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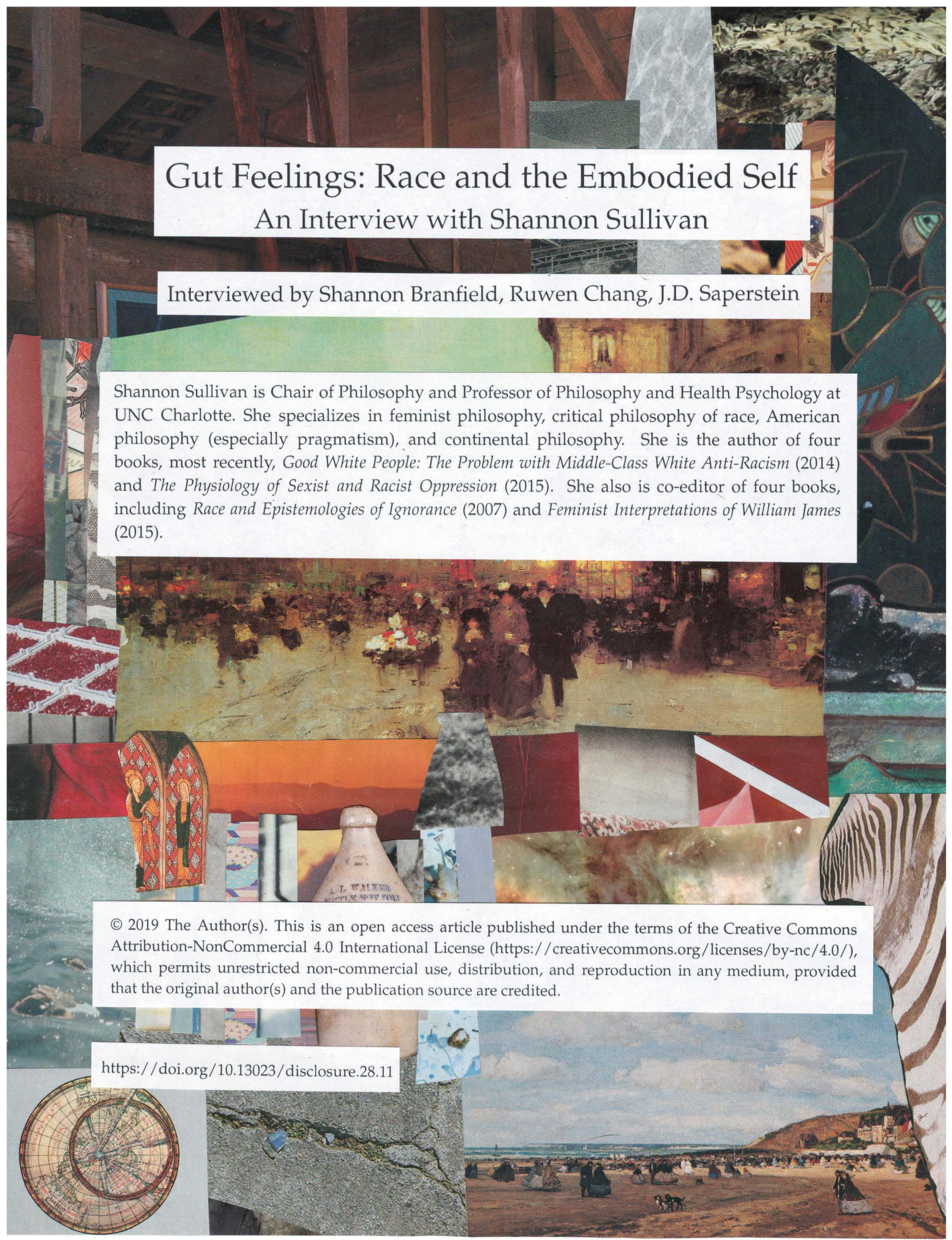
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# Gut Feelings: Race and the Embodied Self


## An Interview with Shannon Sullivan

Interviewed by Shannon Branfield, Ruwen Chang, J.D. Saperstein

Shannon Sullivan is Chair of Philosophy and Professor of Philosophy and Health Psychology at UNC Charlotte. She specializes in feminist philosophy, critical philosophy of race, American philosophy (especially pragmatism), and continental philosophy. She is the author of four books, most recently, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (2014) and *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression* (2015). She also is co-editor of four books, including *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (2007) and *Feminist Interpretations of William James* (2015).

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Branfield, Chang, and Saperstein

Gut Feelings

**Ruwen Chang (RC):** What got you into affect theory?

**Shannon Sullivan (Sullivan):** I didn't intend to work on affect and emotion. When I taught a course last fall [2017] on philosophies of emotion and affect, I realized that I do work in that area and I hadn't really conceptualized my work that way before. But when I go back to your question properly and think about it, it was connected to being interested in embodiment, which is important to thinking about race in particular. And so, as I was writing the *Good White People* book, I was thinking about white guilt and white shame and how central those emotions are to a lot of discussions about how white people should respond to white privilege. Thinking about guilt and shame then led me to look at different affects and to focus on love, which is the most controversial part of the book.

But the other answer is really three answers. One of them, I realize, is that it's Nietzsche who had a huge influence on me from early on, even before I started working in anything directly in feminist or critical philosophy of race. Nietzsche was an affect theorist before affect theory became popular, particularly in his criticism of guilt and resentment. And then, second, my most recent monograph on *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression* is, in many ways, about affect. I didn't design it that way initially, but it pushes further to think about being embodied in the context of racism and sexism. I really wanted to consider embodiment not merely phenomenologically or metaphorically, but to think about physiology: stress hormones and epigenetics and heart functions and the like. I wanted to do that in a way that understands affect and emotion in very bodily terms, and so, thirdly, William James's work has become really important to me. Recall the James-Lange theory of emotion, in which emotion is defined as bodily movements and changes. That's the starting point of that book: to think about physiological unconscious habits and the ways that they are structuring and being structured by experiences with racism and sexism. So, I increasingly find affect to be an important part of my work, but getting to that point happened by accident.

**RC:** I come from China, so race is really a new topic to me. This semester I'm taking a class on race and class. The books we're mainly reading focus on structural forces like police state violence and housing policy, but your work is actually focused on the body rather than structural forces.

**Sullivan:** Yes. For better or worse, my work tends to focus a lot on that. I won't say on individual experiences necessarily, but on the person and personal experiences. Those are intimately connected with structural and institutional forms of racism or sexism. The personal and the structural are two pieces of a very complex puzzle and they feed into each other. And so my work leans toward looking at ontological issues, in the sense of how we as selves get constituted. That shouldn't be done in a silo or an isolated way from thinking about the world that we're part of and its institutions. But while they can seem to have a life of their own, institutions often are affectively invested in by individual people and this happens sometimes in a very unconscious and bodily way.

We're not really going to fully understand structural and institutional forms of racism and sexism if we don't look at the invested self – affective and otherwise, not just financially invested, but *affectively* invested – this sense of the self that is invested in the structures and institutions of racism and sexism in ways that we don't consciously want to endorse or avow, but that might be there nevertheless.

**J.D. Saperstein (JS):** Could you explain more the mechanisms by which racism comes to be embodied by our raced selves?

**Sullivan:** As you know, the concept of habit is really important to me as a way of thinking about patterned predispositions, ways, and styles of engaging the world. I think a lot of this does not happen through conscious deliberate instruction or education. But there are unconscious habits, unconscious ways of doing things as a kind of mechanism. This leads to my interest in childhood as a site, or a location, for the development of unconscious habits. Philosophers don't talk about children much at all. But how do habits that form us as adults get formed in very early ways? Here's where some version of Freud is very important: we need to pay attention to childhood. We get formed as the selves that we are in so many powerful ways as children, which we developmentally cannot consciously be aware of or shape or control as conscious agents.

**Shannon Branfield (SB):** You use personal experience a lot in your writing. Can you talk a little bit about why you do that? If it's a deliberate choice, or just the best way to explain what you're talking about?

**Sullivan:** It is a deliberate choice for different reasons. Part of it comes from finding a home in feminist and pragmatist philosophy and the way in which they both insist that philosophy is useful. Philosophy is like a toolkit for doing things with one's life. It's connected to real experience or real situations or practices. I'm not at all opposed to abstraction, but abstraction has got to tie back and be in some kind of interactive relationship with real experiences. That leads me to want to talk about actual experiences when I'm writing. I also find philosophy very therapeutic. It's very much about trying to work out crap in my own life. Hopefully what I'm writing about is not just about me, of course. It's also about broad features situated in human existence. As I'm reading and thinking, I'm sometimes either not finding answers to what I want or not agreeing with what I'm finding, so I'm trying to work it out for myself. How do I live this life as a white woman, as a parent? And can philosophy be a useful tool to help me do that?

I find often it can be, which is why personal examples are in my work. Also, and especially as I began writing more and more about whiteness and race, I felt that it was very important to take the risks that I was implicitly asking white readers to take. I've got to have skin in the game. I've got to be just as much at risk in terms of feeling uncomfortable or feeling exposed, so I've got to be willing to put myself out there and do that too. And if I can't do that, then it doesn't feel very honest as an author.

Some of this approach also comes from teaching. When I teach about gender and race, for example, it's never about scolding the students. I don't want students to think, "And now we're being schooled in how we're supposed to think about X, Y, and Z." For this reason, I try to have the classroom environment be one in which they see that I'm just as much flailing around with this material and just as much at risk existentially as they are. And so sometimes I will direct it back to me: "Here's an example in my life where this happened..." and then that helps everyone relax a little bit.

**RC:** Yes. I really like your approach that you use personal experience as a method. I really liked that. The next question I would ask is: there's one thing I have difficulty understanding in your book. It's about your mentioning that race is ontological. Can you elaborate more on this argument?

**Sullivan:** When I use the word ontology, I mean it in an historical, situated, embedded way. There can be ways of using that word that may sound like one is trying to point to something universal and essential for all of being, and I'm not doing that. I'm trying in some basic ways to talk about how we as selves get formed and that is always going to be ongoing – never a static process or a static thing. It's always dynamic, always changing. At the same time, if that formation is happening through habits, they provide a durability to the self that can be difficult to change, which the concept of habit helps explain. Habits also are one way in which the self can be somewhat plastic, somewhat capable of change. So, habit has become an interesting mechanism for thinking about both the durability and the plasticity of who we are. Another word I would use is “transactional”: a co-constitutive formation between the self and its various environments, if we take “environment” in a very capacious sense – not just physical environments, but also social and affective environments. I really love the work of Sarah Ahmed and Teresa Brennan that talks about the circulation of affects. I think of circulation as a kind of transaction in which you've got selves and worlds and affects circulating to form the self in a way that is invested and affectively leads to wanting the world to be certain ways.

**RC:** I also feel like if race is ontological, actually, we can apply this ontological view to gender and class and thus I feel like there's actually a possibility for solidarities between different social groups. Intersectional solidarity.

**Sullivan:** I think ontology is always intersectional, so “intersectional ontology” might be the best term? At the same time, however, for certain temporary purposes we may need to consider some pieces separately. It's so complicated how we get constituted as selves. It's probably impossible to take it all in, to occupy a God's eye point of view that could see it all at once. There can be reasons to pick out some pieces at times, to focus on them more than others. But that's a functional claim, not a claim that we're constituted in isolated, siloed ways. I think especially in the United States, it's almost impossible to pull race and class apart, for example. This might be true in other countries and situations as well, but in the United States race is classed and class is raced and that's not to collapse them.

I want to resist the notion that there is a neutral core to the self and that things like gender and race are epiphenomenal. And to resist the related claims that if you're doing “real” philosophy, you're examining the core of human existence, and that race and gender aren't important or they are secondary. I think that's changed a lot, but around 25 years ago when I was going through grad school, and even as a young assistant professor, that was definitely a fight that had to be waged. If you were talking about gender or race, it was supposedly a fad. I think a lot of that has changed now, but there are still pockets in philosophy where one has to argue for something like a weaving model rather than a core model. The self is a fabric that's woven together out of different strands, and some of them are more prominent strands and some are minor. It's admittedly not an even playing field where every strand constitutes you in the same way, but there's no core that's neutral or separate from the strands that make you up. It's a very different model of the self than a core-periphery model.

**RC:** But, if we consider embodiment – or bodies actually – as compared to the constructing of emotions, the body is actually something less constructible, or something real. So it feels like if we don't have a neutral core, actually, we have this body...?

**Sullivan:** That's a great question, although I want to push to say even our literal bodies get constituted in these transactional ways. The *Physiology* book takes up that claim in a very detailed way. That's not to say that we can't find some generalities about human embodiment, such as we all have to eat or we'll die. But the minute you take that beyond some sort of simple platitude and start talking about it in some very concrete ways – about the food that constitutes us – then the core model is inadequate. For example, I have a chapter in the *Physiology* book on the gut as a site of resistance to taking in the world in certain ways (and I'm greatly influenced here by the work of Elizabeth Wilson). There's a huge connection between what I call gut habits and gut character. In that chapter, I examine, for example, how there is a significant connection between women's guts and incidents of sexual assault and sexual trauma that are gendered. It doesn't mean sexual assault happens only to women or to feminized people, but this doesn't change the fact that gendered patterns exist regarding sexual assault. And this is where philosophy needs to catch up with a lot of material in the health sciences, because this has been known in the health sciences for the last 10 or 15 years. As for the gut – I'm literally talking about intestines and stomachs – it's the largest section of our body that's exposed to the outside world, more than the skin, and doctors will talk about the outside world coming into and passing out of your body via your gut. This is the site of exposure and a kind of dynamic interaction with the world in terms of what you're taking in and what you are – what's forming you, and then what you're giving back to the world. I want to talk about bodies as sites of habits, as physiological habits that are dynamically constituted in ways that are durable and plastic. We can find a transactional relationship developing physiological habits that are shaped by a world that's full of racist and sexist oppression, which helps form biologically unconscious habits. This is a kind of affective shaping in response to the world on the level of our physiological embodiment. Here again is where William James becomes important for tightly connecting movements and changes in the physiological body and with the effects of sexism, racism, and other forms of trauma.

**JS:** So as you're talking about the physiological and really embodied impacts of racism, how do you see these conversations you're having at this level working in conversations with the broader public?

**Sullivan:** I don't know that all of this quickly or easily translates over to talking to a broader public, although I do think it can in part. The *Physiology* book weaves in very concrete case studies, and it opens with a concrete example of a physiological affective sense of pain or struggle, and unpacks it in ways that get to more theoretical points. On this question, I have to admit that one of the things I'm proudest of is that *Good White People* was named *Ms. Magazine* Best Feminist Read for 2014 and a *CHOICE* academic outstanding title for the same year. That meant I was able to talk to both scholarly audiences and public audiences. A broader audience could pick up the book and feel like they got something important out of it. That is somewhat ironic because getting that book published was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my entire life. I don't mean writing the book – I was writing it, rewriting it, and revising it for several years – but the process of dealing with the pushback I got on the manuscript. I thought, "This book will never ever be published, it will never see the light of day," because I got such strong pushback.

**JS:** Do you find that that happens often in your work? Because I know when we were discussing your article on white priority, there was a lot of discussion about whether it's good to talk about white priority when talking to a non-academic audience. But is it useful academically to separate out these terms? We had a lot of conversations regarding how we speak to a public audience and how we speak in academia. And should there be different conversations happening?

**Sullivan:** I think the answer has to be "yes." There have to be places where you can move fast, when using technical terms don't feel like jargon, because people know what you're talking about and you can move quickly and you can do more things that way. But I think it's also really important that there be spaces where one is intentionally trying to reach a broader audience. And there are a lot of times where those hopefully overlap. Context really matters, and paying attention to one's audience really matters, whether you're teaching or writing. It's wonderful when sometimes you can speak to multiple audiences at once, but I wouldn't want to insist upon that. There may be times when that doesn't work and you may need different tools in your toolkit and different ways of going at things.

But if I go back to white priority, the worry I have is whether we really need another term. We've got white privilege. We've got white supremacy. We've got white fragility. And now we've got white priority, and this can sound like a mere proliferation of terms. The answer may be that an additional term doesn't turn out to be very helpful. One has to be experimental and see what works. However, I think harm is done if the term white privilege gets overused in ways that don't pay attention to the differences in how privilege cashes out in different people's lives. That's not to let white people off the hook. But I think the pushback that we're increasingly seeing regarding white privilege needs to be taken seriously in a critical way. Otherwise the concept of white privilege might seem to be about an elite set of white people beating down other white people with a stick, shaming and ridiculing them. We still need the concept of white privilege, but we've got to nuance the way we're thinking about whiteness.



**SB:** Can you talk more about the resistance you get to your work particularly with *Good White People*? You mentioned there was a lot of pushback. It was difficult to get published. What sort of pushback did you get? And why do you think *Good White People* received more of that than your other work?

**Sullivan:** When that book was going through the review process, it received very strong reviews: really positive and really negative, not much in between. The negative reviews effectively said, "Who cares what white people feel? Don't they need to go change the world?" I had to fight an uphill battle to establish that talking about emotions and affect had any kind of political relevance. Thankfully, I don't feel like I have to fight that fight anymore – that if I want to talk about affect or emotion, it could be connected to work in political philosophy. Then, once I got past that hurdle and when I criticized white guilt and shame, I received strong responses that were concerned that this was a kind of white supremacy in disguise. Or, even if that wasn't my intention, that I was really naive and didn't understand that my arguments were supporting or espousing white supremacy. To go then from criticizing guilt and shame to talking about a form of white self-love as an alternative to white shame, well, that confirmed all the worst fears of some of my critics.

For example, someone told me when I was at SPEP [the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy] presenting some earlier work that fed into the book that there was a person in the audience who leaned over and said, "Next thing you know, she's gonna put on a white hood," referring to the Ku Klux Klan. This happened as I was reading the paper. I will admit that the book takes a lot of risks in saying that the comfortable divides we have between the white supremacists, that is, the bad white people over here, and the good ones over there who are anti-racist – that there are not really such sharp lines and that we cannot be confident where those lines are. For that reason, we need a lot of rethinking of strategies and tactics. But once you blur that line, it presents a difficult epistemological issue. How do you know for sure that you're not furthering a white supremacist agenda? And the answer is we cannot. The attempt to know that with certainty and to be really sure you're not doing that – I worry that often becomes an agenda of protecting yourself as a good white person rather than actually figuring out how we might rethink the problem of racial injustice and make some headway on it. It's pretty clear we haven't made much headway. That was true when the book was written and it is still true now. If you start blurring the line between the good and the bad, it's epistemologically and morally risky – even though I very explicitly argue in the book that this is not an argument saying to give up on the good white people, "Go be a bad white person because there's no difference." Nonetheless, some of the responses I received took the position that once you blur that line, you're just like the white supremacists, and not only that, you also open the way for all the white supremacists to stand as legitimate. That was one concern, and it equated to the claim, "Well, maybe because you didn't care about that line, you really weren't a good one after all." Your so-called true colors are showing. So, finishing that book was a very emotionally, affectively, and existentially difficult process.

**JS:** We're talking about how you're getting a lot of pushback on ideas concerning affect in the early 2010s. You might not be able to answer this, but what do you think has changed either academically or socially and politically that has allowed for that shift towards accepting ideas of affect, or being turned towards it?

**Sullivan:** I'm not sure. I have a couple of guesses. There has been work going on in affect studies and affect theory in fields outside of philosophy for a long time. So, some of it feels like philosophy is late to catch up. We're still trying to figure out that we have bodies half the time, for example. And there are other things such as when Martha Nussbaum published her book *Political Emotions: Why Love Is Important for Justice*. Not that Nussbaum is hostile to feminism, but she's not a feminist philosopher, she's a political philosopher who works in ancient philosophy. When you get folks outside of the "fringe" group of feminist and critical race philosophers who are publishing major works with major presses that deal with emotion or affect, now suddenly it's okay in philosophy.

**RC:** I have a question that goes back to the feedback you received about *Good White People*. When we discussed the book in our class, we also had separate opinions, like, "If we want to make political change we should make people cry, we should make people feel ashamed," which is just like the approach you are criticizing in your book. Another approach is that, "If you want other people to hear your pain, you should first hear their pain." So it's like trying to see even racist white people as emotional beings, to see them as persons with affects. So I feel like your book is trying to say, "OK, we have enough of the first approach. Now we should do something about the second approach."

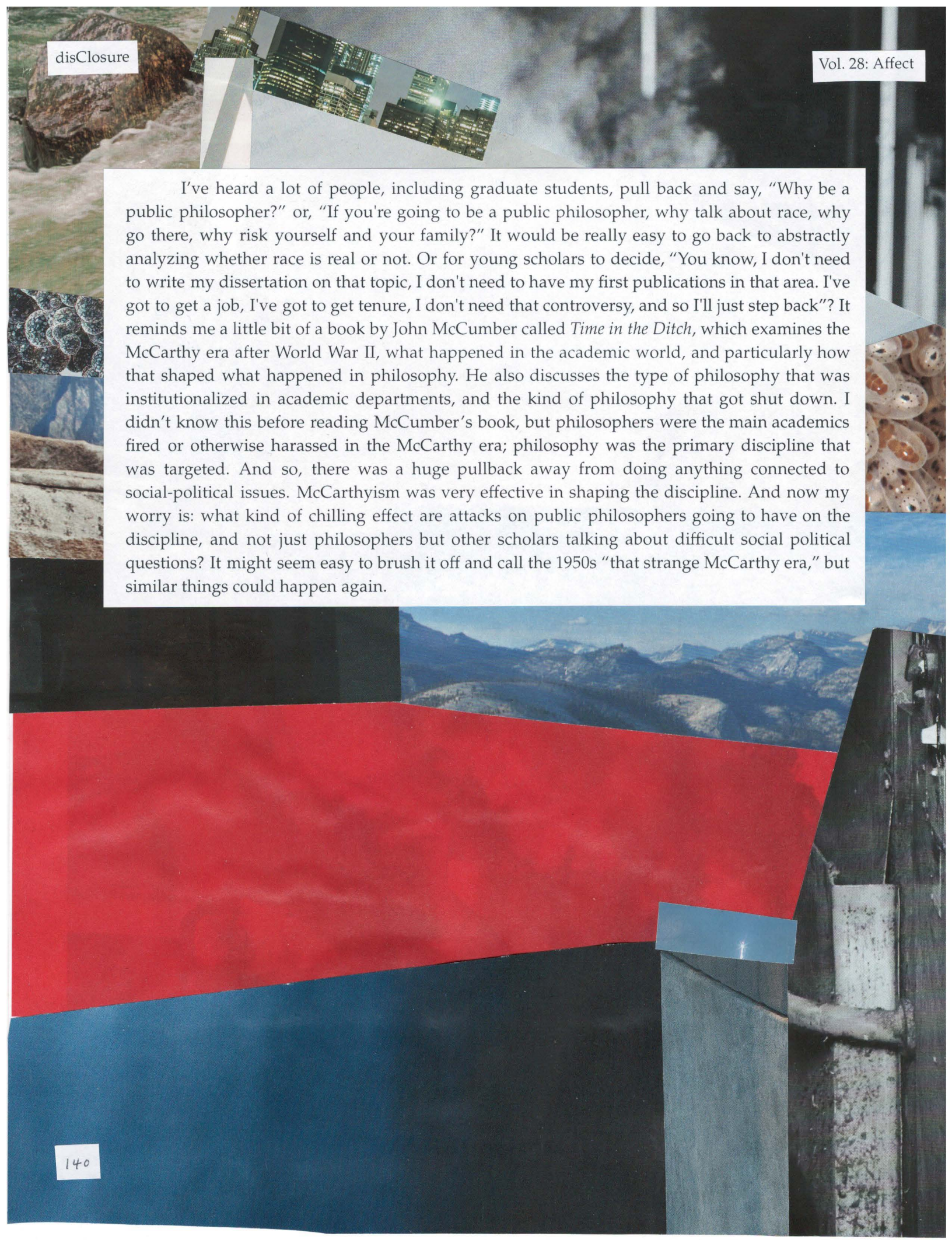
**Sullivan:** I do think that something like guilt and shame can be the result of being a white person and confronting that wall of ignorance. There are so many ways in the United States that people don't learn about this stuff and their families don't talk about it. I think back to childhood again: there are very few practices or habits in white, "normal," good white families, where the pattern tends to be: if you talk about race, you talk about people of color. To talk about whiteness and how it functions is very uncomfortable for most white people because it's not something they are used to doing. And if you do talk about whiteness, that tends to mark you as being one of the bad white people. So the safe thing to do is not talking about it at all. I'm not saying white people will never feel guilty or ashamed when they learn about wrongdoings, both personally and in their families, and I also think of the long histories of white supremacy and white privilege in different countries. But cultivating white guilt and shame as the marker of how you've become enlightened to the fact that white privilege exists – I'm concerned that doesn't have much to do with actually trying to fight racism but instead with protecting your moral reputation.

**RC:** I'm reminded of what you said in your article about Trump's election being a backlash against Obama being elected. So I was thinking that maybe there will be a backlash after Trump's election?

**Sullivan:** I think one of the biggest dangers is that the pushback against Trump will be merely a push to return to where the nation was before he was elected. I'm worried about the pushback of good white people who want to ensure that we get white privilege in the form of "good" rather than "bad" whiteness back in place. I recognize that Trump's election had a lot to do with Obama, that is, with the fact that there was a black man in the White House. But my worry is that anti-Trump energy is trying to go back to where we were before, when we "knew" who the bad white people were and they were kept in their place, so to speak – that's very problematic. I don't know if there's another backlash coming. I think it's too early to tell. But the fact that there is resistance to Trump does not necessarily mean that it's going to tackle some of these other problems. It's not just that the choices are stale, "Accept a Trump-era or try to return to a pre-Trump-era." They also are harmful. There have got to be some different ways to live as a white person. There have got to be some different options both personally and politically. How we create those different ways of living is going to be hard, and it's going to be risky. But if the pushback against Trump is merely returning to the colorblind days of a supposedly post-racial Obama era, we're in trouble.

**JS:** Do you see any changes in critical race theory as a subject of academic inquiry, especially in this post-Obama era? Or do you see glaring questions that need to be answered or addressed?

**Sullivan:** The question that I want to get away from is: "Is race real?" That and similar questions have dominated critical philosophy of race for a long time. I know that's not true in other fields where critical race theory is done. In philosophy, however, we've exhausted that question. I also think we need to confront the vicious feedback that public philosophers sometimes receive. I'm thinking of George Yancy, an African American philosopher who ran a series in "The Stone" in the *New York Times* on race, and in December of 2016 he published an editorial the *New York Times* called "Dear White America." He also has a book coming out in April of 2018 called *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Race*. The massive amount of vile and threatening things that were sent to him in the wake of "Dear White America" is mind-blowing, and as a result Yancy had to have police presence with him when he was on campus for a while. Is this what critical philosophers writing about race have in store for them? Yancy has received support from academics, and the American Philosophical Association recently published a statement in support of him and other public philosophers. But the episode has a chilling effect. Yancy isn't going to back down, he's going to keep doing the work he does. But when you see what got thrown at him...



I've heard a lot of people, including graduate students, pull back and say, "Why be a public philosopher?" or, "If you're going to be a public philosopher, why talk about race, why go there, why risk yourself and your family?" It would be really easy to go back to abstractly analyzing whether race is real or not. Or for young scholars to decide, "You know, I don't need to write my dissertation on that topic, I don't need to have my first publications in that area. I've got to get a job, I've got to get tenure, I don't need that controversy, and so I'll just step back"? It reminds me a little bit of a book by John McCumber called *Time in the Ditch*, which examines the McCarthy era after World War II, what happened in the academic world, and particularly how that shaped what happened in philosophy. He also discusses the type of philosophy that was institutionalized in academic departments, and the kind of philosophy that got shut down. I didn't know this before reading McCumber's book, but philosophers were the main academics fired or otherwise harassed in the McCarthy era; philosophy was the primary discipline that was targeted. And so, there was a huge pullback away from doing anything connected to social-political issues. McCarthyism was very effective in shaping the discipline. And now my worry is: what kind of chilling effect are attacks on public philosophers going to have on the discipline, and not just philosophers but other scholars talking about difficult social political questions? It might seem easy to brush it off and call the 1950s "that strange McCarthy era," but similar things could happen again.