

## Equality as Ethical Praxis and the Struggle for Justice

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Thank you Ms. President and Professor Hytten for the invitation to respond to this year's Distinguished Invited Essay. Thank you Professor Lebron for challenging us to leverage our imagination toward future social practices premised upon and imbued with a *sense* of racial equality—with an open attentiveness—and also premised upon a *sensibility* of racial equality that makes us responsible to reason and compassionate toward the suffering that continues to be endured under a regime of racial inequality.

I offer additional acknowledgements and appreciations for standing on the land of the Powhatan, of Pocahontas herself. I remember her and her people, who endure here today among the eight 'recognized' tribes still in Virginia, who must live among the ghosts that continue to haunt these and other places, these and other times.<sup>1</sup> I thank the Native peoples whose land we all now share; I thank the land itself, whose life our own depends upon and to which we return at our end of days.

I remember here too Richmond's Shockoe Bottom and the lives auctioned away for the wealth of Europeans, settlers, and our nation itself, lives still haunting the land now being gentrified and whitewashed.<sup>2</sup> The racism of the bloodstained face of Richmond's history infects the souls not only of Confederate revivalists and folks like the 'black-faced' white liberals currently leading Virginia, but of blacks and people of color who must contend daily with the erased histories not only of the lives lost to suffering but of the lives of meaning and love that populate the memories of black families that survive.<sup>3</sup> The same bodies forced to absorb the full range of daily microaggressions and the intensive violence of the lethal blows of state-sanctioned police murder are made to contend with the pervasive slow violence of environmental degradation, of food deserts, poisoned water supplies, and unsustainable built environments, the slow violence and daily traumas of

racism.<sup>4</sup> In remembrance of all this, I thank the laborers of those generations and their descendants whose exploitation then and now enables my own privileged vantage point.

Finally, I thank all of you for walking the path of these reflections with me. This article will hopefully be thinking with rather than against the main points of Professor Lebron's argument, and though I will raise some concerns and cautions I will mostly point toward what I hope will be some fruitful directions for him.

First, I appreciate and welcome Professor Lebron's embrace of the pragmatic tradition and non-ideal theory to grapple with the phenomenology of inequality and racism. I agree that our lived condition of pervasive historical and ongoing inequality (race, class, gender, religion) puts the lie to the democratic promise of respect for the dignity and rights of all since so many have for so long been systematically deprived of due care, acknowledgment, and recognition as equal members of the community. I believe it is the way that this history is sedimented into our bodies and perceptions, the way it orders everyday life, disciplining our actions, conceptions, emotions, and the regimes of truth through which we live, that makes it incredibly difficult to experience equality across racial differences.<sup>5</sup> This is why our sense of equality is adumbrated against our experiences of inequality, of being treated with disrespect and unfairly. Professor Lebron argues that if we are to have an experience of equality that a 'certain manner of attentiveness' and 'set of skills' must be acquired for residents in our communities (and not only citizens I would add) to form the bonds of cooperation and relations needed for a democratic society to come into being.

Professor Lebron's foundational claim is that blacks do not come into view for most (white) people as worthy of full human recognition, that is, as persons in possession of human vulnerabilities that require ethical and emotional responses, and in possession of warrants to rights that demand respect and demand our responsible action. Yet despite the persistent history of marginalization and indifference, the moral urgency of racism (racial inequality) "cannot be gleaned any other way than by understanding what racial

inequality does to black Americans, the force with which it does it, and the range of responses it generates that typically fall from view in analytic liberal theory: despair, hope, rage, ambivalence, alienation, indignation, melancholy, and so on.”<sup>6</sup> Professor Lebron argues that acts of imagination and skilled attention can make connections across this gap for those who typically fail to see blacks as proper recipients of the respect that is fundamental to equality.

As Professor Lebron puts it: “When we are attentive we provide the imagination range to sense the more difficult aspects of others’ lives under inequality; when we are skilled we deploy a finer sensibility in taking the proper ethical stance towards others’ experiential difficulties under a regime of racial inequality.”<sup>7</sup> To establish a framework for re-approaching the problem of racial inequality in this way, Professor Lebron analyzes the discursive dynamic or transaction between a person making a claim of equality and her interlocutor, and he provides three schematic pairs of concepts meant as a “foundation, though not full accounting, of the necessary skills” needed for the interlocutor to respond to ethical challenges raised in the claim.<sup>8</sup> Claims to equality are offered with reasons of various sorts, and Professor Lebron suggests we have a moral duty to be “properly receptive” to those reasons (I note in passing that much is unspecified here by Lebron, both in terms of what can count as a reason and what it means to be ‘properly’ receptive), and this receptivity can enable us to become responsible to the claim and to feel compassion for the pain caused by the injustice of the inequality. “[E]quality demands that claims be assessed and responded to by imagining what it is like to be the person making claims.”<sup>9</sup>

This relational connection between the interlocutors can happen only when they both are engaging in the same kind of language game. In thinking of this exchange about in/equality, Professor Lebron pursues what I think is a limited example of a basketball game, which like Rawls’ original position, seems to be located nowhere at all and seems to be being played by no one in particular at all. I want to suggest that this analogy doesn’t work because to know something of this game, we need to ask, where is this game being played? When is it being played? What are the ages, genders, and races

of the players? Are they playing by general rules of the game, or by the home court rules (e.g., winners' or losers' outs)? Who are the referees? Moreover, the game of basketball is a bounded competition, with one winner, and players attempt to deceive, misdirect, and otherwise confuse their opponent and prevent them from playing their best game. I think this is not a model for the unbounded dynamic of democracy, nor for ethical relations, and I would urge him to find a different example. And while I am also not enamored of his second example of black Darryl's recounting of his racially profiled police stop to his white colleague, I won't say more about either analogy here. What Professor Lebron is after is a way to think about the black experience of spatial and temporal racism—"democratic distance" and "democratic disaffection"—and about the skills that whites need to be able to hear and respond to blacks' claims in these regards. Professor Lebron offers three loosely paired skill sets that whites need to undergird their imaginative engagement with the black experience of in/equality, and for each pair, I will suggest some extensions or considerations.

The two parallel sets—narrative, reasons, and affect, paired with receptivity, responsibility, and compassion—are meant to outline the kind of developed habits that rely on deft handling and sensitivity to context and others that Professor Lebron regards as necessary to generate a dialogue on racial in/equality.

I think it has to be noted that for whites in general to be able to be receptive to the stories or narratives of blacks and others who have been treated unjustly, to be open in this way, is already a very significant achievement. Openness requires us to attend to the complexity of our lives and identities, to our extensive relations to a wider moral community that not only includes all other persons but all other living beings, the air, water, and land itself. It requires us to know the tangled roots of our past and the hauntings of the present. It requires us to grasp our own intersectionality and plural selves and their bearing on our understanding in general. It requires us to face the complexity of the fact and irreducibility of moral pluralism, that moral outlooks and guidance on the good and right are more akin to

the diversity of natural languages without direct inter-translations and no final ordering principle.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it even requires us to grasp that schooling's ranking and sorting regimes are deeply implicated in the shaping of the "common sense" logics of meritocracy (that our performance in the limited measures of school warrants our merit in general which in turn warrants our access to opportunities outside of school), of deficit (that school measures and outcomes reflect intelligence, morality, and character, and shortfalls on standards reflect individual and familial flaws), and scarcity (that social goods and opportunities are limited and to be distributed through competitions so outcome inequalities reflect the survival of the fittest), that these school logics themselves help organize and reinforce racial inequality.<sup>11</sup>

This complexity that must be understood in order to hear and respond across racial differences is further complicated by the fact that neither we nor our situations are fully transparent to ourselves, nor can they ever be, and so there are always levels of opaqueness in our knowing, feeling, and being with others. Only attentive to this complexity can we begin to forge an openness and spaces wherein we might engage the other as ourselves, as our equal. Only resistant to the common sense that makes the racial order seem self-explanatory and reasonable can we engage the other with receptivity; we have to actively refuse the dominant orders and their pervasive manifestations not to be continually overrun by them.

Only through an active anti-schooling and anti-common sense set of skilled habits can we be open to discover deeper layers of truth in ourselves and others. A kind of ideological psychoanalytic healing needs to take place to work our way through self-deception, through dominant ideological distortions. This means we must become vulnerable to unexpected truths about ourselves and others. The challenge of this vulnerability falls unevenly on us, based on race, gender, and class. Some must risk more than others to find their way to being able to hear the stories of the innocent suffering of others, to remember stories long repressed, to stand openly in common spaces to receive and be receptive to others.

Professor Lebron is right, I agree, to highlight the sense and sensibility of affect, of compassion in his argument; I think it is essential precisely in this context of complexity, of fraught openness, in the effort to receptively hear with heart. I would suggest that in this domain, we need to attend to how uncertainty pervades our connections with others, how tenuous and in need of constant renegotiation and reestablishment our connections are. Even in our most receptive mode we would be arrogant to think that we can fully receive or know the other, and to imagine otherwise would be disrespectful, I believe. Our compassion will always be forced to stop at the dignity and incommensurability of the other, at the vast self at the center of its own projects. Every situation and connection with someone/thing else has unfathomable layers of meaning—facts themselves bear the limits of their historicity. The impacts of our words, gestures, silences, and actions reach beyond our understanding. The moral demands of the haunted landscapes of our lives reach from the most intimate and sacred places to the most profane and public spaces of our lives, and from the moment of our waking to that of our going to sleep. So our compassion must be internally directed, toward ourselves, calling us toward transformative healing, toward recognition of our incompleteness and shortcomings without loosening our resolve to struggle on. Our compassion must also be outwardly directed, toward those with whom we share this situation, however differently, calling us toward transformative solidarity.

For his foundation of racial equality, Professor Lebron also calls us to skillfully attend to reasons and to the responsibilities and demands made by the force of their logic. Here I worry about the scope of the types of ‘reasons’ that bear on us as we seek to enact justice and forge equality, however imperfectly. We must be certain that the ‘cry of the heart’ is sufficient to elicit responsibility, in both the sense of being able to respond with compassion (the kind of skilled receptivity discussed earlier) and in the sense of responding to the call of duty with action.<sup>12</sup> I want to invoke a further demand, one to insure that responsibility extends to accountability. To whom are we responsible? When and where are we responsible? How are we responsible?

These are questions that draw us toward accountability, toward public examination of our efforts to become more and more responsible for the historic task of transforming racism (and other forms of oppression).

Public responsibility and accountability can only occur in communities of practice that have made a commitment to struggle to transform the colonial-racist situations that endure into the present.<sup>13</sup> Where are such communities? Certainly we find these communities within movements for social justice and the multiple articulated spaces of gathering wherein people strategize how to transform their lives, then endeavor to enact their vision of limit-breaking changes, and then subject their new situation in turn to its own cycle of critique and change. Where are these communities today? What will help form these communities where they do not now exist? What are the existential encounters and practices that can awaken us from the everyday sleepwalking of our lives, pull us up short to see ourselves and our situation within new horizons, and draw us into the sustained commitment needed both to know and imagine otherwise and also to persist in the effort to remake everyday life despite the enormity of the task and the relentlessness of the push back to maintain the status quo?<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, I think we should question strategies meant to elicit shame or guilt. Just as no world historical social justice movement has grown from the Alinsky approach to community organizing (first “rub raw the sores of humanity” to provoke anger-generated energy to build relational power that can achieve near-term winnable goals), I think it is unlikely that a movement can be generated from shame or guilt. These are more likely to induce hiding, withdrawal, or a turning away from the moral breach. Although ethical breaches may draw our attention, they do not necessarily elicit our intention. Movements build from and engender critical hope and imagined futures that are not unrealizable utopia but are rather feasible dreams that lay out next steps for bringing into being today the reality desired for tomorrow.<sup>15</sup>

To change ourselves and the world around us takes struggle, determination, love of others and ourselves. The praxis of ethical movements wields coercive force not because we fall short (which is necessarily the case)

and call ourselves to account, but because we are moved into, and sustained within, struggles for justice because of our love for ourselves and others, our children and grandchildren, our sisters and brothers, our parents and grandparents. It is the truth of the experiences of love and equality that have resisted all colonial and racist efforts to erase them that provides the kind of transformative hermeneutic that is needed in the methodology of the oppressed.<sup>16</sup>

Like Professor Lebron, I seek a philosophy of moral agency that is grounded not in a monadic one, but in a relational many, in an expansive and inclusive moral community that speaks not in a monologue, but rather in polyphonic dialogue. As he said, “Our moral principles have the force they do because of the practices and relationships in which we find ourselves engaged.”<sup>17</sup> The challenge for us is to forge such moral communities of practice in all of our spheres of activity—in academe; in our mosques, synagogues, and churches; in our union halls; in our community and neighborhood organizations. These must be communities of practice that do not aim to recuperate the ethicality of whites or aim for some kind of moral purity that is impossible and that elides moral responsibility.<sup>18</sup> These must be forms of community that accept and take ownership of all the injustices that plague it. I am reminded of a prayer in my tradition that is said aloud by the entire community on the most holy day of the year, a prayer in which we each take responsibility for whatever injustices, crimes, or immoralities exist in the community as a whole and speak it aloud as our own: *I have lied; I have stolen; I have murdered; I am racist; I am sexist; etc.* When we each become accountable to the other for the injustices into which we have been thrown, when we create communities that support one another to heal and change ourselves and our situations, we can embark on a journey toward equality as an ethical collective praxis. This is not all grim and disheartening since it is inspired by love and solidarity. When looking to what we need, Professor Lebron invoked Elise Springer’s moral responsiveness—the “social dance — or struggle, or conversation—of mutual transformation” that is at the core of remaking ourselves and our world.<sup>19</sup> It is in this space of movement that



our hope lies, so, let's dance ...

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1 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

2 Ibid.

3 Barbara J. Fields and Karen Elise Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2012).

4 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965).

6 Chris Lebron, "The Sense and Sensibility of Equality," *Philosophy of Education* 2019, ed. Kurt Stembhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

11 Jeannie Oakes, John Rogers, and Martin Lipton, *Learning Power: Organizing for Education and Justice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

12 Simone Weil, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, in *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 1986).

13 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

14 Maxine Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018); Deborah Kerdeman, "Pulled Up Short: Exposing White Privilege," *Philosophy of Education* 2017 ed. Ann Chinnery (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019): 1–18; Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race Gender and Implicit Understanding* (State College: Penn State University Press, 2011).

15 Ronald David Glass, "Critical Hope and Struggles for Justice: An Antidote to Despair for Antiracism Educators," in *Discerning Critical Hope in Educational Practices*, eds. Vivienne Bozalek, Brenda Leibowitz, Ronelle Carolissen, and Megan Boler (New York: Routledge, 2014), 101–112.

16 Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

17 Lebron, "The Sense and Sensibility of Equality."

18 Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

19 Lebron, "The Sense and Sensibility of Equality."