

Philosophy and Its Discontents,
or How Strange Fruit Became Familiar

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Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black Bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop¹

After Trayvon (February 2012), wait, no, during Ferguson (August 2014), I knew for sure I was basking in my own ignorance. Of course I was steeped in the news reports of the days and nights. I had worked with students on challenging the relationship between the police and the Black students in our racially and economically stratified and segregated city. I had met with our

Black police chief, and made employment and training decisions about how to “cure” our gun-carrying campus “peace” officers of the resentment caused when the higher ups demanded that they stop racial profiling and doing the shit that they had normalized throughout their careers in other jurisdictions.

I tried, and spectacularly failed, to get my new bosses and old colleagues to understand that students coming back to campus after the summer of 2014 would be in no mood for being stopped for driving, walking, or living while Black. They come from everywhere those students – tough neighborhoods in the Bronx, or tony suburbs outside of D.C. or anywhere they can come from. Everywhere that summer, their parents, their friends, their extended family – in church, at home, in the barbershop – were talking about the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown. I knew for sure that those students would need a sign that our campus was not swimming in white ignorance. Instead, all the signs pointed in the wrong directions.

Then, all of a sudden, Tamir (November 2014), and I wasn’t just sad or upset or even outraged. I was conscious of being *enraged*. And that’s how I knew for once and for all that I would neither understand nor quench that rage before I was consumed if I did not confront my own ignorance and figure out where the “knowing” I had relied on had let me down.

I want to thank Georgia Warnke for her elegant and deep essay. I resonate with the framing she brings to the challenge of enlarging historical understanding in a context of willed ignorance of the past, present, and likely future. She draws some terrific examples of the erasures that live in the disputes of historians in the U.S. and in Europe in the face of histories and responsibilities that are somehow too painful to be enshrined in reality – and ought to be a gift of “positive” self-regard. She ends the first section of her essay by setting up an alternative route through history – an alternative both to taking refuge in “exceptionalist historical memory” and to demanding residency in Mills’s “realist” framework. She turns our attention to both truth and method.

As someone who has constructed a philosophic identity around being a hermeneutic, I could feel myself being seduced by the familiar. But I am

not the same as I was even five years ago.

Every thing must change/Nothing stays the same/Everyone
will change/No one, no one stays the same/The young be-
come the old/And mysteries do unfold/For that's the way of
time/No one, and nothing goes unchanged/There are not
many things in life one can be sure of/Except rain comes
from the clouds/Sun lights up the sky/Hummingbirds fly/
Winter turns to spring/A wounded heart will heal/Oh, but
never much too soon²

I was brought up to have faith in that change. Baldwin, while maintaining a belief in American progress, seems in various writings to have scant faith in the majority of adults – who have bathed in the polluted waters of American history. That history has distorted the world and the worldview of most Whites and many Negroes. It has created and sustained a theology of White supremacy, based on fear and self-loathing in Whites and an inverted perspective in the Negro that keeps him from being free. Baldwin sees the light of possibility in the students he meets (and in the adults who live up to their aspirations, often at great cost to them and their families). This spirit of perverse optimism was part of my parents' generation. They were in their 30s in the early to mid-1960s and were active in pursuing change on behalf of their young children and the broader society. They did not teach us that our lives were the result of a criminal conspiracy to destroy us but that a constant and unrelenting press to change the world was underway and we were both participants and beneficiaries. They had every reason to know every nasty outcome of U.S. history. They each grew up in segregation and, if not in bone-grinding poverty, in homes in which making do and making more out of less was standard. They knew the pre-integration military and schooling. Neither of them were the first child in their families to go to college, but they were each the first to attend predominately white graduate schools in the North. There they met – down Eighth Avenue from Baldwin's Harlem. When they became parents, first in Greensboro, North Carolina – where they knew first-hand the consequences of questioning (and seeking to change) the “natural

order” – then in Pennsylvania – where the narrative was markedly different, but their role as the first Negro neighbors was no less revolutionary (though quite glossed with the politics of respectability) – they might well have been following the Baldwin primer.

The society into which American Negro children are born has always presented a particular challenge to Negro parents. This society makes it necessary that they establish in the child a force that will cause him to know that the world’s definition of his place and the means used by the world to make this definition binding are not, for a moment to be respected Now this is a cruel challenge, for the force of the world is immense. That is why the vow *My children won’t come like I came* is nothing less than a declaration of war, a declaration that has led to innumerable casualties.³

We were taught not to believe in any way that we were any approximation of the N-word. That invective was a symptom of mental problems in the speaker, a vocalization of that person’s inversion of feelings of inferiority. My brother and I believed firmly that our parents lived in that past, were prevented by that past from knowing the world we inhabited in the ‘70s and ‘80s – although, of course, knowing the history we had been taught [*not* in school by the way] we perfectly understood them and their limitations. They relied on white kinship and allyship through the marches and the churches and the teacher’s unions and the ecumenical Seders, but they were not nearly as ignorant as they made out to be – out of nothing more than faith and profound love.

I believe that negative experiences can cause us to think, to revise our understandings. But if I have ever been tempted to rely on fallibilism and openness to change, I am living in more fear now that philosophy cannot save me or rehabilitate me [or you] any more than an openness to history can. If I cannot, conscious, save myself through my best tools, how can I wait patiently for the surprise of experience to break through your privilege? Can I rest on the belief that openness for you has the same stakes for you as for me? It does not seem to me that the inevitable outcome of understanding the finitude

of our understanding necessarily leads out of the comforts of narratives of exceptionalism or moral displacement. And the consequences for different forms of ignorance are making my veins pulse.

Frederick Douglass [that same man who has “done an amazing job and is getting recognized more and more”⁴] in his famous 1852 Fourth of July Address, after praising the works of the Fathers of the American Revolution, takes a sharp turn in his analysis of history.

My subject, then, fellow citizens is American slavery America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future But I fancy I hear some one of my audience say “Would you argue more, and denounce less; would you persuade more, and rebuke less; your cause would be much more likely to succeed.” But I submit, where all is plain, there is nothing to be argued [Should I argue] that the slave is a man? Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? To do so, would be to make myself ridiculous and to offer an insult to your understanding What, then, remains to be argued? For it is not light that is needed but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.⁵

Douglass loses that rhetoric of fire and thunder to expose the inconsistencies and hypocrisies in the celebration of the quest for freedom and equality, memorialized in the Declaration of Independence and in the opening of the Constitution at the same time as the Fugitive Slave Act obliterated even the geographic markers of slave and non-slave states. He incants against the hypocrisy of the Christian churches and that of a government that denounces abuses only in other countries. He understood that ignorance is not exploded simply by argument but by cataclysm.

Reparations that are monetary and encased in a belief that what is done is done cannot be reparative. In 1988 the Senate voted to compensate and

apologize to Japanese Americans sent to internment camps. Senator Simpson (R-WY) who voted for the measure noted that while the apology was overdue, payment “takes away some of the sincerity,” while Jesse Helms (R-NC) sought to couple payment to internees to payment to survivors of servicemen killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁶ As repugnant as segregationist Helms might be, he is a moral reminder that the “slip and fall” experience posed by Warnke can be a catalyst for new misapprehensions – of the causes and consequences of our errors. I can, even in the moment when my smooth path throws me for a loop, elude confrontation with my own experience, and even more so that of the “other” whose experience continues to be strange and estranged. We must recognize that the past is not purchased, when we find new “aliens” at every imagined border since January 2017.

When a woman you work with calls you by the name of another woman you work with, it is too much of a cliché not to laugh out loud with the friend beside you who says, oh no she didn't. Still, in the end, so what, who cares? She had a fifty-fifty chance of getting it right.

Yes, and in your mail the apology note appears referring to “our mistake.” Apparently your own invisibility is the real problem causing her confusion. This is how the apparatus she propels you into begins to multiply its meaning.

What did you say?⁷

In the new Raoul Peck documentary, “I Am Not Your Negro,” James Baldwin is offering a perspective from after the assassinations of his three friends, Medgar Evers (1963), Malcolm X (1965), and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968). In one segment that is interspersed throughout the film, Dick Cavett asks him about where we are in resolving “The Negro Problem.” Baldwin is clear that America does not have a “Negro” problem but an “American” problem. The conditions under which Black Americans live, on his account, should be taken as a signal case in unraveling the disconnection of American history from self-deception and immolation. Any concessions to delicacy

lead to the danger of satisfaction with the creeping progress that itself adds pretty layers of icing onto crap cake. The consequences of White supremacy are soul destroying for every person who finds comfort in the simulacrum of #AllLivesMatter. What happens to the person who wears slaveship/middle passage as a graphic on a cute mini or conflates lives sold into slavery in the Americas as “other immigrants who came here in the bottom of slave ships, worked even longer, even harder for less. But they too had a dream that one day their sons, daughters, grandsons, granddaughters, great-grandsons, great-granddaughters, might pursue prosperity and happiness in this land.”⁸ What kind of ignorance kills? Reinterpreting our understandings is necessary but not sufficient. Arguments against those misunderstandings are not enough. The possible results of the shock of the metaphorical falling are not enough to guarantee engaged struggle that might encourage those who suffer those insufficiencies through Body, Bone, and Blood. The changes sought in our moral and historical compositions are worth seeking and struggling with, even when we do not advance as fast or as far as we have worked to achieve. There is danger in the seeking but ever more danger in the stopping.

Don't touch my hair/when it's the feelings I wear/don't
touch my soul/When it's the rhythm I know/Don't touch my
crown/They say the vision I've found/Don't touch what's
there/When it's the feelings I wear/ They don't understand/
What it means to me/where we chose to go/Where we've
been to know⁹

1 Written as a poem by teacher Abel Meeropol (White, Jew, Communist, adoptive father of the sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg) in 1937. First recorded by Billie Holiday on Vocation Records in 1939.

2 “Everything Must Change,” written by Bernard Ighner and released by Quincy Jones in 1974.

3 James Baldwin, “They Can't Turn Back,” in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison. (NY: Literary Classics, Penguin Putnam, 1998) 622-37.

4 See e.g. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/frederick-douglass-trump/515292/>

5 The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro, given at Rochester New York, July 5, 1852.

6 “Senate Votes to Compensate Japanese-American Internees,” New York Times, April 21, 1988. Last accessed at www.newyorktimes.com/1988/04/21/senate-votes-to-compensate-japanese-american-internees.html

7 Claudine Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014), 43.

8 “Ben Carson Just Referred to Slaves as Immigrants,” USA Today. Accessed <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/03/06/ben-carson-calls-slaves-immigrants/98816752/>

9 Sampha Sisay, Solange Knowles, Jonathan Patrick Wimberly, and David Andrew Sitek, “Don’t Touch My Hair,” from *A Seat at the Table, Solange* (Columbia Records, 2016).