

## One Black Philosopher in the White Academy\*

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**Abstract:** This article discusses Bruce Kuklick's *Black Philosopher, White Academy: The Career of William Fontaine*, a biography of the first African American to be a tenured faculty member in philosophy in the Ivy League. The author offers alternative interpretations of key social, political, and historical issues and events ranging from expectations of assimilation and affirmative action to the missing, dark underside of American philosophy to address important lacunae in the work.

**Key words:** affirmative action, African American philosophy, American philosophy, black philosophers, William Fontaine, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, racism, social justice

Bruce Kuklick's *Black Philosopher, White Academy* is a biographical work of illuminating social and intellectual history with at times poignant subterranean anxieties and reflections on the tragic dimensions of its subject's life.<sup>1</sup> The work is also psychoanalytical to the extent that it is premised upon the author's extraordinary realization of an apparently repressed or dissociated memory. Kuklick, the Nichols Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of such books as *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (Yale UP, 1977) and *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720–2000* (Oxford UP, 2003), had also earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy at that institution. After researching the dry records of philosophy departments across the country for a commissioned essay on American philosophy after World War II for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he realized he had not considered his home institution. The Penn archivist offered him some of the personal manuscripts of William Fontaine, the African American faculty member who taught at Penn from 1947–1967. To his surprise, the material included a copy of Fontaine's letter of recommendation for Kuklick to pursue graduate study in history. That Kuklick forgot that he had studied with Fontaine was bad enough; that Fontaine was one of his recommenders made the matter embarrassing. This biography is thus also an effort at redemption and memory through a journey of understanding. Such an endeavor placed the author in dangerous psychoanalytical terrain.

William Thomas Fontaine was born on December 2, 1909, in Chester, Pennsylvania. An alumnus of the historic black institution Lincoln University, he was among the small population of blacks who achieved a B.A. degree in the first half of the

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\* From *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (forthcoming).

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Kuklick, *Black Philosopher, White Academy: The Career of William Fontaine* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

twentieth century and, through the achievement of his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, he belonged to an even smaller accomplished group. He taught for a time in historically black institutions that included Lincoln, Southern University, and Morgan State University, and he had worked, with Kwame Nkrumah, who became the first president of Ghana, in ship-building in solidarity with union efforts before being conscripted in WWII, where he prepared black soldiers for the literacy requirements of the military. His post at Penn emerged from his persistent pursuit of learning through continued study there and in part as a consequence of pressures brought on by the Cold War, where American efforts to construct itself as a defender of freedom against the Soviets faced contradictions in its legal and social system of racialized apartheid or Jim Crow. Fontaine struggled with illness, which severely damaged one of his lungs, and condescension as he slowly progressed from visiting lecturer to assistant professor to tenured assistant professor to associate professor. He died on December 29, 1968, from tuberculosis destroying his remaining lung.

Kuklick portrays Fontaine's life story as ultimately a tragic allegory of the plight of misplaced black intellectuals in white institutions. In spite of his efforts to break the academic color line, the most noted examples of his doing so were ironically not by virtue of ideas but by virtue of circumstance. The book opens, for instance, with the story of Morton White, Nelson Goodman, Alfred Jules Ayer—eminent and assimilated white Jewish philosophers—and William Fontaine, a fellow proponent of assimilation in his presentation of the self, sharing a ride to the American Philosophical Association (APA) meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1948. The four philosophers had a lively conversation on philosophical matters as they drove to the meeting to which Ayer, visiting from Oxford, was one of the plenary speakers. The tone of the ride changed, however, when they arrived in Charlottesville and realized that Fontaine not only had to stay in the colored section of town but also had to be accompanied by his white colleagues into the white-only hotel at which the convention was taking place with their assuring the staff that he was only attending the meetings and would not be staying there. The experience embarrassed Ayer, Goodman, and White, and they successfully lobbied for a resolution that was passed the following year stating that the American Philosophical Association would no longer meet in states that practiced segregation.

Kuklick's account of Fontaine's tenure at Penn as the only black philosopher in the Ivy League reveals a similar irony. Although his appointment broke a color line, it was not by virtue of the scholarship he presented for their approval, which his colleagues correctly assessed as mediocre. Fontaine, it turned out, did not share his far superior work in social thought and on race relations, all of which, save his monograph published a year before his death, were produced during his years at black institutions and in debate with black intellectuals. Fontaine did not, in other words, break the *intellectual color line* because he was not there as who he was and consequently did not ultimately share a space with his colleagues as an intellectual. This circumstance was marked not only by the bittersweet experience of his receiving tenure as an assistant professor, because promotion to associate with tenure was premised on demonstration of good or excellent scholarship, but also by the symbolism of him as an intellectual janitor through his "office" being a renovated broom closet that is today a women's toilet (Kuklick, p. 130).

Black membership in a white academy was, and in many respects unfortunately still is, a humiliating experience for many (if not all) black scholars.<sup>2</sup>

Fontaine had the distinction of not only being the only black philosopher in the Ivy League in the first half of the twentieth century but also being the first tenure-track and then tenured black faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania. Fifty years earlier, the institution had the opportunity to offer W.E.B. Du Bois that opportunity, which Kuklick describes as a “nasty episode” and “the institution’s chief experience with African Americans, [which] indicated that the university did *not* want an extended association with a black man” (p. 85). Part of the basis of that episode, we should recall, was that Du Bois had produced *The Philadelphia Negro* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), a tome that provided the groundwork for American sociology as did no other text by an American from the nineteenth century. None of the scholars entrusted to evaluate Du Bois during that episode are part of the collective memory of the species or even in their fields without consulting works on minor figures in the history of sociology. Du Bois, by contrast, is not only internationally known but also many of his books remain in print and are on sale in academic bookstores. If one considers the additions of his other books and essays, his doctorate in History from Harvard and his completion of work for the Dr. Econ., which qualified him in political economy and sociology, at the University of Berlin, the travesty of the Du Bois example was that it was an egregious case of *over-qualification*. Du Bois simply revealed the mediocrity of much of the world entrusted to evaluate him.<sup>3</sup>

A subtext of the book is the debate on affirmative action, a topic that made many of the liberal whites, including Nelson Goodman, the Jewish assimilationist, good friend, and supporter of Fontaine, cringe. Ayer, Goodman, and White, among other white Jewish philosophers, had responded to anti-Semitism by producing work of greater sophistication than the gentiles who hated them. For them, the best way to respond to bigotry was to be better than the bigot. The logic of racism and anti-Semitism were, however, such that intellect was not a presumed incapacity for those academics. In fact, anti-Semitism often took the form of exaggerating the intellectual capacity of white Jews. (I write “white Jews” because not all Jews were and are white, and even for white Jews, there was a time when no Jews were white.)<sup>4</sup> Since reason is philosophy’s domain, there

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<sup>2</sup> For a compendium of discussion of these matters, including those faced by other African American philosophers, see *A Companion to African-American Studies*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> To make amends, the University of Pennsylvania recently consulted referees to assess Du Bois for a posthumous appointment of Professor Emeritus. In my letter of evaluation—an honor and a privilege as it was—the gravity of the injustice was apparent in the section in which I discussed his “peers”: Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Anténor Firmin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, in the 20<sup>th</sup>, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Octavio Paz, Alfred Schutz, to name several.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Diane Kaufmann Tobin, Gary A. Tobin, and Scott Rubin, *In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People*. San Francisco, CA: Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2005, and Lewis R. Gordon, “Réflexions sur la question afro-juive,” *Plurielles: Revue culturelle et politique pour un judaïsme Humaniste et Laïque* No 16 (2011): 75–82.

was an extent to which anti-Semitic presumptions of hyper-rationality favored white Jewish intellectuals. For black intellectuals, especially those who became professional academics, however, the struggle was markedly different because of anti-black racists' belief in black intellectual deficiency.

The Du Bois example and others, such as philosophers Alain Locke (Harvard) and Roy D. Morrison, II (University of Chicago), reveal a story in which rejections on the grounds of a lack of merit could only be disingenuous.<sup>5</sup> The efforts devoted to retaining Fontaine, a non-threatening black man who espoused social conservatism and anti-communism, revealed a neurotic situation: The most achieved black scholars were threatening in a white academy that patronized the black scholars it would accept on the grounds of their absence of scholarly achievement. Could the whites with whom Fontaine kept company ever have been comfortable working with blacks who were their intellectual equals or, worse, superiors?

Moreover, Ayer, Goodman, and White were afforded the freedom to devote their energies to what mattered to them the most. Fontaine lacked that luxury. Philosophical writing, for him, was on their terms, not his. The consequence for Fontaine was tragic because of the neurotic structure of the whole situation, which was marked, peculiarly, by the impact denied recognition had on his writing. The long-awaited book (two decades' worth) that was to earn him his full professorship was rejected by Random House, and the process of his revising it for its eventual publication by the Charles C. Thomas Publishing Company in 1967 collapsed into a scattered collection of essays under the title *Reflections on Segregation, Desegregation, Power and Morals*. Kuklick's assessment is unfortunately accurate: "The man could not articulate a lucid framework for what he wanted to say. He did not know where he stood, or at least could not say where he stood" (p. 122).

Kuklick's observation is remarkably synchronous with Du Bois' and Fanon's on this matter of naïve assimilation. In *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (International Publishers, 1968), Du Bois had reflected, in a wonderfully truthful self-assessment, that he had in effect learned, in his younger years, to stand still in several languages.<sup>6</sup> This theme of inhibition and inaction Fanon described as a neurotic potential of black contact with predominantly white environments.<sup>7</sup> That Fontaine was a victim of this effect is ironic given his critical relation to Du Bois and Fanon, both of whom he met and with whom, in the case of Fanon, he debated. One of the powerful dimensions of *Black Philosopher, White Academy* is Kuklick's formulation of key moments in twentieth-century black

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[http://www.ajhl.org/revue\\_plurielles.html](http://www.ajhl.org/revue_plurielles.html)

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of these and other philosophers from the African Diaspora, see Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, edited by Herbert Aptheker (New York: International Publishers, 1968), see chapter XIII, especially pp. 221–222.

<sup>7</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952); cf. Lewis R. Gordon, "When I Was There, It Was Not: On Secretions Once Lost in the Night," *Performance Research* 2, no. 3 (September 2007): 8–15.

intellectual history and U.S. politics from Fontaine's perspective. Fontaine was among the extraordinary group of black intellectuals who attended the 1956 and 1959 Congresses of Negro Writers and Artists, which took place in Paris and Rome respectively. The 1956 one included Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and George Lamming, among many others. Fontaine presented his paper, "Segregation and Desegregation in the United States: A Philosophical Analysis," which, along with the work of other U.S. nationals, was not well received by the Francophone delegates, especially Fanon: "During the meeting Fanon excoriated what he took to be the conservatism of Fontaine and the other U.S. nationals..." (Kuklick, p. 110).

Fanon, twice decorated for valor as a resistance soldier in World War II, had faced challenges working on his doctorate in psychiatry at Lyon, the achievement of his post-doctorate license to head psychiatric facilities in the French-speaking world, and then serving as the Chief Psychiatrist at Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria, where he trained medical interns in the humanistic psychiatry he was developing. Fanon and Fontaine, in other words, met each other as black intellectuals who had encountered similar professional challenges. While Fontaine faced a white intellectual hegemonic field of Marvin Farber, Nelson Goodman, C.I. Lewis, and C.L. Stevenson, Fanon's was Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (with whom he studied), and Albert Camus (against whom he argued). But unlike Fontaine, Fanon asserted his humanity, fought against being patronized, and recognized with equal value the work of black intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor that expanded his hegemonic field. To achieve his doctorate in psychiatric medicine, Fanon wrote a dissertation on Friedreich's ataxia, a disease resulting in progressive damage of the nervous system, in stream with the expectations of the psychophysicologists who trained him (and whose ideas he rejected), but immediately afterward he produced *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), a work that offered an analysis of the kind of situation Fontaine was in at the University of Pennsylvania. Fanon argued for the importance, politically and as a matter of social and mental health, of being actional, of not being left frozen or, worse, imploding. His first chapter on language offered a critique of dynamics of recognition that collapsed into the neurotic situation of measuring oneself by a standard that one could never meet by virtue of one's identity. Fanon's point was not against a well-groomed or professional presentation of the self. He was as polished a petit-bourgeois intellectual as Fontaine. The difference was that Fanon thought on *his terms* and in terms of a community of black intellectuals as a source of knowledge on a par and often over and against presuppositions of white normativity. He also offered a critique of white normativity in his sixth chapter on psychopathology in which he argued that antiblack racism offered no coherent notion of a mature black person. Germane to our discussion, it is striking that Kuklick's examples of Fontaine as a mature adult in *Black Philosopher, White Academy* are nearly all drawn from Fontaine in the classroom. An award-winning teacher, the classroom was perhaps the only interracial context in which Fontaine was able to function, Fanon would argue, as an authority at the University of Pennsylvania.

Fontaine's scholarship was another matter. There, as Kuklick admits, Fontaine lacked what Fanon called "ontological resistance" to white men. Although the relationship was collegial, the truth of the matter was that Fontaine was not their

colleague. The racism was such that there was no room for him to be average, and the system offered an additional injustice: Extraordinary achievements by blacks often only afforded them the opportunities available to whites who have achieved at an average and at times below-average levels. It is unfortunate that affirmative action debates were hijacked by the rhetoric of “under-qualification” since it was in fact introduced to provide opportunities for qualified and overqualified individuals. The “under-qualification” argument depended on a denial that practices of racial discrimination against blacks and other communities of color persisted.

Fontaine also suffered from what is today a familiar theme in the life of professional scholars. Everywhere, there is no shortage of bad advice. The typical scholar is often encouraged to protect her or his career through working on the most conservative projects and presenting the safest representations of his or her work to colleagues and the wider profession. The situation often leads to junior scholars being alienated from their work because of not ultimately working on *their* projects. That alienation often leads to writing dysfunction. Racism, as Du Bois argued, adds the dimension of double consciousness, where the black academic sees her or himself as seen through anti-black perspectives. What such an individual fails to understand is that the effort to prove the self on such terms is stillborn. There is, however, another kind of double consciousness, *potentiated double consciousness*, where the contradictions of a neurotic and unjust system are identified and transcended.<sup>8</sup> This is what Fanon meant by becoming actional, and it is also what Du Bois understood: Such intellectuals actually do *their* projects. Kuklick agrees as he argues in the following passage, which he does not mean to be patronizing but is painful with such an overtone:

Fontaine did have the intellectual ability. His World War II articles on the sociology of knowledge and on the development of social consciousness, as I have tried to demonstrate, cut at the bone. His peers at Penn may not have known “The Mind and Thought of the Negro,” from 1942, and “Social Determination in the Writings of American negro Scholars,” from 1944, but he had produced first-class essays. They had without doubt more merit than his later book. *Before Fontaine had irrevocably hooked himself up at a white institution, he had shown great facility in discerning the strengths and limits of social knowledge* (Kuklick, p. 124).

*Black Philosopher, White Academy* thus offers a story that could be read as an allegory for contemporary young academics entering a profession suffering from even greater market encroachments than even in its recent past. The added consideration in the contemporary United States is no doubt President Barack Obama’s negotiation of a new symbol of “the first” for a black of high, in this case highest, achievement, especially with his succeeding George W. Bush, who has already become a metonym for mediocrity in the New Millennium. The difference, however, is that Obama’s excellence is treated as an exception for black people, and Bush’s mediocrity is treated as an exception for

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<sup>8</sup> For discussion of this concept, see See Paget Henry, “Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications,” *The C.L.R. James Journal* 11, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 79–112.

whites. As a familiar expression in black communities would formulate it: Obama can only be successful as an American but fail as a black. While many white philosophers of average and even below-average achievement have taught at white institutions, including the most prestigious ones, their performance would not lead to the conclusion that whites should not be hired in those places. I bring this up because of an anti-affirmative action sentiment in Kuklick's summation of his book's thesis: "Therein lies for me the compelling and tragic dimension of this story. The social world charged a massive psychic fee to token black intellectuals who crossed the color line between 1940 and 1970. *Reflections on Segregation, Desegregation, Power and Morals*, said Fontaine, was not merely something he had written. 'The book is my life'" (Kuklick, p. 133). Perhaps the best response to this indictment of proto-affirmative action and *de jure* affirmative action policies is to ask this: Why weren't those blacks who were far superior to the whites who were the gatekeepers not recruited for employment? Isn't the necessity of affirmative action ultimately premised upon them? That, I think, is ultimately what Kuklick was trying to convey through posing the counterfactual (with respect to Goodman) scenario of Fontaine being measured by his strengths instead of his weakness.

I have argued in *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge UP, 2008) that African Diasporic philosophy tends to focus on three themes: (1) philosophical anthropology, (2) social transformation and freedom, and (3) the metacritique of reason. Kuklick's portrayal of Fontaine's work reveals that Fontaine was devoting his intellectual energy to all three early in his career but then became absorbed in the third later on without a link to the first two. Without those links, his thought became fragmented. The transcendental, neo-Kantian, analytical pragmatist work of Goodman, inspired by C.I. Lewis' efforts at the same, was a project that Fontaine could not do beyond exposition. His originality required resources beyond the demonstration of methodological mastery.

All this is to say that there is much the reader could learn from *Black Philosopher, White Academy* beyond the rich history that contextualizes Fontaine's life. There are also moral and ethical dimensions of the tragic. This is not a story of one of the giants of the black intellectual tradition(s). It is, however, a story that brings insight into what thwarts human potential. By way of criticism, Kuklick could have furthered the discussion through offering some discussion of how other African American philosophers fared. The text leaves the reader with the impression that there were no other black philosophers at the time who could have joined a dialogue on metaphysical problems of reasoning, science, and metaphysics with the white philosophers who were doing such work. This matter may have come to the fore had there been more discussion of where professional black philosophers worked. In addition to historically black colleges and universities, black academic philosophers also found homes in seminaries. These seminaries were predominantly white institutions, which raises some additional questions about the scope and sociology of a white academy, yet they afforded some philosophers, such as University of Chicago-trained philosopher Roy D. Morrison and Brown University-trained philosopher William R. Jones, enough freedom to write high-level philosophical work on non-religious matters such as epistemology, philosophy of science, phenomenological methodology, and meta-ethics. Others, such as the small cadre of intellectuals who emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s placed the question of African Americans in philosophy at the forefront of their theoretical considerations and weathered the storm of criticisms and even insult to create a body of work that place

scholars such as Fontaine and his contemporary Eugene Holmes under reflection. Leonard Harris, who edited the influential anthology *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Afro-American Philosophy since 1917* (Kendall Hunt, 1983; 2002) and George Yancy, who edited *African American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* and *Philosophy in Multiple Voices* (Routledge, 2007), have been instrumental in this regard.

Bio: Lewis R. Gordon is Professor of Philosophy and African American Studies at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. He is the author of several influential books including *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism in a Neocolonial Age*, which won the Gustavus Meyer Award for Outstanding Work on Human Rights in North America, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (Routledge), *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Paradigm), and *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge UP).