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Socratic Oblivion and the Siren Songs of Academe: Responding to Anne-Marie Schultz’s “Stirring up America’s Sleeping Horses”

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Anne-Marie Schultz wants philosophy both to attend to social justice (2018, pp. 1-2) and to engage with public audiences and public thinkers like Ta-Nehisi Coates (2018, pp. 8-9).¹ She justifies her position by lauding Socrates as portrayed in Plato’s *Apology*, dubbing him a “public intellectual” and celebrating his commitment to *parrhesia* (2018, pp. 1-4).²

We largely agree with these goals. But ethics and politics flourish and flounder in the subtleties of the empirical world. And we find problematic both the sanitized version of Socrates and the uncontextualized version of Coates. Stated plainly: (1) Socrates is a poor model for any socially engaged intellectual, and (2) Coates must be placed within the history of black literature and philosophy in the United States. This means that calling Coates “Socratic” is not univocally positive, and comparing Coates to Socrates inflates his reputation and ignores a history of black thinkers that deserve equally serious engagement.

1. Socratic Oblivion

Socrates deserves some praise. Even though he synthesized and revised ideas from Xenophanes and Pythagoras (not to mention Homer and Hesiod), he represents a qualitative shift in intellectual history and systematic inquiry of the world. He used the Greek language and culture to make new words like *philosophia*, and he refined cultural concepts like *aretai* and *eudaimonia*. And rather than fight, Socrates preferred conversation, describing himself as a midwife of ideas who tends to men’s souls (*Theaetetus*, 150a ff). He even allowed women to be full guardians in the *kallipolis* (*Republic*, 451d ff), remarkable considering Greece’s misogyny. He took no payment for his services, and he lived his convictions to the death (*Apology*, 31c, 38c ff). He embodied integrity.

But we should not sanitize Socrates, discarding his flaws into oblivion.

White-washing important figures causes precisely the harm Schultz wants to correct, the harm that Coates emphasizes in American history. Socrates had more than a little macho man in him, serving as hoplite and relishing the idea (see: Anderson, 2005). And despite allowing women to be full guardians, his status as feminist is questionable, often conceding that women are empirically inferior to men and that everyone is subservient to the state (*Republic*, V; see: Annas, 1976). Moreover, even if we examine only the early dialogues, like the *Apology*, we find a pattern of Socrates only talking to prominent *men*, whom he repeatedly annoyed (*Apology*, 21e, 22e, 24b). Then, he allowed himself to be captured, tried, and executed. He trusted the system. He begged obedience to it and justified its capital punishments (*Apology*, 19a; *Crito*, 51c, 52a). In Socrates' words and deeds, we find outright contradictions, like Socrates saying we ought neither to fear death nor weigh it heavily in our considerations, yet also arguing he did not lead a public life because he needed to survive (*Apology*, 29a, 31c-32a). We find a man who neglects his household and friends (*Apology*, 36b) and who fails to compromise or find alternatives to *his* way of arguing and *his* way of facing justice (*Apology*, 28b, 38e). Moreover, we find little discussion of slavery, despite there being periods in Greek history where there were as many as a dozen slaves for each free person (Blake, 1860, p. 24).

Socrates is a mixed bag. If conviction and execution are the standards for success, then so much the worse for failure. Moreover, Socrates should have known better because Anaxagoras was tried and exiled for impiety before him (as Aristotle would later face too). We ask our audience not to be lured by the siren song of Socrates that sings that you can convince people through uncompromising reason.³ Plain speech cannot accomplish all goals, especially not in politics.⁴ And neither education nor votes can be won by refusing to meet audiences where they are or failing to adjust strategic action to circumstances. Socrates was a great philosopher, but he was a lousy activist and public intellectual. He annoyed almost every influential person in Athens, thus burning politically useful bridges. He questioned people to the point of *aporia* and gave few positive answers, thus failing to establish a clear educational program. And when his movement needed him most during Athens' turmoil, he decided execution was preferable to escape and continued strategy and action.

Given this reality, why would anyone want to call Coates "Socratic"?⁵

2. Prophets or Specimens?

Additionally, why hold Coates as an exemplary public intellectual? Absent the "popularity" of his genre of public discourse (or even absent

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a historical focus), it is questionable to celebrate Coates rather than thinkers like Charles Blow or Jamelle Bouie. By focusing exclusively on Socrates and Coates, Schultz's framework misses key figures and distorts Coates through a Socratic lens. And by neglecting developments between Socrates and Coates, she avoids engaging the prophetic tradition that informs African American politics and thought in the 20th century. Schultz does cite Cornel West's *Democracy Matters*, but she pays no attention to his more recent book, *Black Prophetic Fire*, which lays out a black prophetic tradition moving through Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, and Ida B. Wells, not to mention the strivings of Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Angela Davis. We must remember that thinking occurs outside of the ivory tower in ways neither always inferior to the academy nor necessarily legible to it. This means that engaging traditions takes work, as using the most obvious frameworks and figures risks neglecting the development, context, and deep meanings of works. Schultz's omissions are regrettable, especially because two definitive aspects of the prophetic tradition are speaking truth to power (the act of publicly challenging dominant modes of authority) and doing so fully aware of the significant moral consequence, both nice parallels to *parrhesia*.⁶ The prophetic tradition thus merges theory and *praxis*; it offers an understanding of why one speaks and to what end one acts.

Given this context, Coates is a controversial illustration of Schultz's points. He may speak to power, but he has no sense of that action as critical toward an emancipatory project. Towards the end of *Between the World and Me*, Coates advises his son, "But you cannot arrange your life around them and the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness... Our bodies are too precious. And you are here now, and you must live—and there is so much out there to live for..." (2015, pp. 146-147). He follows this with a discussion of the "dark energies" of The Mecca (the black social world as exemplified by Howard University) and of the grand celebration taking place there during homecoming—full of music, liquor, and dancing as sensual as a black woman "in her tightest jeans... [shaking] as though she was not somebody's momma" (2015, p. 147). Coates is clearly concerned with worldly pleasures and offerings, specifically those of a black world surviving through the threat of white supremacy. But nothing at Howard University's Homecoming resolves the contradiction of white supremacy within the United States, and Coates is okay with that. And while we cannot judge this position as an abdication of duty without a fuller account of black struggle,⁷ we can say that a fundamental difference exists between the social practices encouraged by Socrates and Coates.

In fact, Cornel West expressed his discontent with Coates' writing and politics for reasons that reflect these differences. West notes that Coates has no affiliation with collective struggle, and no analysis of concrete instances of inequality and oppression. More or less, West identifies that Coates has no intention of using his work to motivate or inform activism (2015).⁸ So, even if Socrates were an effective public intellectual (which we challenged), Schultz would need to prove the same for Coates.⁹

Coates is a slippery thinker. As with any complicated figure, it is impossible to frame the entirety of his writing and actions in a single idiom. Even as Coates shies away from solutions of any sort, there are moments in his writing where he posits the possibility of America's reconciliation with its bloody history and slavery's ever potent specter (see: 2017, ch. 6). But these difficulties demonstrate the wisdom of Ralph Ellison in his essay "The World and the Jug," where he explains that attempts to pick the *exemplary* black writer, and to position them as a champion, render black persons as bugs collected in jars by children or livestock raised and appraised by farmers (2003, p. 155 ff). Attending to the work of black thinkers requires attending to the ways they have approached both the issues worth addressing and the writing worth reading. Schultz's rendering of Coates in a vacuum does not meet this threshold.

3. Be Gadflies

So where does this leave us? We hope with nagging discomfort. We have been steering our fleet toward the siren song of Academe, those seductive lyrics that tell us to self-interrogate to assuage guilt and to name-drop thinkers outside the canon of white, cisgender, heterosexual, wealthy, powerful, male philosophers. Another academic publication, another blog post, another op-ed column, another academic ship ruined on the rocky shore of slacktivism.¹⁰ We must resist the Socratic and academic siren songs by engaging seriously with the neglected philosophical tradition in thinkers like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells.¹¹

We think Schultz would agree with us that mere writing is not enough. We need parents who send their children to public schools and make sure they get support for solid curricula and extracurricular activities. We need people monitoring local governments and their own church communities to squelch hate. We need people to give money and political power to people and causes that need it most. And if we neither talk to people unlike us nor persuade leaders to attend to justice, we must ask ourselves this: are we just writing as a mere academic exercise, and what is that really worth?

In sum, we must be more than public intellectuals; we must be gadflies.¹²

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Notes

¹ Schultz is unclear about who her audience is. The piece appears written for accessibility by avoiding technicalities. Yet, she also derides scholars of ancient philosophy specifically, and philosophers and academics generally, for not attending to Coates (2018, pp. 1-2). We take the accessibility of the piece to hint she means to address the widest possible audience, so we will proceed similarly. We are also aware that most of our audience will be professional philosophers, skewing toward upper-middle-class white folk.

² Despite talking about Socrates and Plato generally, Schultz does not provide an explicit statement as to which dialogues represent Socrates or Plato, nor does she sample from more than *The Apology* in the main argument.

Additionally, Schultz fails to provide an account of *parrhesia*. She mentions that it involves Socratic questioning, plain speaking, engagement with others, and calling out another person's commitments (especially when implicit) (2018, pp. 2-4). It also seems to involve political risk, in that it put Socrates at odds with the Athenian rulers (2018, p. 4). For us, *parrhesia* means, at base, to say everything, speak truth to power, and assume social and political risk to defend norms like truth, goodness, and justice. We think you can see this in Socrates, but also in the etymology, *parrhesia* coming from the Greek words *pas* ("all" or "totality") and *rhesis* ("speech" or "expression"). A curious omission, especially given her socio-political bent and self-confessed continental allegiance, is Michel Foucault's analysis of *parrhesia* (2001).

³ Reason and facts do not convince most people. For accessible reviews of recent social scientific literature, see: (Beck, 2017), which surveys research in psychology; and (Kolbert, 2017), which grapples with living in a "post-truth" world. Plato knew this too, which is why he used myth, allegory, and metaphor. This is something underemphasized in the *Apology*, making Schultz's exclusive focus on it a strange way to analyze his political and rhetorical projects.

⁴ This hits especially hard against Schultz because she takes "plain speech" as a central feature of *parrhesia*. Had there been a more lucid discussion of *parrhesia*, this objection might soften.

⁵ One (only partially tongue-in-cheek) response, is to say that Coates is detached, academic, and idealistic like Socrates. Critic Thomas Chatterton Williams (2017) might agree, as he thinks Coates oversimplifies race relations through "sonderweg" thinking, a method of using true but unhelpfully simplistic frames to understand things. Calling America a country of slavery, theft, and genocide is true, as is saying that white supremacy plays a large part. But it lacks nuance and sophistication enough to understand the problems, and any solutions generated by the simplistic ideas will be inadequate.

Considering a different angle, Vinson Cunningham (2015) has also described Coates as loose and lyrical (versus a more precise and argumentative James Baldwin). His view would provide further evidence for our claim that Coates is unlike Socrates or Plato.

⁶ As an example of the prophetic tradition, Martin Luther King, Jr. famously

invokes that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” In “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King argues that the task of social justice involves notions of “eternal law” or “natural law,” which are grounded in perfect ideals. It also involves striving to produce human-made laws that bring the inaccessible divine law into being ([1963] 2013). This represents both factors of prophetic thinking mentioned above.

⁷ Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* addresses the notion of “wake work” as a kind of communal care of black persons, which suggests that this kind of work has its own efficacy (2016, ch. 1). It has its own precursors in works like “The Idea of Ancestry” by Etheridge Knight (1986).

⁸ In 2015, Cornel West wrote the following on Facebook:

Baldwin was a great writer of profound courage who spoke truth to power. Coates is a clever wordsmith with journalistic talent who avoids any critique of the Black president in power. Baldwin’s painful self-examination led to collective action and a focus on social movements. He reveled in the examples of Medgar, Martin, Malcolm, Fannie Lou Hamer and Angela Davis. Coates’s fear-driven self-absorption leads to individual escape and flight to safety – he is cowardly silent on the marvelous new militancy in Ferguson, Baltimore, New York, Oakland, Cleveland and other places. Coates can grow and mature, but without an analysis of capitalist wealth inequality, gender domination, homophobic degradation, Imperial occupation (all concrete forms of plunder) and collective fightback (not just personal struggle) Coates will remain a mere darling of White and Black Neo-liberals, paralyzed by their Obama worship and hence a distraction from the necessary courage and vision we need in our catastrophic times. How I wish the prophetic work of serious intellectuals like Robin D. G. Kelley, Imani Perry, Gerald Horne, Eddie Glaude commanded the attention the corporate media gives Coates. But in our age of superficial spectacle, even the great Morrison is seduced by the linguistic glitz and political silences of Coates as we all hunger for the literary genius and political engagement of Baldwin. As in jazz, we must teach our youth that immature imitation is suicide and premature elevation is death. Brother Coates continue to lift your gifted voice to your precious son and all of us, just beware of the white noise and become connected to the people’s movements. (2015)

While West is certainly correct that Coates is not concerned with collective struggle, his assertion that Coates is unwilling to be critical of Obama is now less compelling. Coates’ most recent (2017) collection of essays, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*, attends specifically to the Obama Administration.

⁹ In this respect, Coates is unique among contemporary black writers.

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Many often think of Coates in relation to Claudia Rankine, whose (2014) book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, works to explicate race relations in the United States. Rankine's book came out in the fall of 2014 in the midst of public outcry against police brutality in general and the questionable practices of grand juries in particular. It is interesting to note that Coates—whose book was not released until the summer of 2015—received a MacArthur Genius Fellowship a year before Rankine did. And Rankine uses the money from her MacArthur grant to fund the Racial Imaginary Institute, a creative space and think tank where writers of various training can explore the workings of race in the United States. The Racial Imaginary Institute represents an effort to alter public dialogue in ways bigger than a single writer could accomplish. One could also contrast Coates' political hesitation with the vigilance of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former member of the Black Liberation Army who was once on death row but is now serving a life sentence. This summer, Abu-Jamal released his latest (2017) collection of essays, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, which continues his focus on writing toward the activism of the moment.

¹⁰ Schultz writes, "Nuanced argument on blogs, newspaper columns, book clubs, church meetings, and social gatherings are desperately needed to combat the dark shadow of *parrhesia* in the public square" (2018, p. 9).

¹¹ This list could be expanded to include people we did not mention in this essay: Booker T. Washington, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Katherine Gines, Tommie Shelby, George Yancy, and Charles Mills. We could include novels by Richard Wright, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou. We recognize the irony of name-dropping precisely when we advise otherwise. But we cannot do much about wordcount.

¹² We would like to thank Scott F. Aikin and Sabeen Ahmed. They helped us to feel out our ideas by discussing the history of philosophy, literature, activism, and race.

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