – its imperialism (the Mexican-American War, the conquest of the Philippines, the occupation of Haiti and Cuba); its dispossession of the Indians; its subordination of blacks; its use of atomic weapons; its misadventures in Vietnam, Chile, and Nicaragua; and still other misdeeds about which all too many Americans are ignorant or indifferent.”<sup>13</sup> To put it differently, like the fathers of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism, Reverend Wright’s loyalty is not to the American people but to America’s promises in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” For Reverend Wright, America has not lived up to this promise because of its discriminatory treatment, not only of blacks, but other racialized ethnic groups such as First Nations, Mexicans, Muslims, and Asians in the United States, women, sexual minorities, senior citizens, the poor, and the disabled, which constitutes, in Reverend Wright’s words, “a moral atrocity warranting God’s damnation.”<sup>14</sup> Reverend Wright hides nothing about race and racism in the United States.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary Black Political Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Sherrow O. Pinder, *Black Women, Work, and Welfare in the Age of Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), p. viii.

<sup>12</sup> Randall Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency* (New York: Pantheon, 2011), p. 187.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

## Part IV: Race and Racism

Because of the increasing range of books and journal articles addressing issues of race and racism from a variety of disciplinary and conceptual perspectives, the theorizing of race and racism must be included in any book on black political thought. Hence, how to theorize race, racism, and related topics, and develop conceptual tools for the analysis of the many ways in which race as a concept and racism as a system have shaped past and present black political thinking in the United States must be accounted for. Black political thought has to respond to this and draw on race and racism in such a way that the “black perspective” comes more to the forefront. On this note, it is paramount indeed to point to the problematics of substituting race for racism and the failure to examine the indispensability of race and racism as two overlying but sharply differentiated manifestations.

In fact, assigning racial categories to people is symptomatic of racism. Furthermore, because of how the body is racialized, blacks encounter the racist world through their bodies. The fact that a class analysis appears to get in the way of accepting such a claim does not make this self-evident certainty less certain. For sure, a black male lawyer on Wall Street will experience race differently than a black single mother on welfare living in the Bronx in New York City. Race is fixed on the body and it is a phenomenon that is both visual and psychical. It is the central marker confirming the ontology of race. Clearly, blacks assume the mark and burden of race, and have agitated in the name of race. In fact, some black male leaders have been presented as speaking as and for blacks. While we should dispute the obligation of black men to speak for all blacks, surely, we are cognizant of the masculinist ways in which representational politics operates.<sup>15</sup>

When Frantz Fanon, in his influential book *Black Skin, White Masks*, declares that “The Negro is not. No more than the white man,”<sup>16</sup> is he suggesting that there is no biological basis to race? So, what exactly is race? Given that blacks’ lives are always conditioned by their race, an essential question is what relationship might there be between attitudes toward race and blacks? So how, exactly, can we account for “the declining significance of race”<sup>17</sup> and “the end of racism”<sup>18</sup> as is espoused by some scholars? To say that a black person is a slave not of the idea that others have of him/her but of his/her own appearance, to use Fanon’s

<sup>15</sup> Sherrow O. Pinder, *The Politics of Race and Ethnicity in the United States: Americanization and De-Americanization of Racialized Ethnic Groups* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), p. 180.

<sup>17</sup> See William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> See Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multicultural Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995).



language,<sup>19</sup> is to contend that race subjects blacks to an identification that is marked on the body. In other words, blacks are, in deconstructivist language, “always already overdetermined from the outside.” Thus, differences among blacks stemming from identity markers such as gender, sexuality, disability, and class are overlooked. That race, as the outcome of racism, is the signifier that is pegged to other signifiers such as gender, class, sexuality, disability, and speech and language impairment cannot be denied. It is no wonder that Charisse Burden-Stelly draws our attention to “present programs for the cultivation of a vibrant black community: economic development, moral uplift, social organization, political protection, self-determination, race unity, cultural pride,” which are deemed fitting for blacks’ advancement.

Part IV, “Race and Racism,” draws on the works of Alexander Crummell, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ida B. Wells. “Their political thought,” according to Burden-Stelly, which is “articulated through ethnological, evangelical, racial uplift, and Republican discourse,” in extraordinary ways, confronts “the contradictions between idealized notions of American progress and the realities of the racial Nadir.” It is important to remember that while Du Bois calls for the conservation of race because blacks have a lot of positive attributes that American society as a whole can benefit from, a “new” form of racism that pretends to omit race and views racism as over, has recently reared its head above the so-called “colorblindness” and “post-raciality” and has been redirected to the “old” blatant one against blacks. We need not look any further than the present political climate, in which with an antidemocratic American president holding the highest position of power, rights for racialized ethnic groups, sexual minorities, the poor, documented and undocumented workers, the disabled, women, and other marginalized groups have been severely curtailed. Indeed, when feminists across the board joined forces to protest the Trump administration’s curtailing of women’s hard-won rights, solidarity amongst women came to the forefront. But, as Sherrow O. Pinder reminds us, “we’ are not one in the same feminist struggle for a just society.”

## Part V: Feminism and Difference

“Women” as a category of analysis is important for feminism. When one thinks that “white is what women are,” one needs to draw from the archetypal discussion on gender positioning. Since black women are not seen as women, in order for black women to break into the category of the woman, the racialization of women and its deleterious implications have to be prohibited. This, in turn, would open up new possibilities for women’s subjectivity and varied positioning to be

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<sup>19</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 116.

acceptable. The writings of Mary Church Terrell, Patricia Hill Collins, and Gary L. Lemons are included in Part V, “Feminism and Difference,” and are valued for their profound theoretical underpinnings in relation to the political insights that these authors highlight in exposing the limits of acceptable womanhood and opening up a complex analysis for thinking differences, which is by no means to abandon the feminist goal of equality for all. While the experiences of women cannot be homogenized, Pinder draws on the fact that “there is a great continuity of feminist treatment of differences within gender to privilege the concerns of white women and ignore issues that are of importance to black women.” Perhaps this is why so many black feminists debate abandoning the term feminism and employ “womanism” as a more compelling term to address their concerns.

“Womanists” and black feminists are both concerned with fights against racism, sexism, and other systems that promote inequality. Womanism is defined typically as a reaction to feminism for not incorporating issues that are important to black women. This notion thus takes into account Alice Walker’s metaphoric use of *the garden* where room exists for all flowers to bloom equally and differently. *The garden* metaphor shows that differences within the very discourse of feminism cannot and should not be sidestepped. Feminists should find ways that allow for these differences to materialize and be addressed. To this end, employing womanism as a discourse of resistance is an appropriate strategy for taking into account the many forms that injustice and inequality take on individuals and groups that are outside of the recognizable norms. It allows for an analysis, which demonstrates that womanism is not limited to black women’s concerns but can open up a space where black men, for example, as Pinder writes “can work to empower themselves in feminist solidarity” and broaden the concept to embrace the concerns of all people. The need to situate black women’s inequality within the larger framework of black political thought becomes overriding.

Given that whiteness is the norm and white women are not positioned outside of whiteness, white privilege, as Pinder points out, might propel white women to “define and shape what feminist concerns should be and guide the development of feminist goals.” If a broad feminist agenda is to be reimaged, white women would have to unlearn their privilege, which, in itself, constitutes a double recognition—that is, white women gaining a certain kind of “other knowledge” not merely information that they have not yet acknowledged or received, but knowledge that they are not equipped to value.<sup>20</sup> This is symptomatic of how white women are positioned as a part of America’s cultural norm defined by whiteness. Hence, unlearning dominant systems of knowledge and representation, which, for the postcolonial theorist Gayatri C. Spivak is a “transformation of consciousness – a

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<sup>20</sup>Gayatri C. Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 4.