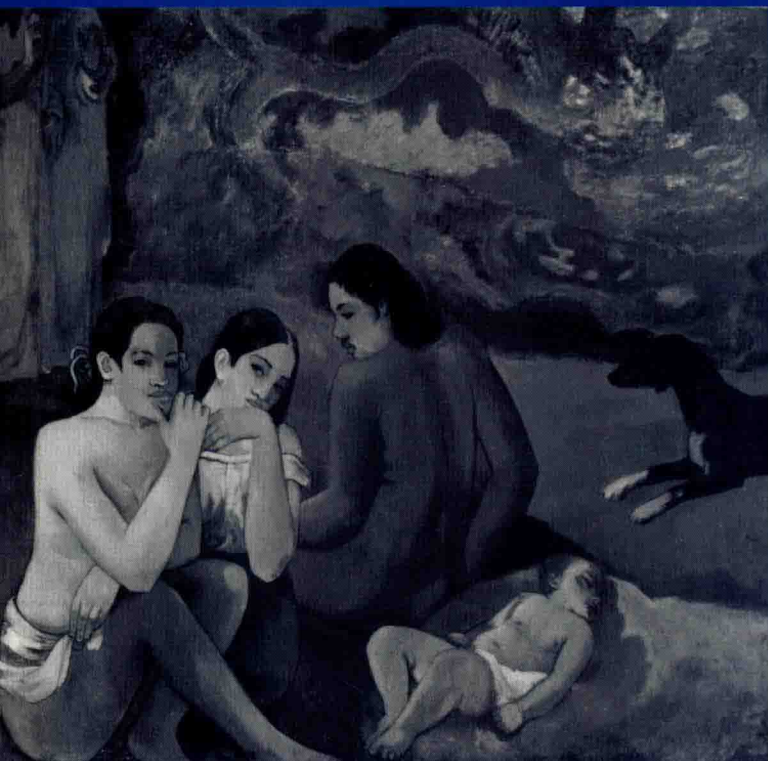


EDITED BY NAOMI ZACK



# WOMEN OF COLOR AND PHILOSOPHY



# WOMEN OF COLOR AND PHILOSOPHY

A CRITICAL READER

EDITED BY  
NAOMI ZACK

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WOMEN OF  
COLOR AND  
PHILOSOPHY



To present and future philosophers who are  
“women of color”

## The Contributors

**Linda Martín Alcoff** is Professor of Philosophy, Political Science, and Women's Studies at Syracuse University. She is the author of *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory* (1966), the editor of *Epistemology: The Big Questions* (1998), and co-editor, with Elizabeth Potter, of *Feminist Epistemologies* (1993), and, with Eduardo Mendieta, of *Thinking from the Underside of History* (forthcoming).

**Anita L. Allen** joined the tenured faculty of the University of Pennsylvania Law School in 1998. Between 1987 and 1998, Allen was Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law Center, and in 1996 was made Associate Dean for Research and Scholarship. She was previously a member of the faculties of the University of Pittsburgh Law School (1985–7) and Carnegie-Mellon University (1978–81). She has been a member of the visiting faculty at the Harvard Law School (1990–1) and was the first Distinguished Reuschlein Professor at Villanova Law School (1998). She briefly practiced law with the New York firm, Cravath, Swaine and Moore (1984–5). Allen has published dozens of articles, many relating to privacy and private life. The most recent include: "Privacy and public life: talking about sex as a problem for democracy," *George Washington Law Review* (1999); "Lying to protect privacy," *Villanova Law Review* (1999); "Coercing privacy," *William and Mary Law Review* (1999); "The social contract in American case law," *University of Florida Law Review* (1999); and "Confronting moral theories: Gewirth in context," in *Gewirth: Critical Essays on Action, Rationality and Community*, edited by Michael Boylan, 1999). In addition, Allen has published three books: *Uneasy Access: Privacy for Women in a*

*Free Society*, 1988); *Privacy: Cases and Materials* (with R. Turkington, 1999), and *Debating Democracy's Discontent* (with M. Regan, 1998).

**Yoko Arisaka** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Francisco. She was born and raised in Japan and moved to the United States in 1982. She received her Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of California at Riverside in 1996. During the fall of 1997 she was a CNRS research associate at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Her research includes modern Japanese philosophy, nineteenth- and twentieth-century continental philosophy (emphasis in phenomenology), Asian philosophy, philosophy of mind, and political philosophy. She has published several articles on Heidegger and on Nishida, the founder of modern Japanese philosophy. She is a co-editor of *Nishida and the Question of Modernity* (forthcoming) and is currently working on her book, *Philosophy and Imperialism: Asian Modernism in Prewar Japan*.

**Dasiea Cavers-Huff** is Associate Professor of Philosophy, History, Humanities, and Ethnic Studies at Riverside Community College, in Riverside, California. She received her Ph.D. at the University of California, Riverside, in 1997. Prior to her studies at Riverside, she spent four years studying within the Cognitive Sciences Specialization at the University of Maryland, College Park. In addition to her research in the cognitive sciences, she is currently working on the interface between psychology and race.

**V. F. Cordova** has a BA in philosophy from Idaho State University and an MA and Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of New Mexico. Cordova has taught at the University of New Mexico; the University of Alaska-Fairbanks; Oregon State University; and Idaho State University. She has been a visiting scholar at Colorado State University and a Rockefeller Fellowship recipient at Lakehead University, Ontario, Canada. Cordova presently holds an adjunct position at Idaho State University in Pocatello, Idaho.

**Angela Y. Davis** is an internationally renowned activist-scholar who is currently Professor of History of Consciousness at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She gained her BA in French Literature from Brandeis University, and her MA from the University of California at San Diego, where she also completed work for her Ph.D. in philosophy.

Davis also studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris and at Johann Wolfgang von Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany. In 1972 she received an honorary doctorate in philosophy from Lenin University. Davis's work has been published in numerous journals and anthologies, and her five books include: *Women, Race and Class*, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billy Holiday*, and her autobiography. Davis has been the subject of numerous biographical sketches, scholarly essays and books, films and sound recordings. (This information on Angela Davis is taken from George Yancy's account, for which he thanked Stephanie Kelly: Ed.)

**Barbara Hall** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Georgia State University in Atlanta. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona in 1997. She also holds a JD from DePaul University and a BA from the University of Illinois, Chicago. Her areas of philosophical specialization and interest include philosophy of law, African-American philosophy and reproductive rights.

**Joy James** is author of *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*; *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals*; *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in US Culture*. She is also editor of *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* and *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention and Prisons*. James is currently the Distinguished Visiting Scholar in African American Studies at Columbia University.

**Adrian M. S. Piper** is Professor of Philosophy at Wellesley College and a conceptual artist. The recipient of Mellon, NEH, Guggenheim, and Woodrow Wilson Research Fellowships, she is a Fellow of the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University and recently a Distinguished Scholar at the Getty Research Institute. Educated at CCNY, the University of Heidelberg, and Harvard, her principle publications are in metaethics, Kant's metaphysics, and the history of ethics. She has taught at Georgetown, Harvard, Michigan, Stanford, and UCSD. The two-volume project from which her essay in this collection is excerpted, *Rationality and the Structure of the Self*, is nearing completion.

**Anne Schulherr Waters** is of Seminole, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Jewish descent. She has four graduate degrees, including



her JD from the University of New Mexico Law School, and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Purdue University. A philosopher and poet, she is published in the philosophy journal *Teaching Philosophy*, and in two anthologies, *Living the Spirit*, edited by Will Roscoe, and *The FLO Anthology*, edited by Julia Penelope and Sarah Hoagland. Waters is currently co-editing, with Leonard Harris and Scott Pratt, an *Anthology of American Philosophy* for Blackwell Publishers. She is also compiling a set of contemporary essays for a Blackwell *American Indian Philosophy Companion*. She is guest editing, with M. A. Jaimes-Guerrero, a special issue of *Hypatia*, *A Journal of Feminist Philosophy: American Indian Women and Feminism*, and is gathering together the first American Indian Philosophy section of the *American Philosophical Association Newsletter*, which will include her own paper, "American Indian Identity." Waters organized for the recently created American Indian Philosophy Association (and is current president of it), as well as the recently approved American Philosophical Association (APA) "Committee on American Indians in Philosophy", of which she is chair.

**Ofelia Schutte** is Professor of Women's Studies and Philosophy at the University of South Florida. Her areas of teaching and research are feminist theory, continental philosophy, philosophy of culture, and Latin American social thought. She is the author of *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks*, and *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought*, and numerous articles on feminist, Latin American, and continental philosophy. A former Fulbright scholar to Mexico, she serves on the board of the feminist journal *Hypatia*. Her current interests include poststructuralist, multi-cultural, and Latina feminisms.

**George Yancy** received his BA in philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh and his MA in philosophy from Yale University. He is editor of *African-American Philosophers, 17 Conversations* (1998). He has contributed articles and reviews to such scholarly journals as *Social Science Quarterly*, *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, *The Journal of Religious Thought*, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, *Popular Music and Society*, and *The College Language Association Journal*. Yancy is currently editing *Cornel West: A Critical Reader* for Blackwell Publishers. He is presently McNulty Fellow in the Philosophy Department at Duquesne University.

**Naomi Zack** received her Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia University in 1970 and then left academia for twenty years. Since her return she has written two books: *Race and Mixed Race* (1993) and *Bachelors of Science: Seventeenth Century Identity, Then and Now* (1996). She has also edited two anthologies, *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (1995) and *Race/Sex; Their Sameness, Difference and Interplay* (1997), and has co-edited *Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality* (1998). Recent publications include the introductory textbook, *Thinking About Race* (1998). Zack is associate professor in the Philosophy Department at the University at Albany and is currently working on two new books, *The Philosophy of Science and Race* and *Descartes' Dreaming*.

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Angela Y. Davis, "Interview with Angela Y. Davis," in George Yancy (ed.) *African American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

Joy James, "Discredited Knowledge in the Nonfiction of Toni Morrison," in Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in US Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Ofelia Schutte, "Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts," *Hypatia* 13/2 (Spring 1998) (published by Indiana University Press).

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NZ, Albany, NY, August 1999

On the basis of the available documents, the existence or non-existence of an organized sect of witches in fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Europe seems to be indeterminate. It is a dilemma, however, which to my eyes at least has only relative importance.

Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*,  
translated by John and Anne Tedeschi

There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,  
translated by Myra Bergman Ramos

“Eventually it comes to you” observes Lorraine Hansberry, “the thing that makes you exceptional, if you are at all, is inevitably that which must also make you lonely.”

Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*

# Contents

The Contributors	vii
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	1
<b>Part 1 Critique</b>	<b>23</b>
1 "Discredited Knowledge" in the Nonfiction of Toni Morrison <i>Joy James</i>	25
2 Cultural Alterity: Cross-cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts <i>Ofelia Schutte</i>	44
3 Exploring the Sources of Western Thought <i>V. F. Cordova</i>	69
4 General Introduction to the Project: The Enterprise of Socratic Metaethics <i>Adrian M. S. Piper</i>	91
<b>Part 2 Activism and Application</b>	<b>133</b>
5 Interview with Angela Y. Davis <i>George Yancy</i>	135
6 That Alchemical Bering Strait Theory! or Introducing America's Indigenous Sovereign Nations Worldviews to Informal Logic Courses <i>Anne Schulherr Waters</i>	152

7	The Libertarian Role Model and the Burden of Uplifting the Race <i>Barbara Hall</i>	168
8	Interracial Marriage: Folk Ethics in Contemporary Philosophy <i>Anita L. Allen</i>	182
<b>Part 3 New Directions</b>		207
9	Asian Women: Invisibility, Locations, and Claims to Philosophy <i>Yoko Arisaka</i>	209
10	On Judging Epistemic Credibility: Is Social Identity Relevant? <i>Linda Martín Alcoff</i>	235
11	Cognitive Science and the Quest for a Theory of Properties <i>Dasiea Cavers-Huff</i>	263
12	Descartes' Realist Awake-Asleep Distinction, and Naturalism <i>Naomi Zack</i>	280
	Select Bibliography	303
	Index	311

# Introduction

NAOMI ZACK

## About the Title

The title, *Women of Color and Philosophy*, is intended to signal a recognizable subject, or one that can at least be imagined, by all philosophers, regardless of their race or gender. However, I arrived at it through a process of compromise, which required that I relocate some of my own ideas into a broader perspective. The idea for the book sprang into my head (or out of it) all in one piece. It occurred to me in the fall of 1997 that the work of existing women philosophers who were not white and who did not work exclusively as feminists or as scholars of race or ethnicity, would be worth collecting as a professional document. I did not know how close to the center of the field were the main scholarly interests of members of this group. The women of color in philosophy with whose work I was already familiar could not be categorized as mainstream philosophers. I wondered about the ways in which women of color in philosophy believed that their work was related to philosophy as it is understood by those white male philosophers who appear to work in the center of the discipline.

I invited and solicited essays from African, African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, Jewish-Arab, Native-American and, to count myself, Mixed-Race, women philosophers.<sup>1</sup> My original call for papers was titled, "Women of Color Do Philosophy." The word "Do" meant the action verb, and the syntax of the title was inspired by the book title *Men Doing Feminism*.<sup>2</sup> I read in the title *Men Doing Feminism* an intention to bring attention to the unlikely event of men working

as feminists. It is of the same magnitude of unlikeliness for women of color to work as philosophers.

The title "Women of Color Do Philosophy" soon made me uncomfortable because I began to think that the label "of color" was overused and metaphorical. Also, when I told several white male philosophers about the project, they reacted playfully, as though visualizing a chorus line of "women of color" executing an erotic dance *meme*. I remembered that even now, some educated people still project stereotypical attributes of unrestrained sexuality and stupidity onto nonwhite women, in contexts where nonwhite women appear to have social roles more advantaged and privileged than roles traditionally assigned to them.<sup>3</sup>

I changed the title to "Nonwhite Women Do Philosophy." As a result of my work on race, I was more comfortable with "nonwhite" than "of color." I do not think that racial categories have the physical reality they are assumed to have in common sense. There are no general genes for race, there is greater variation within, than between, any of the three or four major racial groups, and racial categories change historically and geographically.<sup>4</sup> Racial categories are not only socially constructed in the ascription of psychological and cultural traits to biological difference, but the biological difference itself does not have the scientific foundation it is assumed to have at the folk level. It therefore seemed to me that "nonwhite" was an accurate, no-nonsense way of referring to all the ascribed categories of race, other than the white one, with a minimum of socially-constructed connotation. At any rate, simply listing all of the racial categories with which the contributors identified would have made too cumbersome a title.

However, one African-American woman who was a potential contributor to the anthology objected to the use of the term "non-white" in the title, on the grounds that it was a negative designation rather than a positive or affirmative one; it defined people in terms of what they were not. I thought that this was how many whites, including hard-nosed social scientists writing for the government, labeled blacks, Asians, Indians, and Hispanics, and that insofar as all of the racial categories were made up and ascribed, it was just as well to use the most official label, which was also an inclusive one. But I knew that not everyone presently doing philosophical work on race agreed with me about the extent to which all racial categories are ascriptive. One recurring objection to my emphasis of the biological emptiness of race in previous publications has been that this emphasis



seems to neglect the social importance of race, and the value to blacks, Asians and Indians, of their phenomenological experience of their racial identities as physically real.<sup>5</sup> The phenomenological experience may be culturally constructed, and it has a history of being reactive to white racist ascriptions of the false biological notions. But, in conjunction with shared culture and group loyalty, the phenomenological physical reality of race is an important basis for ongoing liberatory activism and scholarship. I therefore did not have a satisfactory answer to the potential contributor who objected to the word "nonwhite" in the title, and I thought that her article was an important contribution to the anthology.

More problematic, several Latina potential contributors informed me that they could not include their work in a collection with the adjective "nonwhite" in the title, because they identified themselves as racially white. I responded that I had read their references to themselves as "women of color" in previous publications. Their response to me was that the terms "nonwhite" and "of color" were not synonymous, precisely because of the metaphorical connotations of the term "of color." I thought it ironic that some philosophers deliberately chose metaphor for the sake of precision, whereas I had disciplined myself to eschew metaphor. I did not think that a collection such as this would be complete without the views of Latina or Hispanic women philosophers.

I figured out that there is, in this case, more to the deliberate choice of metaphor than an avoidance of precision, so that what looked to be a metaphor might be a more comprehensive term. The label "metaphoric" for a racially white person's self-designation as a person "of color" is itself a metaphor. Not all people who are "of color" are "nonwhite" because the term "of color" can be informatively applied to a person who is racially white but does not share the culture of white people who belong to the dominant groups of national origin in American society. In broad parlance, "race" refers to biology and "ethnicity" refers to culture (leaving aside the frequent use of "ethnicity" as a euphemism for racial nonwhiteness). The term Hispanic is a deliberate social construction that refers to members of ethnic groups in the United States whose families are originally from Spain, South America, Central America, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and other places. Although it is recognized (demanded) on the census and other classifying forms that "Hispanics" identify as "white" or "nonwhite," the dominant British and European ethnic groups in the United States