

Alfred Frankowski

The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization: Toward a Political Sense of Mourning
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Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Miriam Carey, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tanishia Anderson, Yvette Smith, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, Natasha Mckenna, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Tyre King, Keith Scott, Terence Crutcher--Black women, men, and children murdered, not in the brutal past of slavery or in the not so distant past of Jim Crow but in the present. Many names are missing from this list; more names will be added as senseless killings of Blacks continue, all at the same time as memorials to Dr. King are erected, as stones of hope are built to commemorate Black lives lost in a past that supposedly has nothing to do with our "post-racial," wonderful present in which Barack Obama is president. Strange indeed. It is this strangeness that Alfred Frankowski's *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization* analyzes by critically assessing the intertwining of the aesthetic, the political, memorialization, and racism in a US context. Frankowski shows not just the strangeness but also the failure and perversity of memorialization under post-racial practices that effectively silence anti-black racism. Under the regime of post-raciality, memory becomes a type of forgetting, a silencing, a way not to carry the past and present dead with us and, ultimately, a way to detach ourselves from moral responsibility in the face of continued anti-black racism. Frankowski's deeply important, original, and timely work introduces a political sense of mourning; it is also a work that mourns--not only all the Black lives lost to the pervasive anti-black violence of the past and of a forgetful present but also of a future condemned to repetition if we fail to critically assess how some of our so-called progressive and resistant practices of remembrance are tied to deadly forgetting.

First, a note on Frankowski's appeal to the aesthetic and to the notion of mourning: he appeals to the aesthetic in its connection to sensibility as such and thus to that which can and cannot be sensed, which, in turn, informs what can be mourned or not (xviii). Mourning here does not denote a psychological phenomenon as it is understood in the literature on the topic influenced by Freud, for example, in work by Butler, Eng, Kazanjian, and others (Butler 1997; Eng and Kazanjian 2003). It is a *political* mourning that calls us to "attempt to always carry the loss within the present" (xx). *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization* is divided into six chapters that discuss different aspects of memorialization in a post-racial context, providing analyses of memorials including The Stone of Hope in Washington, D.C., Hope Plaza and the Tower of Reconciliation in Tulsa, the African American Family monument in Savannah, and the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Big Rapids, Michigan. Frankowski also provides analyses of other aesthetic memorializations, such as W. E. B. Dubois's commentary on the sorrow songs, Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," and Keith Beauchamp's documentary, *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*. These commentaries aim at showing different aspects of what are, in fact, *limits* of memorialization and what Frankowski considers as the double movement characteristic of the production of memorializing representations: on the one hand, memorializing representations illustrate progress and recognition of the brutality of the past, but, on the other hand, they become delinked from that very past. They thus mark the present as a completely different moment, and anti-black violent racism remains part only of the distant past even though it is staring us at the face.

Chapter 1 importantly proposes a phenomenology of memory, an analysis of the way that memory is part of a collective background of intelligibility that is meaningful insofar as it informs our *lifeworld*. Here Frankowski sets the ground for what will become a key aspect of his argument: that given present practices of post-racial memorialization, we are in a moment of crisis that needs to be countered by a political sense of mourning, a mourning that is a social practice that "problematizes the context, the lifeworld, and the systemic productivity in which our former modes of existence, our former modes of investment were meaningful" (98). By carrying out an analysis of the Stone of Hope, in this chapter Frankowski illustrates the post-racial limits of memorialization, how post-raciality reproduces memory as a type of forgetting and thus forges "evasive aesthetic relations" (11) that miss the way in which memory is integral to a social context, consequently making it possible for institutional racism to be considered only part of a distant past. It is in this post-racial context that Frankowski discusses the murder of Trayvon Martin that led to various resistant practices of memorialization and activities decrying the act but that, according to Frankowski, ultimately produced only "muted activity," false consciousness, and the production of cultural amnesia (16).

Frankowski is in effect disclosing how practices of memory are ultimately connected to who we are and who we are becoming. His key analysis in chapter 2, of the limits of memorialization and representation illustrated by Hope Plaza and the Tower of Reconciliation, which commemorate the so called "race riots" in 1921 Tulsa, provide a powerful reminder of the manner in which the production of aesthetic relationships via post-racial memorialization and discourse serve to produce and erase social consciousness while also perpetuating state violence, thus creating an "increasingly

strange" present (43). Importantly, Frankowski asks, "How do we live with the recognition that our activity of remembering mirrors an alienated relationship to politics within the post-racial context?" (43).

In chapter 3, Frankowski's discussion of the African American Family Monument and his analysis of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" in connection with W. E. B. Du Bois's understanding of the sorrow songs further illustrate how under post-racial discourse, memorialization generates active forms of silencing connected to a neglect that further reinscribes violence. It is in this chapter that Frankowski appeals to a *critical* aesthetics, or an aesthetics inspired by *both* Du Bois and Benjamin that is attuned to the *limits* of our sensibility and that calls for an allegorical rather than representational memory that will move us toward the political sense of mourning that he sees as necessary if we are to resist the violence generated by post-racial memory. The key here is finding a way to remember violence that is claimed to be of the past, but that is still very much present, while not disgracing those who have fallen (60).

In his extremely rich discussions in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Frankowski weaves four interconnected themes that support his call for a movement away from representational memory couched in the politics of recognition toward a political sense of mourning that opens the possibilities for countering post-racial memory and developing new ways of being in the face of entrenched anti-black racism: an explanation of the Cassandra complex, the network of relations connected to systemic forms of denial that is part and parcel of post-raciality (66); an explanation of the way in which the Kantian critical aesthetic of taste is crucial for his project (chapter 5); an important reminder of how Fanon's understanding of the political lifeworld as violent is utterly different from Kant's; and an explicit call for a political mourning that lies beyond the politics of recognition and identity politics. Here I will concentrate on two of these themes: the appeal to Kantian aesthetics and the call for a movement away from the politics of recognition that Frankowski connects to post-racial representational memory.

Readers familiar with Kant's documented racism (see Eze 1997; Hill and Boxill 2001; Mills 2014) will find it surprising to see his work being used in the call for a new political sense of mourning Black lives. Here we can ask about another kind of limit, the limit of engaging a Eurocentric philosophy for the purposes of combating anti-black racism. As philosophers, we cannot ourselves practice the forgetting of our esteemed philosophers' racism, sexism, and other wrongs. Yet Frankowski's engagement with Kantian aesthetics is as multilayered and complex as his analysis of memory. He both appeals to a Kantian vision of the Sublime in order to show how Kantian aesthetics points to a limit, to a breaking point, in cognition's ability to represent and also to the way in which such an aesthetics can help explain how the subject becomes nonresponsive to violence (93). Frankowski's project involves a movement away from Kant at the very same time as it learns from Kant how cognition can be led to a crisis of representation that both remembers and silences violence. In this manner, Frankowski engages in a fruitful reading of Kant that takes the Sublime as illustrating a life "that is living in relation to forms of articulation that not only communicate how something comes to an end, but that have themselves come to an end" (93).

Frankowski's proposed political sense of mourning does not appeal to representations of those populations that have been wronged or that are marginalized. It is, as he says, a "practice of responding," a "process of living with the death within our context" (96). Following Judith Butler, he sees this practice as not reducible to the political acts themselves but to the manner in which we remain attuned as well as resistant to the political lifeworld, as our very own actions become suspect in specific material contexts. Frankowski states that mourning

indicates that which is memorialized, but it problematizes the context, the *lifeworld*, and the systemic productivity in which our former modes of existence, our former modes of investment, were meaningful. Like the Sublime, mourning makes the context in which we lived appear now as a problem. (98)

The question arises, however, as to why he ties representational memory with all its failures of both memorializing and forgetting to a politics of recognition connected to identity politics. More precisely, the question is why Frankowski reads identity politics only in its narrow sense in which subjects that have been marked by violence and tragedy, subjects that have "wounded attachments," as Wendy Brown would put it (Brown 1995, Ch. 3), can see themselves only through this wound and are doomed to reify the very attachments and contexts that undermine them--what Frankowski sees as integral to post-racial discourse. Recent feminist philosophers of identity (Collins 2002; Alcoff 2006; Crenshaw 2011; Weir 2013) have developed notions of identity that go beyond narrow visions of identity politics or what Mari Matsuda calls *regressive* identity politics (Matsuda 1997, 18). These reconfigurations of identity allow for the possibility of subjects not being confined to particular essentializing and homogenizing identity claims that demand representational acts of memorialization and of mourning that are not fluid and that erase the possibility of our "*living with and through* our context," as Frankowski calls for (78). An engagement with some of these feminist notions of identity that are mindful of the problems with the politics of recognition and narrow identity politics would be helpful here and even push the limits of Frankowski's own analysis. Moreover, a consideration of the function of *haunting* produced by the brutal past of slavery (Gordon 2008); of recent commentaries on aesthetics that consider a strong link between the aesthetic and the political (Roelofs 2014); and of Black theoretical work on representation and memory in the context of anti-black racism (Raiford 2011) would allow for an even richer analysis of post-racial memorialization.

Although engagement with these texts would enhance Frankowski's analysis, *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization's* linkage among the aesthetic, the political, and practices of memory in a context of brutal anti-black violence and racism and its call for a critical engagement with current post-racial forgetful practices of remembering remains an original, deeply significant philosophical contribution that poses an equally deeply important moral challenge for us: that of seeing the strangeness and perversity of post-raciality in the midst of the present bloodshed of Black lives that indeed matter.

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