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# Response to Comments on 'Addams on Cultural Pluralism, European Immigrants, and African Americans'

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## Response

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I thank Denise James and Charlene Haddock Seigfried for their thoughtful comments on my paper. Although they respond in different ways, they both picked up on questions and uncertainties that arose as I wrote the paper.

For some years I have been trying to write on essays Addams addressed to African American audiences. For this paper I decided to deal only with Addams's writings between 1900 and 1910 in order to compare her essays for African American audiences with what she wrote at the same time for wider audiences. This approach enabled me to sort out when Addams's writing aligned with thinking in the dominant culture and when it departed from that.

James questions my decision not to use the concept of white privilege in the paper. Calling Addams's theory of cultural pluralism "white-centrist," James is concerned that I downplay the weightiness of cultural imperialism and evade judging Addams harshly. I agree with James that whiteness and white privilege are invaluable conceptual tools. (In what follows, assume that "race" and "racial" have scare quotes around them. I understand race to be a cultural construct; its meaning and salience are configured differently in different times and places.) Whether whiteness and white privilege are the right conceptual tools to use varies with the focus of one's lens. My paper is in a sense microscopic. The contemporary conception of white privilege was introduced at a time when cultural designations of race in the U.S. were generally placed into a white/nonwhite binary. This is not nuanced enough for understanding racial configurations in the U.S. at the beginning of the twentieth century. On immigration documents, for example, newly arriving persons had to fill in both their "color" and their "race." People from

Italy were to indicate “white” as their color, and for race they had to select between North Italian and South Italian (Guglielmo, *White*, 9). Most Anglo-Saxons thought it vitally important to differentiate themselves racially from the multitude of “inferior” European races, and for the most part, they avoided using “white,” a term that blurred what to them were crucial distinctions. Yes, Anglo-Saxons thought southern and eastern Europeans were above African Americans on the evolutionary scale, but even that line was porous at given times and geographic locations. Addams strongly protested when African-Americans were lynched; she also protested when Italian-Americans were lynched. Only later in the twentieth century, after the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act imposed draconian restrictions on immigration from countries outside of northwestern Europe, did “ethnic” come to replace racial designations for people of European descent, and “white” become the operative cultural designator for them. These legal restrictions stayed in place until 1965.<sup>1</sup>

To claim that Addams was “white-centrist” erases what were then crucially important racial distinctions made among the many European races. Addams’s theory of cultural pluralism is remarkable in that in it she places culturally despised groups at the center of her vision. No one at the time would have identified her theory as white-centrist. As Seigfried notes, “Even innocuous sounding beliefs running counter to this narrative [of European racial distinctions and gradations] would have a radical-seeming resonance unknown to us.” One could say that my essay explores on the micro-level one manifestation of how what we now call white privilege functioned within intellectual thought during one decade. Telescopes are valuable instruments; so are microscopes.

Understanding how the salience of whiteness has changed over time helps us remember how contingent historical events are, how nothing is inevitable, how things could have gone

differently. What if the U.S. had not passed draconian immigration restriction legislation in 1924? It is possible that the white/nonwhite binary would still have emerged; it is even possible that people of Southern and Eastern European descent could have found themselves categorized on the non-white side of the line. It is also possible that a more complicated racial landscape could have emerged, as is the case in some Latin American countries. (This does not imply that the racial landscape would necessarily be less racist.)

Raising a consideration I did not discuss in the paper, Seigfried notes that Addams did not live with African-Americans the way she did among immigrant communities, and that this may have limited her ability to theorize about them. Seigfried then makes the sensible observation that “participation in the lives and cultures of others will always operate on a scale of more and less,” and that partial understanding is still useful. She asks how African Americans with whom Addams interacted responded to her. Du Bois, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Reverdy Ransom appreciated her efforts enormously and gave her high praise.<sup>2</sup> A crucial difference in Addams’s experiences with immigrants compared to African Americans, is that she was intimately familiar with differences within immigrant communities and had learned to work with and around them. She had to negotiate the deep tensions between different segments of Chicago’s Jewish community, as well as tensions among Catholics of Irish, Polish, and Italian descent. In 1910 the vast majority of African Americans lived in the rural South; the African Americans in Chicago with whom Addams interacted represented a small segment of the experience of African Americans in the U.S. Although Du Bois, like Addams, grew up in the north, he spent a great deal of time with many southern African American communities before writing *Souls of Black Folk*. Geography and place matter. They shape our experiences and our ability to use them while theorizing.

James notes that in the early twentieth century “culture” and “civilization” were *grand idées* that functioned as measuring sticks, reinforcing “white” superiority and justifying colonization and imperialism. She is right about this. James is troubled that “[Fischer’s] overall claim seems to be that Addams could not have escaped the net of cultural imperialist ideology of her times.” This is a claim I struggled with while writing the paper, and continue to struggle with. William James’s image of how thinking goes hovered over me as I wrote the paper. In “What Pragmatism Means” he describes the mass of opinions all tangled up in one’s mind. When an experience rubs against a thread in the tangle, one alters it and figures out how to link it back into the tangle. “Truth” is what he calls this process of tangle adjustment. This means that intellectual progress is piecemeal; one cannot comb out all the tangles at once, and probably not even in a lifetime.

I have read many social evolutionary theorists from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, among them T.H. Huxley, Benjamin Kidd, John Fiske, and L.T. Hobhouse. The paradigm’s assumptions were deeply embedded in both intellectual theorizing and popular culture. What I find amazing is the numbers of tangles Du Bois and Addams were able to comb out. My paper shows specific ways in which Addams did “escape the net of cultural imperialist ideology,” and identifies specific ways in which she did not. I doubt that any individual can question enough of the mass of opinions that constitute a paradigm so as to escape its net altogether. As Seigfried notes, to ask an individual thinker to do so is “a Platonic demand, assuming access to an independent realm of perfect truth and goodness. It is not a pragmatic one.”

Seigfried and James both sense my hesitant tone in the essay’s final paragraph. Seigfried is a good diagnostician. She traces the disappointment in my tone to exactly the right spot: “It is

our own fear that we cannot recognize and overcome all our prejudices through mental scrutiny and good will.” A few years ago I began paying attention to how frequently Addams refers to her immigrant neighbors as primitive. Since then, I have been going through the stages of grief. At first I denied that Addams really meant it. When I realized that she meant it and had theoretical grounds backing it up, I was angry. Now I am someplace between disappointment and acceptance of how the intellectual paradigm of her day both facilitated and limited Addams’s theorizing. Seigfried is succinct: “How much recognition of our own biases is even possible?” Humility describes how I felt as I tracked Addams trying to interpret what she learned from her immigrant neighbors, using the intellectual tools then available to her. I felt the weight of my own mass of opinions, with thoughts dangling on threads of time and place. Humility does not replace or negate the courage James calls for, but it does help us recognize our own struggles and those of our intellectual predecessors.

#### Endnotes

1. For accounts of the history of “whiteness” see Jacobson, *Whiteness*. Until 1946, the Philippines was a colony of the U.S., so Filipino migration to the U. S. was not restricted by the Johnson-Reed Act. Migration from Mexico had its own complications. See Ngai, *Impossible*, Chapter Four.
2. Writing about Florence Kelley, Du Bois said, “Save [for] Jane Addams, there is not another social worker in the United States who has had either her insight or her daring, so far as the American Negro is concerned.” Quoted in Deegan. *Race*, 64. Fannie Barrier Williams writes, “Serene, with philosophic penetration into the cause of our social disorders, beautifully sensitive to every form of human suffering about her, . . . Jane Addams has taught the world a new

conception of the divine element in humanity, which neither rags, dirt, nor immorality can entirely obscure” “The Need.” 109. Writing about the settlement house he established, Reverdy Ransom writes, “From our initial movement until the end of our connection, we had the active sympathy and cooperation of Miss Jane Adams (sic) of Hull House” *Pilgrimage*, 104.

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