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## Humanizing Blackness: An Interview With Tommy J. Curry

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### ABSTRACT

Tommy J. Curry is an associate professor of philosophy at Texas A&M. Ebony A. Utley is an associate professor of communication studies at California State University Long Beach. In this conversation, we define blackness and discuss its future.

### KEYWORDS

Blackness; humanity; race

**Utley:** Our topic is the future of Black scholarship. Let's begin with your definition of Blackness.

**Curry:** Most people think of Blackness and how we study Blackness as a negative endeavor. It's always associated with oppression, pathology, suffering. There's another way that we could look at Blackness as an alternate version of the human being. Like a human being that's made within history, that really stands within the courage and enduring of slavery, suffering, and poverty—an evolved kind of humanity that's of the world and not something that stands outside of it. We usually associate humanity with whiteness, reason, virtue, and all of these things that we haven't really realized in the world. With Blackness you get that quality of the human that is found within triumph, struggle, and resistance. Resistance is a human quality that Black people possess because they're human, but there is something else about Black humanity that is unique, that comes about because of slavery, Jim Crow, rape, castration. These types of things are peculiar to Black people, and because of that, their humanity, as it interacts with the world, has created this unique thing that we now think of in terms of Blackness.

**Utley:** Can anyone who accepts the definition of Blackness as the condition of being a human being, consider themselves Black?

**Curry:** No. When we talk about the quality of Blackness what we're actually talking about is awareness about the conditions that have been brought about through colonization through racism, through poverty, through disease, through wretchedness. The question is: Do you have it? Do you have the history or the trauma of slavery, or colonization, or genocide? Of being marked, targeted, and exposed? Do you experience the world as a social death, always able to be killed because of the continuous violence towards Black people?

**Utley:** If an individual is phenotypically Black, but does not experience the word this way, is this person still Black per your definition?

**Curry:** Yes, because it's not about the consciousness of "this is the life I've lived," it's the possibility of existence in this world. I can walk off the cliff and say that I don't believe in gravity, but I'm not less affected by gravity. If I walk off the cliff, I'm still dead. That's what I mean. Consider whiteness, even if you're a poor white person that could be killed by the cops, the question is "Do you live your life as if the very condition of living is formulated on death?"

White people, even poor white people, don't go through moments of life where they know that their disposability is fundamentally necessary for everyone else's existence. Young black men certainly do. The exploitation of black women certainly makes that true. They're the disposable and the exploitable. People can say that bad shit happens to other people too, and I'm in complete agreement with that. It doesn't disown that there are different kinds of experiences, but when you talk about Blackness in America, you're talking about how groups of people who are descendants of slaves and colonialism whose existence within the empire is conditioned by death. That's a very different thing. And yet, there's something in Black people that says resist. That's the question of how humanity is being created and reformed. We don't get that complexity. We study Blackness and Black people as if they were a reflection of certain political ideologies, not the consciousness of a people who think that they should actually be able to live, to be citizens, husbands, or wives. These are all complex emotions that exist in human societies that are studied across the world, but are never utilized to study Black people.

**Utley:** How should we study Black people?

**Curry:** In my work I refer to that as the culture-logic—an idea to frame how Black people create the world through a co-authoring of the world. How does the human being interact with the world, not as a distant object, but literally how do they make it, form it, contour it so that it reflects their own existence? This replaces things that we talk about now like phenomenology, critical theory, or even basic concepts of metaphysics like ontology or epistemology. Because what we're talking about is how the world and the human are necessary to create social reality. They don't exist separate from each other. When we study Blackness we like to study it as a material artifact that's outside of our perception. So racism becomes an object of our study. It doesn't become something that is created and co-created. We see Black people's problems when we study Black people in that way, and it reproduces some of the assumptions of inhumanity. Because if we thought of ourselves as human, then we would create realities just like white people create realities.

**Utley:** How do white and Black reality creation processes differ?

**Curry:** White people project themselves into the future all the time. They're building ideas that are going to set the foundation, like in technology, in astrophysics etc., that set the foundations for generations ahead of them. White people fundamentally believe they're human, so their advances are grounding for future generations centuries later. Black people can't speak in that way because we don't fundamentally believe that Blackness is a foundation to humanity, such that it has anything to contribute to civilization. That's a very different intellectual space to produce knowledge if you believe that you are simply a fleeting contingent of an environmental circumstance. That you have no separate history, aspiration, or vision for what the world could or could not be. We don't expect this for other groups of people, but ask Black people what they contribute besides reform of the empire? And they're like, "We don't know because that's not what we teach our scholars to think towards." We have to refocus our lens in a very serious way.

**Utley:** Is there one academic discipline that refocuses Blackness better than others?

**Curry:** No.

**Utley:** They're all equally failing?

**Curry:** Yes. Disciplines are the specific articulations of how we've divvied up Western concepts of the human. Sociology is a reflection of how the European man exists within colonial society.

Economics is how the European man rationalizes self-interest profiting in colonial societies. Philosophy, how do Western men fit themselves in relationship to all other people who are not as rational or human? Disciplines are merely reflections of different pieces or aspects of one concept of the human. When writing about Blackness we have to challenge ourselves to not study Blackness or race-theory as if it's one aspect of how Western bourgeois man rationalizes Black lives, which is what I think a lot of our work turns into. The issue is how do we separate from a study based on that separation, not how we regret the distance race puts us from an ideal white notion of humanity.

**Utley:** But there have been plenty of Black studies within various disciplines.

**Curry:** Yes, and their argument is that these things should have an equal space and equal voice. I fundamentally disagree with that. We're not talking about disciplines that are built off of truth or representations of the vast amounts of people that formulate humanity, the world-wide humanity. We're talking about illusions. We can't both hold that the discipline is false because it's based on the illusions or perceptions of mythologies from the white mind, and say that our notions of Blackness should have equal weight today. Why should we be equal to the illusion? We know that's false; we have to start intervening.

**Utley:** How do we intervene?

**Curry:** Independent research institutes on concepts of life. The same thing that happened when the Frankfurt school came out. We have to build up our own organizations. We need new schools of thought.

**Utley:** What do you want to call it?

**Curry:** Black humanity studies. We have not yet even begun, even though we're in the twenty-first century, we have not reached a point where Black people could identify humanity studies as just the study of Black people. Black people are like "Can we use the master's tools?" But why is that a goddamn argument? We write for whites to recognize what we say about Blackness. If you write things about cultural or alternative visions of humanity, then you don't get the same cachet because it's unrecognizable to white audiences. We need re-education. A school of thought that literally reformulates the way that we see Blackness itself. We're taught to look at Blackness as that thing, like we're going to study race, but you have to go out there and study that thing over there, and there's not a lot of people here that study it, so here's what you have to do. Nobody in our committee studies race, so if you're going to do this make sure you have enough emotional distance, make sure you're still objective, make sure you got that gender thing to add diversity to this concept. How we're told to study ourselves as objects away from ourselves is not how any other discipline has started. Think about how racist the disciplines were. They weren't racist because they were objective; they were racist because they were intimately connected to the social and cultural aspirations of the white people who were studying society. But then those very same aspirations tried to be disowned and measured when Black people were taught to study race. So when Black men are taught to study themselves, they're taught to study themselves as problems, criminals, pathologies. What's that alternative vision, that spark within the scholar that's pushing them to create different things, ideas, and models that can't be captured within these disciplines?

**Utley:** I like lists, so let's outline it.

**Curry:** What we're actually trying to capture is how does the person's particular or peculiar social position, how does their group relationship, how does their position within society or institutions, how does that reflect the larger institutions or historical questions?

**Utley:** So we've got the acceptability of subjectivity as one of the first steps. What's next?

**Curry:** If we understand the subject, if we understand that position, then second, we must understand the humanity of that subject. There has to be an understanding of the historical issues, which impress or impose upon the humanity of Black subjects. The third thing would then be the production of knowledge. What would it look like for Black humanity to exist within capitalistic or communal economic structures? What are the different aspects of Black rationality? And then lastly or next (not like this would be last), but how do we theorize the aspirations of the Black human within these social, material, and historical relationships? Because I think that's the work that theory actually has to do. We could describe the world as Black humans see or experience it, but then what do we aspire for the world to become? Where do we see the world leading? That job has been turned over to artists and our poets, which is fine, but we also have to give that to our theorists. We must support the creativity and innovation of Black scholarship. What we're trying to do is create new conditions for new possibilities of how people can think by eliminating the barriers and obstacles to Black humanity and Black aspirations as much as possible.

**Utley:** What's at stake if we don't create these new possibilities for thinking?

**Curry:** I did an interview with NASA about this question of extraterrestrial and microbial life. Think about what that does for young white college students. They're debating whether or not if these things are actual possibilities for their civilization. They're actually thinking, "How do we formulate ethics or relationship to a foreign entity or alien life on another planet?" In the twenty-first century, white people are engaging the galaxy, and Black people are arguing about "hands up don't shoot." I'm not saying that we shouldn't worry about things, but we're not even taking a planetary assessment of how America's empire relates to other colonial strategies throughout the world. That's not even the question on the table. It's really an intellectual regression. All we care about is an argument about identity. We've become lost within the mantras of our time, without any conceptualization of either the structures that make this possible throughout the universe, or what the future even looks like.

**Utley:** What should the mindset be for the future of writing about Blackness?

**Curry:** Blackness is humanity unrealized. That's what it is. It's not perfect, but it's the version of humanity that humanizes what rational man was. Because it's compassionate, it's built from the wretchedness of all of experience, it survives, and it's resilient. Blackness is the human possible; the human that's possible.