

# The Life and Work of Charles Mills Conference

## Program & Abstracts

**10:00–11:30 a.m.:** Panel 1: **Anita Allen-Castellitto** (Penn) and **Paul Taylor** (Vanderbilt)

**Presenter:** Anita Allen-Castellitto

**Title:** Art Meets Philosophy: Adrian Piper's *Probable Trust Registry* through the Lens of Charles Mills's *The Racial Contract*

**Abstract:** Adrian Piper is an African American woman, artist, and analytic philosopher whose prize-winning artwork *The Probable Trust Registry* is aptly placed in conversation with Charles Mills's book *The Racial Contract* in this talk. The surprising result is a commentary on how women of color inspire one another do philosophy on their own terms.

**Presenter:** Paul Taylor

**Title:** Dedication, Resistance, Refusal, and Embrace: Compassion and *The Racial Contract*

**Abstract:** Charles Mills dedicated *The Racial Contract* to the people who resisted and refused white supremacy. One of his great contributions was to furnish those people with theoretical and conceptual resources to help them continue and intensify their efforts. But his scholarly achievements threaten to overshadow another of his great contributions. Professor Mills was a peculiarly welcoming figure, whose complaints about the profession he chose—about what I would call its whiteness and its commitment to racial innocence—never drowned out the encouraging words and actions he offered to students and colleagues suffering from demoralization and disenchantment. This talk will reflect on this less obvious contribution and its connections to Mills's more celebrated scholarly interventions.

**11:45 a.m.–1:15 p.m.:** Panel 2: **Brian Meeks** (Brown) and **Olúfẹmi Táíwò** (Cornell)

**Presenter:** Brian Meeks

**Title:** Mills, 1968 and Caribbean Black Power: Roots and Formations

**Abstract:** The paper seeks to understand the origins of Charles Mills's radical perspectives, in the hybrid and peculiar intersection of Rastafarianism, Black Power, and Caribbean Marxism-Leninism that emerged in Jamaica in the late 1960s. What were Charles's main influences at Jamaica College and later at the University of the West Indies? What texts were he and other young radical students reading? And how did these influences lead into the Workers Liberation League, later to become the Workers Party of Jamaica? While some may interpret *The Racial*

*Contract* as a drastic departure from his earlier graduate work on Marx and ideology, the suggestion here is that there are many more features of continuity between the earlier Charles, the activist and party member, and the later philosopher of race than may at a glance be apparent.

**Presenter:** Olúfẹmi Táíwò

**Title:** Doing Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century West Africa

**Abstract:** This essay inscribes into the history of philosophy the contributions of a constituency that is regularly omitted from its annals. This omission has two sources: the exclusion from the annals by those who are celebrated as the canonical thinkers of the dominant tradition—the Euro-American; the continuing dominance of what Francis Bacon called “Idols of the Theater” that makes successive cohorts of practitioners to accept that who or whatever was ignored or excluded by the canon and its expositors cannot be worthy of their own attention, either. In this discussion, I argue from both a thematic and a historical approach that not only is this omission not justified, but it also makes it impossible for honest teachers of philosophy to deliver its history and register truthfully the biographies of its contributors located in a particular neck of the global woods—West Africa.

**1:15–2:30 p.m.:** Lunch

**2:30–4:00 p.m.:** Student Panel 3: **Elvira Basevich** (UMass Lowell), **Eric Bayruns Garcia** (California State University, San Bernardino), **Teófilo Reis** (CUNY Graduate Center), and **Gregory Slack** (CUNY Graduate Center)

**Presenter:** Elvira Basevich

**Title:** The Promise and Limit of Kant’s Theory of Justice

**Abstract:** This essay applies Charles W. Mills’s notion of the domination contract to refine Kant’s original theory of justice. The concept of domination underlining the domination contract is best understood as structural domination, which unjustifiably authorizes institutions to weaken vulnerable groups’ public standing as free, equal, and independent citizens. Though Kant’s theory of justice captures why the domination contract contradicts the requirements of justice, it is nonetheless ill suited to assail it, for Kant neglects that the idea of the innate right to freedom, a cornerstone of his theory of justice, requires the public recognition of the “independent” normative authority of all citizens to command political power as civic equals. The state must dismantle the denigrating race- and gender-based social roles that constitute structural domination for all persons to achieve civic equality. I thus defend the ideal of civic equality to position all persons as co-legislators of the terms of political rule.

**Presenter:** Eric Bayruns Garcia

**Title:** Charles Mills's Epistemology and Its Importance for Political Philosophy

**Abstract:** In Charles Mills's article "White Ignorance" and his trail-blazing monograph *The Racial Contract*, he developed a view of how Whiteness or anti-Black, Indigenous and Latinx racism causes individuals to hold false beliefs or lack true beliefs about the world in general and racial injustice in particular. I will present unnoted ways that Mills's epistemology contributes to the fields of epistemology and social epistemology. And I will present novel reasons why this epistemology matters for political theories that aim to understand and remedy racial injustice. The reasons that I present will be based partly on exegesis of Mills's body of work and partly on conversations that I had with him regarding how he understood White Ignorance.

**Presenter:** Teófilo Reis

**Title:** Charles Mills in Brazil

**Abstract:** Charles Mills's work provides tools to think about race in many different contexts. In this paper, I focus on the circulation of Mills's ideas in Brazil, a country with intricate race relations and a substantial Black population. I am especially interested in the trajectories of *The Racial Contract* and the concept of White Ignorance in and beyond philosophy in Brazil. I discuss then how the thought of some Brazilian intellectuals either already is or can be put in a fruitful dialogue with Mills's works.

**Presenter:** Gregory Slack

**Title:** Charles W. Mills: Black Radical Liberal or Black Marxist?

**Abstract:** Shortly before he was cruelly snatched away from us, Charles W. Mills was developing a position he called 'black radical liberalism' (sometimes 'black radical Kantianism'). Its three central components, so Mills tells us, are Kantian liberalism, Marxian class radicalism and materialism, and Du Boisian race radicalism and race theory. Despite Mills's attempt to weave these three (potentially incompatible) strands into a single theoretical thread, he nonetheless describes this synthesis as a form of liberalism. Here I want to interrogate this position to determine to what extent (if at all) it differs from the Marxism that is one of its three essential pillars.

**4:15–6:00 p.m.:** Panel 4: **Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò** (Georgetown), **Falguni Sheth** (Emory), and **Michael C. Dawson** (U Chicago)

**Presenter:** Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò

**Title:** Model-to-World Inference: Responding to Mill's Critique of Ideal Theory

**Abstract:** Defenders of ideal theory in social and political philosophy insist that its abstractions and idealizations are justifiable or even indispensable; detractors maintain that these will irretrievably distort reality, pointing out important aspects of political life that are un- or

misrepresented by theory. Charles Mills provides an even more pointed and worrying version of this criticism, arguing that ideal theories and theorists act as unwitting or negligent accomplices in oppressive structures. But philosopher Kwasi Wiredu provides an example of philosophy resembling ideal theory and crafted as such in response to racial and colonial domination. I first distinguish between models and “model-to-world inferences,” the conclusions about the world or our actions that we take them to license and use this to defend ideal theory. I then argue for the utility of ideal theory to “constructive politics,” a design-based approach to ethics and ethical judgements. I’ll argue that this is the use of ideal theory that we see in Wiredu (and, arguably, in Mills himself) and this use also responds adequately to the force of Mill’s criticisms.

**Presenter:** Falguni Sheth

**Title:** The Epistemology of Ignorance, Founding Violence, and the Narrative of Self-Defense

**Abstract:** I augment Charles Mills's notion of the epistemology of ignorance with another cognitive lens, the epistemology of violence. An epistemology of violence is a cognitive reorientation by which that same society understands, even internalizes, violence to be necessary to its own survival. This logic can be found in Lockean social contract theory, which mirrors settler-colonial violence waged during the same time and finds its way to the current moment as well. I suggest that an epistemology of violence is a robust way to understand the production of sub-persons.

**Presenter:** Michael C. Dawson

**Title:** TBA

**Abstract:** TBA