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AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

Accessibility and Alienation in *Race and the American Story*

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Race and the American Story
By Stephanie Shonekan and Adam Seagrave. Oxford University Press, 2024. 196 pp. $99.00 cloth, $27.95 paper

Race and the American Story (2024) offers a candid examination of evolving Black and white race relations in the United States. Shonekan and Seagrave's honesty about race is eye-opening and sobering. Their authentic personal narratives are interspersed among excellent scholarly analysis. This combination of scholarship and personal insight serves to remind us that racism is not just a salient talking point in today's highly polarized world or in our academic texts; racism is a palpable reality and a lived experience for all of us, even if we exist in a "colorblind spot."[1]

This book was a product of Shonekan and Seagrave's joint efforts at the University of Missouri (Mizzou) in 2015 to create a class that addressed the escalating racial tensions on the Mizzou campus and across the nation. In the original class, music, personal narratives, and a pursuit of common ground were pivotal elements, and these elements feature prominently in the book. The authors use their own voices throughout the book to discuss their personal experiences, including their discoveries of their racial identities. For Shonekan, this was a visible and consistent experience, while Seagrave instead existed in a "colorblind spot" (chapter 1). The book points out that systemic racism and white privilege come

from both overt and complicit racism (chapter 2), and often white Americans live in "ignore-ance" of these pressing Black issues (chapter 3). The book underscores the importance of moving forward with empathy and love as we try to bridge these gaps (chapter 4).

The fifth and final chapter offers the greatest contribution of the book. Here the authors rework two commonly held narratives of the American story. On the one hand, the Mount Rushmore narrative pushes us toward a blind celebration of the American story. On the other hand, the Untold Story narrative pushes us toward a blind contradiction of the American story. The book offers a new narrative, the Human Freedom narrative, that recognizes both the celebratory gains of freedom and the real denials of freedom that run concurrently in the American story.

Accessibility and Antiracism

The most striking feature of this book is that it is extraordinarily accessible to any reader. It reads less like an academic text and more like a conversation with a friend. Shonekan shares deeply personal experiences of racism, while Seagrave shares confessionals about his own complicity in perpetuating racism. These personal stories are heartbreaking and gut-wrenching but express real and relatable emotional experiences. I appreciate the book's use of freedom in framing the American story, again capitalizing on relatability. Freedom is a virtually universal desire among human beings and is an important catalyst for popular antiracist work. Indeed, the book notes that this accessibility was always important to the initial Race and the American Story project, mentioning that family members of presenters and faculty are even welcome to join the conversation at official events (116). The book's broad message appeals to a popular audience, inviting everyone to engage in honest and productive discussions about the impact of race in the United States.

This sense of welcoming in the book is also flecked with hope. The book invites us into the fold but also challenges us in impactful ways as we consider our role in the community. Everyone who

reads this book should be slightly unsettled. Those who cling to the Mount Rushmore narrative should have their heroes thrown from their pedestals. Those who embrace the Untold Story narrative should abandon a solely contradictory narrative of the United States. But everyone should put this book down with a feeling of hope. The fact that we are at a racial reckoning is not proof of a stolid and unchanging nation. It means we are finally unearthing these issues and reckoning with our reality. The hope is that these challenges will lead to greater unity.

Religion, Empathy, and Antiracism

My greatest praise for the book is its relatability, but my critique comes from a thread of argumentation that I found alienating: the book's advocacy for religion as a tool of antiracism. The book mentions this specifically in two places.

First, in chapter 3, the authors cite three ways to build connection and achieve social justice:

1. proximity to injustice "which makes ignoring injustice uncomfortable";
2. religion, "which can inspire direct empathy"; and
3. self-interest, which "can lead to a facsimile of empathy." (66)

For this third path to connection, the authors use Abraham Lincoln's argument against slavery as evidence. Lincoln warns against racially based enslavement, noting that such an arbitrary justification for enslavement could potentially justify the oppression or enslavement of anyone. To prevent one's own potential enslavement, one cannot logically support racially based slavery, since the arbitrary standards for enslavement might incidentally apply to oneself (64–65).

The book is fairly clear about which of these three paths to common ground is the most effective. The first option, proximity to injustice, "is an effective route but can be avoided or excused by social segregation or simply turning a blind eye" (66). The third option, self-interest, is "sometimes good enough from a practical

social perspective" (66). The second option, religion, however, is described as "a route taken by many abolitionist leaders and continues to be influential for some religious leaders today" (66).

The second instance of advocacy for religion comes in chapter 4. Here, the book appeals to Martin Luther King Jr.'s view of *agape*, a redemptive Christian love that encourages fellowship with others. The authors argue that "only religion is capable of the kind of extreme perspective shift necessary to incentivize" this sort of love for others (112). People see themselves as "children of God, as a part of Creation in common relationship with the Creator" (112). This Christian love facilitates a level of creativity that is necessary for antiracist work. The book states, "[O]ne thing genuine religion does is open up a new perspective on life. It suggests the possibility that there is an entire reality parallel to the mundane, physical one that we normally experience" (113). Christian love allows us to transcend the physical and see a utopian world without these racial divisions.

The Case for Secular Empathy

My initial reaction on reading this was "Oh no, am I a second-rate antiracist because I'm not a Christian?" I certainly concede, as the book argues, that this type of Christian love can indeed be an effective way to cultivate empathy and bolster antiracist work. However, I argue that antiracist work must account for the plurality of beliefs among dedicated antiracists and potential antiracists and offer tools to cultivate empathy that are more universally accessible.

As a point of context, I am both an atheist and an antiracist. But I am very familiar with the specifically Catholic perspective on religion and love presented in the book; I was raised Catholic, attended Catholic school from primary school to high school (even an all-girls high school), and currently am a faculty member at the only historically Black Catholic university in the United States. However, my journey as an antiracist coincided with my growth as an atheist, which began in college when I was around eighteen (exasperatingly cliché, I know). Consequently, I disagree with the book's assertion in chapter 4 that "only religion is capable of the

kind of extreme perspective shift necessary" to build empathy and common ground (112).

I draw from Frederick Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to support this point.[2] When we shed ourselves of what Nietzsche calls Christian morality, we begin to question the values of the world around us. Thus one becomes this questioning Übermensch—the overman—who interrogates what is normatively considered right and moral and will seek out new values motivated by a love of the world and a desire to better humanity. Very specifically for Nietzsche, the Übermensch develops these values of love for the world independent of religion. The Übermensch's questioning mentality operates much like the self-interested person outlined in Lincoln's argument. It takes an Übermensch mentality to assess a ubiquitous system of racial oppression and question its normative value. This can then prompt a secular empathy that can goad one toward antiracist work. I found my own journey to be one characteristic of the Übermensch. I left religion, questioned long-established values, and found empathy. My interest in antiracism then began.

I am certainly not saying that antiracism must be devoid of religion. Nor am I arguing that Nietzsche's Übermensch is the ideal model for antiracist work (the concept has had a complicated relationship with race since it was co-opted by the German Nazi regime after Nietzsche's death). The point I am making is that valid and true empathy is not just causally related to religion. Instead, it takes an Übermensch-like questioning mentality that can manifest regardless of one's religious belief.

Further proof of this point is that religion also has the capacity to diminish empathy. Shonekan and Seagrave even admits as much, noting that "[t]hroughout world history, faith has caused the most horrific events and the most compassionate interventions" (17). Chapter 3 highlights that Christianity has also aligned itself with overt racism, a position critiqued directly by Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. (67). In chapter 4, the authors acknowledge that "religion can be used by human beings to attain selfish ends" or in "self-serving ways to justify oppression and injustice" (112–13). However, they claim that "Christians such as these

betray the true Christian message. True Christian conviction is built on truth and love," and "genuine religion inspires conversion and transformation" (113).

But a rabidly racist white Christian nationalist is unlikely to say his religious convictions are not genuine. His racist religion is just as genuine to him as is one's belief in a kinder, more inclusive religion to oneself. It is not religious conviction that separates these two types of people but rather that the antiracist Christian is willing to take on an Übermensch mentality and question the normative value of racist institutions.

Religion, I argue, is not a prerequisite for antiracist empathy. The book's language is rather pointed in stating that religious empathy is the only form of empathy; self-interested empathy is described as a facsimile of empathy. However, an exact copy of religious empathy is still just empathy. And I argue that this self-interested empathy is a more fundamental empathy than religious empathy because it is a universally understood rule that stands up even against the plurality of religious belief. Even Christianity accounts for it with the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I argue that a more enduring tool for antiracism comes from an advocacy of secular empathy with a universal appeal.

I do want to be exceptionally clear: my argument for secular self-interest is not a condemnation of religiously motivated antiracist work. I agree with the authors that Christianity has been and remains a powerful cultivator of empathy for antiracist work. However, the implication that Christian empathy is preferable to other empathetic motivations alienates and devalues the work of non-Christian antiracists.

The Case for Rage

My second critique revolves around the specific Christian perspective here that urges us, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, "to love the person who does the evil deed" (112). The book emphasizes this enduring Christian love that persists even when faced with beatings, insults, or cruel ostracization (112). It encourages seeing

the face of God in every human being, even one's enemies (113). This implies, for Black Americans, that they should love their oppressors despite a historical denial of freedom.

While this approach may offer individual psychological benefits by promoting hopeful love over anger, I align more with Myisha Cherry's perspective and make a case for rage.[3] First, encouraging love for one's oppressors disregards very real and valid feelings of anger resulting from centuries of white dominance that has denied Black Americans their political and social freedom. I find it unlikely that after enduring centuries of mistreatment, many Black Americans can respond with love rather than anger at the thought of their ongoing deprivation of freedom.

Second, the implication of loving one's enemies in pursuit of freedom means that Black Americans must take a fairly risky gamble. They must accept the diminishment of their freedom through abuse, insults, and ostracization from white America in the hope that this display of martyrdom is so moving that white Americans change their mind about treating Black people so poorly. Leading with love asks Black Americans to take the risk that white Americans will see love as a powerful enough reason to dismantle systemic racism. Love can certainly be a powerful and transformative force, but only when it is a reciprocal exchange. If white Americans do not accept or acknowledge this love from Black Americans, they will not be compelled to dismantle systemic racism. Love is too contingent on both parties meeting each other in good faith. The American story reveals several instances of bad faith promises from white America that still persist today. Why would the exchange of love be any different?

Systemic racism and the unfreedom that accompanies it can be definitively addressed only when white Americans are forced out of their "colorblind spot" with intent, not just a risky gamble on love. Consequently, I argue again that self-interest provides a more suitable foundation to demand freedom forcefully without descending into unproductive vengeance. Malcolm X's example is instructive here. Malcolm X is mentioned in the book as an integral part of the Race and the American Story curriculum, so I find him especially

relevant. His Islamic antiracism did not advocate seeing the face of God in enemies; instead, it focused on self-love, self-respect, and self-empowerment—in other words, self-interest. He demanded respect for oneself, not love for the oppressor.

A logic of self-interest restores the dignity of Black Americans better than a logic of love. Self-interested persons will not endure further abuse and reduce their freedom in the hope of achieving a bigger payout of freedom. However, they will simultaneously recognize that their own disdain for unfreedom is similarly a disdain shared by all; freedom is a universal desire. Consequently, these self-interested persons will not seek their freedom vengefully but will lead with tempered self-interest. Leading with self-interest and self-respect for the Black antiracist offers a more stable foundation for finding common ground than relying solely on Christian love. The goal is not to love their oppressors but to educate them, not through loving concessions but through firm resistance against their inhumanity.

Conclusion

I want to emphasize again that it is not my intention to condemn religion in antiracist work. As a self-interested atheist, I would certainly consider it an imposition if someone tried to disabuse me of my own (lack of) religious convictions. As such, I would not impose in this manner on anyone else. Instead, I offer this critique in an effort to optimize the impact of antiracist efforts and make them more accessible to a general audience, especially considering the diverse range of beliefs among people. In this context, self-interest appears to offer a practical path forward for antiracist work.

Despite the occasional narrow religious focus, I still find the book to be remarkably accessible on many levels. I recommend it highly, since it is useful to several different audiences. Just as Shonekan and Seagrave operate as an interdisciplinary team, this book possesses interdisciplinary appeal. The framework from the Human Freedom narrative is valuable for a variety of academic disciplines and can prompt us to reevaluate both our teaching

methods and our research priorities within this Human Freedom narrative. This work is equally relevant for our students, who can challenge their educators to engage with these topics just as Seagrave's students challenged him (chapter 3). Finally, the book's approachable language and compelling storytelling make it relevant to a broader popular audience outside the academy.

At its core, the project is deeply rooted in community engagement. The book concludes with a vignette detailing how the authors shared the original Race and the American Story syllabus with a local Missouri book club. The locals (older) were invited to join a classroom conversation with University of Missouri students (younger) in which both groups engaged in "candid and generative conversation" (161), one that bridged generational gaps. *Race and the American Story* maintains the same ethos of community engagement that was so prominent in the original Mizzou course. This book not only ignites a sense of community but also implores readers to actively cultivate connections within their own communities, whether in hometowns, academic circles, or other frequented spaces. Our personal connection and relationships with one another lay the necessary foundation for meaningful and constructive discourse on race.

A Comment on Shonekan and Seagrave's *Race and the American Story*

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Race and the American Story
By Stephanie Shonekan and Adam Seagrave. Oxford University Press, 2024. 196 pp. $99.00 cloth, $27.95 paper

Race and the American Story, by professors Stephanie Shonekan and Adam Seagrave, takes the reader through the creation of a cotaught course on race and American political development at the University of Missouri (Mizzou) and the personal lives of the professors who taught the course. The course was developed in response to serious racial tensions on campus. Black students were regularly called "niggers" by their peers, they avoided walking through Greek town, and cotton balls were strewn on the lawn of the building that housed the Black Cultural Center. In response, Black students organized marches and a hunger strike, and the football team led a boycott. Consequently, the university president and chancellor both resigned. Notwithstanding, the faculty of Mizzou came together and developed a class that they believed would bridge gaps between Black kids studying Black folks on one side of campus and white kids studying white folks on the other side.

The authors came to teach at Mizzou from completely different backgrounds, which I believe opens the text up to a wider audience interested in understanding race in the American context. Dr. Shonekan is an immigrant from Nigeria, and Dr. Seagrave is a native-born northern Californian. Other than being professors, the

only thing they had in common was their Catholicism. The text opens with the authors telling us about their personal experiences with race from their unique perspectives. Shonekan gives the reader a glimpse into racial formation from the perspective of a Black girl of mixed African diasporic lineage growing up in a former British colony. Seagrave offers the reader the perspective of a white boy growing up in Napa Valley, but without the pomp and circumstance. His father left the family when Seagrave was thirteen, and afterward his mother had to work multiple jobs to support him and his siblings. For the former, race, colorism, and Eurocentric beauty standards were quotidian factors. For the latter, a son of world-traveled classical musicians, he came of age within a white enclave and never had to interact with Black folks or consider race or racism in any meaningful way.

I found the introduction persuasive for several reasons, but I found the discussion of white privilege most compelling. I agree with the authors that it is a woefully inadequate concept. To tell a poor white student from rural Missouri that he or she is privileged is bound to fall on deaf ears and possibly produce the racism and resentment it was meant to draw the person's attention to. The authors remind us that tragedy and suffering are unraced universalities. They argue that white privilege would be better understood as white insularity—the ability to ignore the suffering and injustices that happen to people who do not look like us. The latter concept is in fact central to research on political solidarity. A fundamental feature of political solidarity is that members of a society care about the pain and suffering of other members. However, race and racialized thinking trains whites not to see the pain and suffering of nonwhites and to be less concerned about it when they do (see Juliet Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, 2009; and Brandon Davis, "The Politics of Racial Abjection," *Du Bois Review*, 2023). I believe that the authors' reframing of privilege as insularity does two important things. It acknowledges that whites benefit from the racial contract but that not all are signatories to it (see Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 1997). Insularity is offered to all, but wealth and access are not.

The authors also provide readers with a solution to this dilemma. They argue that African American history is American history. Black history is not a separate history of America, but it has been separated from it academically and within popular culture. The authors argue that Black and white Americans are the glue that holds the nation together. These separate historical stories have created divisions within our nation and our understanding of what it means to be American. The authors posit that the current narratives (Mount Rushmore versus Untold Story) of the American story are insufficient. They posit that freedom is the heart and soul of the American story. They believe that a human freedom–focused narrative would create a more honest, inspiring, and inclusive American story.

My critiques of the text are threefold. First, in accepting their argument that a Human Freedom narrative would be a better starting point for understanding the American story, I am skeptical that college is the place to start. Most folks do not attend college, much less graduate. Therefore, it cannot become the responsibility of colleges and universities to reteach each cohort thirteen years of American history. The freedom narrative appears to be a condemnation of the American K–12 educational system. If the current K–12 system is bifurcated between Mount Rushmore and Untold Story narratives, then it will continue to produce Americans with incomplete knowledge. On the one hand, learning about World War II without delving into the Red Wings or the 761st Tank Battalion (both, among others, were critical to winning the war) could lead whites to believe that they and they alone fought for this country and are therefore the "real" Americans. In truth, 1.0 million African Americans, 500,000 Latino Americans, 1.5 million Italian Americans, 550,000 Jewish Americans, 30,000 Arab Americans, 20,000 Chinese Americans, and 25,000 Native Americans (one-third of their male population) fought and served in World War II (see Heather C. Richardson, *How the South Won the Civil War*, 2020). On the other hand, learning about them in Black studies classes, and not in history classes, could cause some to feel

unappreciated and not fully American. Within the incompleteness is where resentment festers and divisions become solidified.

Second, the authors argue that finding common ground requires (1) an agreement on basic moral principles and (2) a disposition of love toward fellow members. I disagree with the latter. I do not believe that love is the answer, nor even a reasonable request, for individuals living in a multicultural democracy of 330 million people. However, I do believe that civic education and accountability would be sufficient. African Americans go about their daily lives *hoping* that they will be treated as equal members of the polis but knowing they are unable to fully insulate themselves from the effects of racism. I am not suggesting that in 2024, racism is a completely debilitating practice. On the one hand, we have made substantial, if not monumental, progress on this front. Nor am I suggesting that its machinations are experienced equally across the Black population. As the authors suggest, racism exists on a spectrum (for both whites and Blacks). On the other hand, white folks in this country go about their daily lives with an expectation (conscious or subconscious) of different legal and social treatment, and with expectations of success. I believe that civic education, including the Human Freedom narrative proposed by this text, is needed to create a common "origin story": an American political development narrative that includes *everyone* who has contributed to, hindered, and opposed our continuous effort at perfecting our Union.

Last, I believe accountability—true formal equality and equal access to due process under the law—is required. Over time, this will eliminate differing legal and social treatment and subsequently expectations of dessert, and in its place will grow political solidarity, which is the foundation of the ability of individuals to engage in relations of trust and obligation with fellow members whom they may see as inherently other in some fundamental way. *I don't need you to love me, and you don't need me to love you*. What we all need is to be respected as full members of the polis, equally entitled to its rights and privileges.

What to Keep and What to Throw Away?

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Race and the American Story

By Stephanie Shonekan and Adam Seagrave. Oxford University Press, 2024. 196 pp. $99.00 cloth, $27.95 paper

It is no secret that in 2015, the University of Missouri made national news for the student and faculty protests of the failure of the administration to respond to racial harassment of African American students on campus. Additionally, there was a famous viral clip of faculty member Melissa Click calling for "some muscle" to remove journalists trying to cover the protests. This resulted in significantly fewer applicants from two groups: racial minorities who feared the school was a racist place and conservatives who believed the university was a politically intolerant place. Contrary to this reputation, there were good faculty members and administrators trying to address the racial environment on campus and improve it through reason and reflection. In response to incidents at the university, Stephanie Shonekan and Adam Seagrave developed a course where students read and discuss the critical texts on race in the history of the United States and from that course, a book.

Shonekan and Seagrave have produced a must-read book for anyone who cares about the future of race relations in America and the University of Missouri. The strength of the Race and American Story course and the book that resulted is that they reflect on problems in the here and now through the actual documents of American history. *Race and the American Story* is not a book filled with abstract theory but rather a book whose authors have kept

their ears to the ground. Instead of being filled with jargon, it speaks in plain language that anyone can understand. It is at times a painfully personal book in which both authors tell their experience of race in America. As in any good book, there are claims and arguments made that one may have objections to, but overall, this is a work of common sense. While written in response to a particular crisis, the authors give good reason to believe that what happened at the University of Missouri could happen anywhere.

I have taught the Race and the American Story class at the University of Missouri and truly believe its greatest strength is its use of historical, original texts. Rather than load students down with language that tends to make some individuals defensive, such as "privilege," the course examines documents like the sections of the Constitution that supported slavery and Benjamin Banneker's letter to Thomas Jefferson reminding him what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence. Additionally, the class requires students to write about music and race. Music is important in this book because it is important in the history of race in America. A limitation of the course is simply the self-selection of the students who take the class. As Seagrave puts it, describing his own experience teaching the course, "The type of college student interested in issues of race tends to be a liberal-progressive type of student. It can be difficult at times to avoid allowing the class discussion to degenerate into platitude-voicing or virtue signaling. Too often students think my Socratic questioning is a searching for a 'right' answer rather than prodding them to think about their opinions."[4] We have known since Plato's cave metaphor in *The Republic* that the challenge of education has always been to turn students away from what they are sure they know and ask, "What is reality?"

Both Shonekan and Seagrave are Catholic. Religion is important in this book and is presented in much the same way it has played out in American history; religion can be a support for racism but also a source of liberation. Shonekan's experience of the Catholic Church is one of disappointment, but she also acknowledges its inescapable importance: "Faith is a fundamental thing. It provides a lens through which to see the world and a set of instructions for navigating life. . . .

Throughout world history, faith has caused the most horrific events and the most compassionate interventions that have affected millions of people across many generations" (17–18). Religion conveys images that people live by, and while the challenge of Plato is to get past the given images, Shonekan knows the damage done socially by continually presenting Jesus as white skinned with blue eyes. She also thinks this is true of the dolls that are for little girls to play with and the figures seen and heard in movies and television shows. For his part, Seagrave is much more optimistic about Christianity being a force against racism and perhaps thinks the Catholic Church is the only institution that can defeat racism. Seagrave states, "But genuine religion inspires conversion and transformation. Authentic Christianity challenges believers, as King [i.e, Martin Luther King Jr.] challenged his followers, to really see the face of God in every human being one encounters" (113). An objection could be made that for nonreligious people such talk is a "conversation-stopper," but religion remains the primary molder of character in America. I think there is reason to be somewhat optimistic about Christianity rising to the challenge as the Catholic Church becomes more sensitive on race and reflects on its role in the past and as more and more priests come from places such as Nigeria and Vietnam. Shonekan and Seagrave do a good job in telling their readers what religion has done and what religion can do.

In general, the book is subtle on race in connection with the American founding, though the authors' call for a new historical narrative based on freedom is the most interesting part of the book. *Race and the American Story* cautions against both the "Mount Rushmore version of history," which tells of the enduring legacy left by the American framers, and the "Untold Story," which reminds us solely of the history of oppression in America. The authors argue that as long as the United States educates its citizens with one account or the other, there will not be the common ground needed for progress on race. "The gulf between these two versions of American history and their corresponding world view is massive. The individuals who hold them cannot join together to build a shared, self-governing political society. They can only be forced together by a dictator. There is no possibility either for a coherent combination of the two,

or for a compromise between them that could serve as actionable common ground" (131). Shonekan and Seagrave recommend instead focusing on the American story of human freedom, for this approach allows us to keep the direct engagement with the embarrassing truths of American history while still holding on to the lofty ideals of documents like the Declaration of Independence.

Their solution is a good one but is a difficult and challenging position that requires their readers to become comfortable with contradictions. For example, Seagrave thinks that some of the American founders were not so much active participants in racism as more like bystanders at a zoo who do not jump into the cage to rescue someone (50). One could press him on whether the Constitution offered more national support for slavery than the Articles of Confederation, given the fugitive slave clause, the awarding of representation based on holding slaves at the rate of three-fifths, and the twenty-year ban on doing anything to end the importation of slavery. Seagrave favors the idea that the Constitution is a "glorious liberty document," as Frederick Douglass said while shifting away from his mentor, William Lloyd Garrison. Could Seagrave's students hold both ideas—namely, that the Constitution did support slavery in some instances but some of the framers looked forward to the day when slavery would end? For another example, in the chapter "Of Monuments and Memories," Shonekan details how uncomfortable having a Thomas Jefferson statute and obelisk on a campus makes African American students feel, given the horrible things Jefferson says in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and the sexual violence that she describes as undergirding his relationship with Sally Hemmings. But having the statute on campus does mean students have to talk about Thomas Jefferson, good and bad, including his ideals of natural rights, disestablished religion, and expanded public education through the University of Virginia. While I agree that Confederate statues honoring an enemy of the United States should come down, a Confederate is not the same as an American founder. My suspicion is that someone will always find something objectionable about any statute and that this approach will leave us with no monuments or heroes at all.

I do wonder about how the authors can keep their common-ground focus, given one analogy made in the book. Shonekan says, "I will never know what being kicked in the groin feels like because I am not a man. In the same way, a nonminority will never really know what being a minority feels like or what the perceptions of race are from this end of the color spectrum" (55). Does this argument cut across what was said throughout the book—that Shonekan and Seagrave have developed a course that will allow us to understand each other? Shonekan does understand that for a man, getting kicked in the groin is incredibly painful; similarly could not a white person understand what it is like to be Black in America? In fact, this seems to be the point of the Race and American Story project.

Last, I would have liked more on what freedom is. Surely it is correct and patriotic to say that "[f]reedom is the heart and soul of the American story. Freedom is uniquely human and unavoidably normative; it defines human dignity, demands universal respect, and points to human fulfillment and flourishing" (135). I understand it to be the opposite of enslavement from the book, but what does it mean beyond that? Is freedom the ability of a people to govern themselves or for individuals to choose their way of life from a variety of moral options, or is it as Justice Kennedy once described it, "the right to define one's own concept of existence, or meaning, of the universe, and the mystery of human life"? While the book's focus is on how we can make progress on race in America, what the concept of freedom is needs more clarification.

The authors have given their readers a chance to think about American culture in terms of our racial history. They have shown us who we have been and asked us who we want to be. Whenever someone passes on, one looks at what the person left behind to determine what is worth keeping and what needs to be thrown away. Seriously looking at American racial history challenges us to do something similar, to find the true American political inheritance. Shonekan and Seagrave teach us that there are things we need to let go of and things in our tradition worth keeping.

History Is Present in All That We Do

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Race and the American Story

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Introduction

I cannot help but view Stephanie Shonekan and Adam Seagrave's *Race and the American Story* through the lens provided to me by the thought of James Baldwin. My last book was about Baldwin, and I have no fewer than five writing projects on Baldwin that are in various stages of development. In short, Baldwin is almost always on my mind, and he was definitely on my mind as I read this book.

Fortunately, many of Baldwin's preoccupations are shared by Shonekan and Seagrave. Baldwin was obsessed with the relationship between identity and history, and a great deal of his writing dealt with the role of race in this relationship. The aims of *Race and the American Story*—the book—and Race and the American Story as a curricular and civic project are just the sort of aims, I think, Baldwin would encourage us to pursue. In what follows, I present and consider some of the thoughts and questions that a Baldwinian reading of Shonekan and Seagrave's project presents to all of us.

Confessions

Soon after Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*—a jeremiad about "the American racial nightmare"—was published in January 1963, Norman Podhoretz wrote a response called "My Negro Problem and Ours."[5] Podhoretz's point of view was complicated, and his relationship with Baldwin was even more so. While Baldwin's book was being showered with praise from just about every

corner of the American literary scene, Podhoretz brought a decidedly critical perspective to the conversation. In short, Podhoretz used Baldwin's jeremiad as an occasion to confess his own rather complicated history with African Americans. The essay was raw, provocative, and—for many readers—deeply problematic. While Podhoretz was being subjected to widespread criticism and condemnation for the essay, an unlikely defender emerged: Baldwin. When asked about Podhoretz's essay, Baldwin called it a "tremendous achievement."[6] Why? Because Podhoretz was willing to do what most people were not: to offer a confession of how he thought about race, from his childhood to the moment he was writing.

Shonekan and Seagrave's *Race and the American Story* is radically different in style and substance from Podhoretz's essay. But I think Baldwin would appreciate the confessional nature of the text. Each in their own way, Shonekan and Seagrave give readers a glimpse of what the world looks like through their eyes. In so doing, they come face-to-face with earlier versions of themselves and ask hard questions about who they were, who they are, and who they might yet become. This sort of honest confession is still a rare thing in American writing about race, and the idea of weaving their stories together is an ingenious one that I hope will be replicated by other authors in the future.

A few years after he made his comments on the Podhoretz piece, Baldwin elaborated on the importance of confession in a remarkable short essay called "The White Man's Guilt."[7] In May 1965, Baldwin had been invited by *Ebony* magazine to contribute to an issue on "The White Problem," a framing that was intended to subvert "The Negro Problem" that had been so often discussed in American history. Baldwin's essay poses the questions that I take to be at the heart of *Race and the American Story*: How are our personal histories tied to our collective histories? More specifically, how are our personal racial histories tied to the history of race in this country? Shonekan and Seagrave are wrestling with these questions in their classrooms, in their writing, and in their public intellectual work. In what follows, I consider their multipronged

project through the lens provided by Baldwin. In so doing, my aim is to say something about the importance of Shonekan and Seagrave's project and to raise some questions I hope they and others will consider in the future.

Histories: Personal and Political

> History, as nearly no one seems to know is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do.[8]

These lines appear early in "The White Man's Guilt," and making sense of them is Baldwin's central aim in the essay. Baldwin contends that the recognition that "we carry history within us" is a crucial step toward a certain kind of "personal maturity and freedom."[9] But recognition is only the first step on that journey, and it is a step one must take repeatedly. Beyond recognition, Baldwin calls on us to *come to terms* with our history. This is where things can get a bit complicated. What does it mean to come to terms with one's history, both personally and politically?

Baldwin begins to answer this question by telling us what it looks like to *fail* to come to terms with one's history. Baldwin uses American racial history as his means to show what certain kinds of failures might look like. African Americans often face a "terrible roster of loss: The dead, black junkie; the defeated, black father; the unutterably weary black mother the unutterably ruined black girl." Confronted with this roster, Baldwin says, people all too often fall into the trap of believing "they *deserve* their history" and come to "believe that white people deserve their history and deserve the power and the glory which their testimony and the evidence of my own senses assure me that they have."[10] These white people, Baldwin continues, often "fall into the yet more stunning and intricate trap of believing that they deserve *their* fate and their comparative safety."[11]

Instead of falling into these traps, we can take another path. Baldwin calls on us to "open a dialogue" with others across racial (and other) divides. That dialogue, "if it is honest," must "become a personal confession—a cry for help and healing, which is, really, . . . the basis of all dialogues." Unless we can engage in such dialogues, Baldwin concludes, "each of us will perish in those traps in which we have been struggling for so long."[12]

Baldwin's emphasis on dialogue brings me back to Race and the American Story—as a curricular and civic project and also as a book project. It seems to me that on all three fronts, Shonekan and Seagrave are answering Baldwin's call. The curricular story the authors tell in the book is extraordinary. I use "extraordinary" not as just another superlative; my choice is quite deliberate. How many of us can point to examples of meaningful partnership on our campuses between teacher-scholars who identify as conservative on matters curricular and/or political and teacher-scholars who identify as progressive or radical on these matters? The answer is, I guess, not many. In fact, there are probably more of us who can point to cases of mutual suspicion or hostility between these groups on our campuses, if there is any engagement at all. Race and the American Story as a curricular project is important. Shonekan and Seagrave are modeling something that ought to be emulated on other campuses. If this work is done well and honestly, we might actually learn from each other and contribute to a civic culture in which a saner politics is possible.

As a book project, *Race and the American Story* models the merging of the personal and the political and speaking across difference that are at the heart of Shonekan and Seagrave's curricular and civic project. I found the autobiographies of each author to be very moving. Shonekan's account of her family's experiences in Naperville were especially powerful. The questions that confronted her and her family were not merely theoretical; they were practical and urgent. Shonekan gives the reader a strong sense of what it might be like to advise one's Black son how to navigate those predominantly white streets but reminds us that one cannot really capture what that feels like unless one has experienced it. The

concrete details of Shonekan's experience lay waste to the oft-repeated criticism of appeals to "lived experience" in morality and politics.[13]

Seagrave's reflections on the "colorblind spot" he developed as the result of his own upbringing were revealing in a different way.[14] He asks the questions those who think they *"deserve"* their history—as Baldwin might put it—dare not ask. Why was it that so few Black people were living in Napa? Why was it that so few Black people found their way into the institutions of higher education in which Seagrave found himself? Seagrave's willingness to ask these questions and his explanations of how his experiences inside and outside the classroom helped him answer them is admirable and worth emulating. These are questions many of us would rather leave buried in the closets of our past, lest we have to come to terms with the implications for our present. Seagrave's "lived experience" matters too, and we would do well to follow the example of both authors by engaging in sustained reflection on how our personal histories can help us understand our collective histories and how our collective histories can help us understand our personal histories.

Conclusion

It is difficult to come up with much in the way of criticism of Race and the American Story as a curricular, civic, and literary project. But I will conclude with a counterintuitive suggestion that I hope will inspire future conversations and paths of inquiry. Given that the project is animated by a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation, it may seem profane to say it, but I want to see more conflict. Put another way that might better capture my meaning: I think we as teachers, scholars, and citizens *need* to engage in serious arguments across difference. The Race and the American Story class incorporates many different points of view on the subject matter. That is all to the good, but I would push those teaching this material to really lean into the spaces of disagreement between the various authors being read. To give but one meta-example of how this might be done, consider Charles Mills's *The Racial Contract*. I've

started teaching this text alongside Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau in my Introduction to Political Philosophy course, and the result has been electric. Mills forces us to stare into the chasm between the universal rights language of something like the Declaration of Independence and the real precariousness of the rights of actual human beings who occupied the universe into which it was written. And Mills does not let us off the hook by simply explaining away the gaps between ideals and reality by accusing authors and politicians of mere hypocrisy. Sure, that's part of the story, but he forces us look at the deep structures of thinking that lie at the roots of that hypocrisy. I think that sort of lens ought to be central to how one teaches a class like Race and the American Story *and* how we think about these issues in civic spaces beyond the classroom.

As I read *Race and the American Story*, I found myself wanting Shonekan and Seagrave to argue with each other a bit more. I want to know more about the spaces that remain between them on key questions central to their project. After years of collaboration, they still find themselves in disagreement about certain fundamental things. On those key issues, I want to hear from Shonekan what Seagrave would have to demonstrate to her to move her closer to his point of view, and I want to hear from Seagrave what Shonekan would have to demonstrate to move him closer to her point of view. I hope they take up these questions in their future work, and I hope the rest of us follow their model of principled collaboration in our teaching, scholarship, and citizenship.

Response to Critics

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Race and the American Story
By Stephanie Shonekan and Adam Seagrave. Oxford University Press, 2024. 196 pp. $99.00 cloth, $27.95 paper

We are grateful to the editors of the *Political Science Reviewer* for arranging this symposium and to each of the four scholars who have offered such generous, illuminating, and thought-provoking commentaries on *Race and the American Story*. Writing is always a leap of faith because the author never knows in advance whether her or his (or in this case, her *and* his) readers will receive what the author is attempting to convey. The meaning can be transformed or simply lost in the transition from the author's pen to the reader's mind. It is, therefore, immensely gratifying to see that all the scholars here understood and appreciated what we were trying to say and do with this book.

As Daniella Mascarenhas put it, our goal was to write *Race and the American Story* in the style of "a conversation with a friend." In the spirit of James Baldwin, as Nicholas Buccola explains, we aimed to model and inspire dialogue that was "honest," "personal," and "political" at the same time. In our opinion, such dialogue engaged in across racial lines can be an engine of hope in the seemingly trackless desert of American racial history.

In the United States, this dialogue can only be built upon a shared, or at least overlapping, cultural memory. If "African American history is American history," then all Americans need to know how the former relates to the latter if they are to understand

what it means to be an American at all. And if "Black history is not a separate history of America, but it has been separated from it academically and within popular culture," then we need to work to repair the breach. This is essential preparatory work toward the goal of achieving the kind of cross-racial civic friendship necessary for a multiracial democratic society to function.

Civic friendship requires a degree of mutual understanding and a baseline of respect. In *Race and the American Story*, we discuss a few different avenues for achieving progress on these measures. For Stephanie, the path to progress is through proximity and empathy. For Adam, one of the avenues involves religious belief and the call to love one another. The importance of this path in American history is undeniable; both the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement and the twentieth-century civil rights movement were driven largely by this religious call to love. As we note in the book, however, religion has not played a uniformly positive role on the issue of racism in American history; and love is not a uniformly influential motivator of human behavior.

Two of our critics expound thoughtfully on this complexity and question whether our emphasis on the positive potential of religion and altruistic love may be misplaced. Mascarenhas argues that there are secular grounds for fostering empathy and combating racism that are preferable to religious ones and that "[a] logic of self-interest restores the dignity of Black Americans better than a logic of love." Brandon Davis does not believe "that love is the answer, nor even a reasonable request, for individuals living in a multicultural democracy of 330 million people." This criticism touches a point on which the authors have somewhat different opinions, so in the spirit of responding to Buccola's wish that we would "lean into the spaces of disagreement," we will elaborate separately on each of our opinions before reflecting on the common ground we share.

As Rodolfo Hernandez accurately describes, Adam "is much more optimistic about Christianity being a force against racism and perhaps thinks the Catholic Church is the only institution that can defeat racism." As he quotes from the book, "[G]enuine religion

inspires conversion and transformation. Authentic Christianity challenges believers, as King [i.e., Martin Luther King Jr.] challenged his followers, to really see the face of God in every human being one encounters."

Part of the reason Adam sees religion as a crucial part of the answer to racism—his "optimism" in this regard—is what might be called a pessimism regarding the inherent constitution of human nature. He doesn't believe that people are inherently or naturally racist, but he does believe that human beings are inveterately tribal and apt to prefer their own well-being and comfort to that of people they consider "outsiders" or "other." In this way, and perhaps in more individualistic ways as well, human beings are naturally not only self-centered but even selfish in the pathological sense of wanting more for themselves and less for others than fairness would dictate.

If humans really are this way, Adam views approaches to racism that leave human selfishness intact as unsustainable in the long term. Even if Mascarenhas's Nietzschean "Übermensch" mentality is a promising one for the individual, Adam doubts whether this mentality would take the form of antiracism for most people most of the time. There may be periods of time or particular policy areas where, as Davis opines, "civic education and accountability would be sufficient" for countering racism. The effectiveness of these influences, though, would depend on the existence of certain power relations and practical circumstances that could change over time. It is doubtful, in other words, whether anything short of what the book terms "genuine empathy" could be capable of overcoming the tendency of self-interest to degenerate into selfishness in the long term.

Both Mascarenhas and Davis employ a similar argument against the idea of love as a force against racism. Mascarenhas views love as "too contingent on both parties meeting each other in good faith." In Davis's words, "*I don't need you to love me, and you don't need me to love you*." Love may appear to be too high a bar to ask people to reach. It may also be unfair or problematic to ask African Americans in particular to adopt such a disposition toward white Americans.

As Mascarenhas notes, "[T]he implication of loving one's enemies in pursuit of freedom means that Black Americans must take a fairly risky gamble." This gamble has appeared to pay off at times—the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act in response to the Martin Luther King, Jr.–led movement may arguably be one such time—but in general the point Mascarenhas makes is well taken. When we discuss the potential promise of "leading with love" in *Race and the American Story*, we are certainly not speaking specifically to African Americans. In fact, we are speaking more directly to white Americans. White hatred of Black Americans has always been a more powerful force in our politics and culture than has Black reactions of "rage" against white Americans. The institutions of slavery, segregation, and lynching were all driven by white American hatred. Adam believes that King was right when he said that "hate can't drive out hate; only love can do that."

It is true that both love and the kind of "genuine" religion that inculcates it are unlikely to ever be a dominant force in any society over time. In this way, in Adam's opinion, they are similar to the kind of self-interested empathy that Mascarenhas describes or the accountable modus vivendi approach Davis suggests. The advantage of love and of the right kind of religion in conjunction with it is that when present, they actually defeat racism in a way that self-interest does not. One can agree to a live-and-let-live coexistence with others whom one despises and thinks inferior to oneself, provided the others possess sufficient power to enforce the arrangement. In the case of a Nietzschean voluntarily chosen morality as an expression of self-creating autonomy, one can certainly choose a morality of empathy, but one can also choose a morality of dominating inferiors. In either case, self-interested approaches might *happen* to combat racism because of contingent circumstances, but they don't do so directly or intrinsically. If you have a gaping hole in your convertible, one approach to staying dry might be to drive to the desert; this would address the problem's effects without actually

addressing the problem itself. In Adam's view, only love and altruistic empathy address the problem of racism in the way a replacement roof addresses the problem of a damaged one. Adam doubts whether human nature alone possesses sufficient intrinsic resources for manifesting this kind of love; hence the need for an openness to the Divine.

The issue one might raise with Adam's concept of the Divine is rooted in a question that emerges from a hegemonic world order: Who gets to define the Divine, and do we all share the same conception of a higher presence, a guiding light that can lead us forth to good answers for all? As Stephanie relayed in the book, she has been uncomfortable with the blond, blue-eyed Jesus of the Christianity she grew up with. As a result, Mascarenhas's and Davis's concerns with our elevation of religion as a way forward is well taken by Stephanie. Over time, Stephanie has dealt with her own spiritual evolution, struggling with the ironies and contradictions of the Abrahamic faiths—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—as both community-building and violently racist and sexist institutions.

Take Catholicism, for example. Like Adam, Stephanie grew up Catholic, and the church gave her family a sense of tradition and community based on a shared sense of faith. But so many issues have been raised that shift that foundation for Stephanie, including the enduring whitewashed imagery of Jesus and his mama Mary, the fact that women are still deemed unworthy to preach, and the singular pro-life beliefs. Zooming out from Catholicism to other denominations of Christianity presents more questions. The hatred against Barack Obama that was spewed from the pulpit of the nondenominational church Stephanie's family attended in the Midwest was so palpable that the family had to stop attending. In 2024, the Southern Baptist Convention voted against the use of IVF, which feels like a vote against science. The list goes on and on.

Yet African Americans depended on faith to help them to wade in the water to find their way to freedom, and through reconstruction and the Jim Crow era. There is something to the essence of

that faith. The gospel songs they sang in church pews and in the choir were so heartfelt and hopeful. But was the God of the enslavers the same God of the enslaved? Was the God of the colonizers the same God of the colonized? No matter the answer to these questions, it is difficult to conclude that religion, or Christianity—in the many of the ways it is practiced—is always good. Although Hernandez holds up hope for change in the church, indicated by a more diverse priesthood in the twenty-first century, Stephanie is still not sure that diversity has any meaningful response to the lopsided power structure of the Western/European church. Stephanie believes spiritual conviction is more essential than religious commitment, or the "right kind of religion" that Adam speaks of above.

Candidly, we could have better communicated these nuances in the book. Religion may be one way forward, or one component of a multifaceted way forward, without being *the* only solution; and even then, it may not have to be a form of Christianity based on a Western framework or worldview. Mascarenhas argues that "anti-racist work must account for the plurality of beliefs," and Stephanie could not agree with her more. However, the "secular empathy" she advocates is another great option, in addition to the spiritual empathy that Stephanie is advocating. Davis writes that he believes "accountability," and I will add respect, is a critical element for progress.

As for love, Adam is unsure that human beings would naturally support others without the convictions that religion and "agape love" can inspire, which may make sense for someone raised in the West. Being brought up in West Africa gives Stephanie a different outlook on human nature. Stephanie has always imagined that the reason why Africans so easily yielded their land and resources when the Europeans came with their colonial projects was because Africans are naturally hospitable people. In that transaction, Africans were not selfish, Europeans were. The concept of community in West Africa, which arguably followed Africans to the Western Hemisphere, is differently conceived and experienced in

the United States. So Black folks do not need the formality of religion to love and support each other. Indeed that sense of community and camaraderie is integral to Black life and community. At best, mandating love from white people in order to build empathy that would make them do the right thing is not sustainable or dependable. At worst, it causes resentment and takes us many steps backward.

Instead, Stephanie recommends proximity as the best way forward. When you get close to something or someone, you understand it or the person better and care about it or the person more. Acquiring knowledge about people who are different from you, through education, literature, sports, art, and music, allows you to pull back the layers of mystery to see the humanity in the other. This is why, as Hernandez highlights, music is a central and important part of the book and course. It is a great way to bring folks closer to the problem and to engage with history and culture.

Despite the different angles through which Adam and Stephanie view religion and love, we still find our way to common ground by listening to each other and giving space for deliberation and discussion. In many ways, our careful navigation around and through each other's differences is the model we hope that our readers and students adopt when they engage with this book and our class. And when we get to our common ground, we realize that we agree on so many things. For instance, we are both compelled by Davis's argument that college is not the best place to start infusing an antiracist education into the curriculum. We endorse Davis's assertion that this journey should start much earlier in the K–12 experience. We are gratified by Buccola's use of Baldwin to process the "confessional" framework that is woven through our book. We both deeply appreciate Mascarenhas's candid concerns that allow us to reflect on our own biases. And, perhaps most importantly as we continue to do this work, we both agree with Hernandez's point that a good starting point for any of this work is a reflection on the very meaning of freedom.

Notes

1. Stephanie Shonekan and Adam Seagrave, *Race and the American Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 19.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Classics, 2020).
3. Myisha Cherry, *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to Anti-racist Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
4. Shonekan and Seagrave, 71.
5. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Books, 1963); Norman Podhoretz, "My Negro Problem and Ours," *Commentary*, January 1963.
6. "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin—an Interview," in *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 64.
7. James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 722.
8. Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," 722–23.
9. Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," 724.
10. Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," 724.
11. Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," 724.
12. Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," 725.
13. Shonekan and Seagrave, 53–60.
14. Shonekan and Seagrave, 45–52.