The 1851 Project

Charles Whitaker

Interview by **Kevin Bai** | *Written by* **Grace Lee**

Charles Whitaker, professor and dean of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, shares his experience as a journalist and as a person of color. He discusses the ways in which racism is present in journalism and what can be done to increase representation in the field.

Charles Whitaker remembers wanting to be a journalist from a young age. "I knew I wanted to be a writer from a very early age, probably in sixth grade. I had to do a report, and I used Ebony magazine as my primary corpus of research," he says. "Ebony magazine, once upon a time, was on every coffee table of every African American household. As I leafed through it, I thought, I don't just want to be a writer—I want to be a journalist."

Years later, Whitaker became a journalist and senior editor for the very publication that served as the impetus for his career. He worked at Ebony Magazine, an African American culture publication, for ten years before joining Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. He recalls his experience at Ebony fondly. "The beauty of being at Ebony magazine is that at no time was my race an issue with regard to my performance," he says. "It was quite liberating to be in that environment where I didn't have to second-guess myself or second-guess anyone else's motivations. It was just a luxury I had spending ten vital years at Ebony."

However, there were also times throughout his career when Whitaker felt he was dismissed due to his identity as a person of color. He reflects, "There were instances where I would approach people as a reporter, and I absolutely felt that people were dismissive of me because I was black." He also faced discrimation from editors. "It wasn't based on anything other than the feeling that I, as a black reporter, couldn't handle this or couldn't tackle that topic." Though these biases were not always explicit, Whitaker notes that it was clear that racism and prejudice were still prevalent throughout his career as a journalist.

Whitaker believes that increased diversity and representation is crucial to stand against racism and foster cultural understanding. He explains that reporters are not wholly objective, just like others. "The reality is

that we all view events through the lens of our personal experiences, and if we don't have people from a variety of experiences viewing events and reporting on events, you get a very skewed view of those happenings."

Whitaker points out that underrepresentation further discourages people of color from pursuing journalism. "Many people of color don't see [journalism] as a career path because they don't see themselves represented." As the dean of Medill, Whitaker aims to break this cycle. "We would like to achieve… better representation in our classrooms," he says. "We want to be out recruiting more, convincing more people to come to Medill and give journalism a try." To do this, Medill is aiming to partner with Chicago Public Schools to launch journalism programs and motivate young students from all backgrounds who, like Whitaker, might be inspired to pursue this profession. Whitaker hopes to spread the message that journalism is a "noble profession." He says, "It's an important profession for the maintenance of the democracy."

Journalism has the power to put issues that threaten our democracy to the forefront of national conversation. In response to the current movement following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many other Black Americans, Whitaker remarks, "This has certainly been larger than anything we've seen since the civil rights movement."

"We have a reckoning in our newsrooms of journalists pushing back on the convention of not calling out racism when we see it"

He explains the significance of journalism during the present moment: "I think the fact that we have cell phones now and that almost anyone is a journalist who can capture these events [which] wind up in the mainstream press has made it possible for everyone to feel engaged and want to engage in the movement… I also think we have a reckoning in our newsrooms of journalists pushing back on the convention of not calling out racism when we see it—sort of soft-pedaling racism and being afraid to call that for what it is. A lot of forces are coming together at this time, and they're exploding. We're seeing it spill over out of our TV screens, out of our newspapers and onto our streets."

Especially during this pivotal moment in history, the need for various perspectives becomes even more apparent. "The first draft of history is incredibly important for not just contemporary consumers of journalism, but for future consumers of these narratives," Whitaker says. "There's just a multitude of ways in which our journalism is not as complete or accurate as it could be if we had more diversity in our newsrooms."

Given the importance of representation, Medill has been working to better navigate conversations of race in classrooms. Whitaker admits, "We have often stumbled and have not been particularly adept at handling situations that have come up." However, Whitaker is hopeful that the measures that Medill is taking to increase diversity and to better support its students, especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, is a step forward toward a more inclusive environment. ■

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Defining the Abstract: Anti-Blackness and Black Lives Matter

Interview by John Cao	Written by Catherine Campusano

Marquis Bey is an assistant professor of African American Studies at Northwestern University. Bey received his Ph.D. in English from Cornell University in 2019. Though Bey is new to Northwestern and has limited experience on the overt and nuanced manifestations of racialization at this specific institution, this interview provides a broader insight into the foundations of anti-Blackness in American society as a whole.

In a conversation originally centered around racism in the United States, Professor Marquis Bey begins with an articulation of the distinction between racism and anti-Blackness now commonplace in academic African American studies. This notion of 'anti-Blackness' is recognized as the foundation of the very concept of American racism. Referencing Professor Kihana Miraya Ross' recent New York Times article, "Call It What It Is: Anti-Blackness," Bey confronts an America whose very fabric is orchestrating a very "particular, pernicious kind of marginalization."

"Blackness is understood in a way that is more than simply a kind of epidermal or phenotypic endowment, but rather very much a positionality of bottom."

He cites the work of philosopher Dr. Lewis R. Gordon, to postulate a form of racism where different kinds of racial and ethnic backgrounds are pushed towards Blackness, which is considered undesirable, or whiteness, which is considered desirable. This anti-Blackness extends to broader historical examples of racism.

For Bey, this can be seen in the Irish, whose proximity to Blackness was used to justify their oppression. As such, it becomes clear that there exists a template for systemic oppression, derived from the ways that Blackness has been situated within American white supremacy.

"The possibility, utility, or sensibility of being racist towards a racial population comes from a fundamental violence in prejudice against Black people, which we then call anti-Blackness."

"The very history of the U.S. is very much founded on— predicated on— what might be called more accurately anti-Blackness."

The current Black Lives Matter Movement has also been placed in relation to this anti-Blackness.

Bey was clear that his commentary was not purposefully critical, but he expanded on the movement's current platform with a slightly more radical proposition:

"Black life is to matter."

What is the difference between Black lives matter and Black life is to matter? Bey proposes that the latter highlights the need for a fundamental recalibration and integration of what Blackness means in the U.S.

To do this, Bey starts by examining the origins and history of Blackness and subsequent anti-Blackness in America.

He stands in contrast to prominent works like The New York Times' 1619 Project, which present 1619 as the year in which slavery began in what became the U.S. For one thing, about 20 people from the western coast of Africa were brought as indentured servants to Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the Americas, established in 1607. But, this doesn't distinguish between indentured servitude and enslavement, and implies that there were no Black people before 1619 — when there were Black people in the North American continent as far back as the 16th century.

Instead, Bey traces anti-Blackness to 1444, when about 230 Black Northern Africans were taken to Spain. Bey argues that it is here that Black skin became open for consumption, capture, exploitation, and extraction.

Bey also pointed out the significance of 1640 in the history of U.S. anti-Blackness, when three indentured servants--two White and one Black--escaped, but were later recaptured. Only the Black man, John Punch, was punished with life imprisonment. Some scholars argue that this is the moment that we begin to see how Blackness is treated differently.

Other scholars point to 1662, in which Virginia enacted the Partus Sequitur Ventrem. This law stated that the status of the child follows the womb — ensuring that the children of the enslaved were also automatically born into slavery.

"Maybe no one moment is the moment, they all might be parts of a kind of fabric."

While he was clear that 1619 was not the year that anti-Blackness began, Bey acknowledges that each of these instances have contributed to modern anti-Blackness.

Since the abolition of slavery, the institution of enslavement has morphed throughout the Reconstruction era, followed by the Jim Crow era, and to the targeted mass incarceration in the present.

"[Progressive legislation] did not necessarily mark a kind of clear progress, but rather allow for a different way for anti-Blackness to manifest."

While this may be disheartening to say the least, Bey remains optimistic that more radical calls for change, such as abolishing police and prisons as they currently exist, may reduce anti-Blackness in its current form. But Bey is also realistic in seeing that hopes of the past have failed in preventing the continuation of anti-Blackness into the current day.

For Bey, dismantling anti-Blackness will not be as simple as replacing people at the top. He disagrees with the notion that having more Black presidents or CEOs is all that is required to dismantle a centuries-old system fueled by anti-Blackness. Instead, he advocates for a fundamental societal overhaul — systemic change.

"I think a genuine solution requires a kind of full-fledged interrogation or maybe even undermining some version of the very foundation of our society, because our society is predicated on a whole bunch of things that work to the detriment of racialized subjects."

Even the ways we relate to one another must be reconsidered, says Bey, because interactions between people have also been a means of oppression. These histories manifest in problematic language and behaviors that are rife with assumptions and implicit biases. It is not a simple indictment of an individualized racist person but rather an integration of the ways in which institutionalized systemic racism informs everyone's behaviors, consciously or not.

While this may seem like a tall order, Bey remains hopeful for the future, seeing small moves towards these abstract notions on the Northwestern campus. For him, the Rock signifies a deeply politicized avenue for students to express their protests, a symbol he believes matters to the institution.

More than symbolically, there are now concrete movements on campus working against anti-Blackness, including calls for Northwestern to divest from campus and Evanston police, in addition to the larger protests in Chicago and across the country. For Bey, these actions hold the possibility of having a larger effect because of the national recognition that these are not isolated events.

"I think the university is going to listen, or is more ready to listen, because... there's all this stuff happening that makes it less deniable that it is an issue."

Bey says he believes there is some cause for hope, in that this movement towards progress brings with it a necessary overhaul of higher education institutions as a whole. Universities are entangled in the very fabric of capitalism. Bey argues that learning oftentimes is commodified--it's much more about how one can gain marketable skills rather than learning to be a better person. The commodification of education, says Bey, is "very much part and parcel of the way that capitalism and white supremacy are pervasive in our society." Though a long way off, Bey believes this will eventually require each of us to rethink what education means to us and why we are pursuing degrees.

"Why are we taking these classes? To what end are we doing this kind of work?" ■

Further Reading: Recommendations from Professor Bey

Afro-Pessimism, by Frank B Wilderson III

Between the World and Me, by Ta-Nehisi Coates

The History of White People, by Nell Irvin Painter

How the Irish Became White, by Noel Ignatiev

Lose Your Mother, by Saidiya Hartman

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In Conversation with Alexander G. Weheliye

Interview by **Kevin Bai & Shreya Sriram** | *Edited by* **Niva Razin**

This interview has been abridged for brevity.

Alexander G. Weheliye, professor of African American Studies, discusses Black music and technology, the theory of racializing assemblages, and navigating institutional racism.

➢ **What motivated you to research the intersection of Black culture and music technology?**

I think initially what drew me to it was that, having particularly grown up outside of the United States, the way that I encountered Black music was primarily through technology, radio, music, television, records, tapes, etc. It was much less in a live context. For me, it had always been something technological.

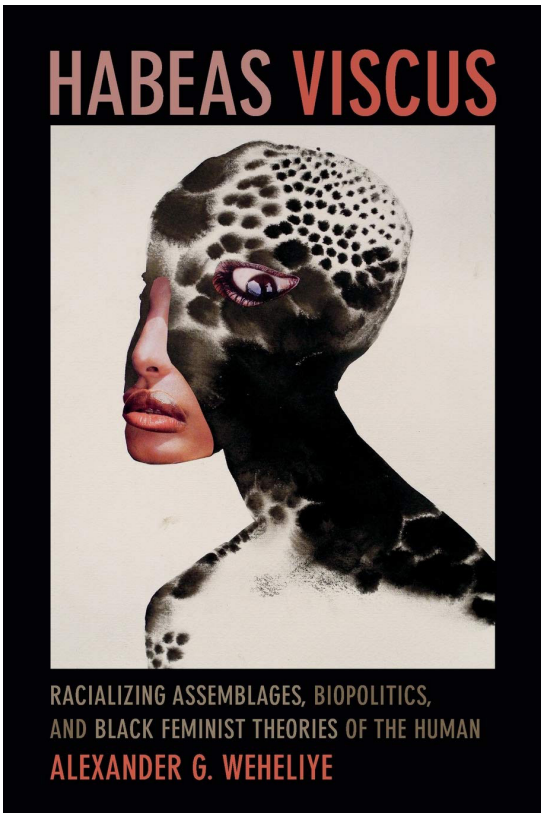
When I was in graduate school, I started reading more in depth about Black music, and I realized that oftentimes Black music and technology were assumed to be opposite. That just spurred me on to think about how our view of Black music changes if we censor technology, not necessarily as something that's static, but something that is changing.

➢ **What have you been researching recently?**

In terms of my more recent work, one of the things that I looked at was how mobile technologies appear in Black music, particularly in R&B, usually as indicators of longing and desire, [with lyrics such as] 'why don't you call me?,' 'when don't you text me?,' 'snapchat me,' or 'you're calling me, texting me, snapchatting me, all the time.' [We look at these as not only as] an indicator of desire and longing but also as a way in which these technologies become incorporated into everyday life and humanized. I've also looked at how music is produced, beginning from the early 20th century until the contemporary moment.

➢ **Could you speak to the origins of house and electronic dance music (EDM) and Black influence in this predominantly white genre?**

House and techno music were invented by Black gay people in Chicago and Detroit. These are very much technologically based genres. They're never about live music necessarily, but about creating sounds for a club environment with synthesizers, drum machines, samplers, etc. What happens is that house and techno gets to Europe in the late 1980s, and it becomes a lot more popular there. When I was a teenager in the 1980s in Germany, there would be music videos of house performers from Chicago on national television all the time because these were hits. They were played on the radio, TV. Because [these genres] became so popular there, white musicians, particularly in the UK and Germany, started producing the music. Over



time, it became more and more white. Both in terms of the producers, but also in terms of the audiences. Around 2000-2005, it's sold back to the United States as this kind of white genre.

There are a lot of Black techno musicians that feel that they don't get the same kind of attention. There are a few founders from the 1980s that people venerate. But, a lot of times, Black contemporary electronic music producers don't get the attention in the electronic music world, but also not outside, because people don't perceive that to be a Black musical genre. The more mainstream outlets will say, 'oh, you're not really making Black music,' and the electronic music outlets don't pay any attention to them, either. It's very complicated and definitely about Blackness and race in a lot of ways that has been submerged over the years.

- **How did house/EDM initially become so much more popular in Europe than in the U.S.?**

It was never commercially successful in the early days in the United States. There was no broad infrastructure that was created for this music to not only be based in Detroit or Chicago. Then, later you get similar things with Baltimore club or New Jersey house, etc. that are these very intensely local scenes that then get picked up at a certain point. But there's never this broad network that actually allows people to exist outside of their immediate environment.

What happened to a lot of the Chicago and techno folks in the 1980s is that they would go to the U.K. or Germany because that's where they got paid. That then also contributed to the whitewashing of the genre because it didn't continue to flourish in the same kinds of ways in the spots where it was initially created.

- **Is it possible that house/EDM did not spread far beyond these local scenes in the U.S. because of the large geographic spaces between them?**

That's definitely a part of it. The other part of it is also just racism. I think that it also didn't fit into the template of what the mainstream wanted Black music to be.

I think the early part of the kind of European appropriation happened in the U.K. because the U.K. already had a very, very long tradition from The Beatles onwards of taking particularly obscure Black American music, reperforming it, and then selling it back to the U.S.. It didn't happen quite in the same way [as with house/EDM], but it happened in really similar ways.

- **How has jazz resisted whitewashing, unlike other genres of music which originated in Black communities?**

I think because jazz was for a long time, associated with Black culture in a very broad sphere. There's actually an interesting history of the U.S. government, particularly in the 1950s, paying Black Americans as musicians to play across the world to be ambassadors of American culture. So, the infrastructure and the support was there. On the other hand, I do think that at this point in time, yes, jazz is considered a Black genre, but there are a lot of performers that are not Black and the audiences in general are not Black anymore, either.

- **In your book *Habeas Viscus* you develop your theory of racializing assemblages. Could you briefly explain this theory and how it applies to modern America and higher education?**

It applies in all the ways. There is no way it doesn't apply to that. What I was trying to do in that book is to really focus on the fact of how deeply ingrained racial thinking is in our world. One of the ways I came at that was through [the work of] Black feminist Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter who talks about how racial difference has to be anchored in our neurological system. So, the way that we respond to ourselves and to others has to not be this conscious moment saying, 'Oh, this person is white, and therefore X, Y, and Z,' but it has to be at this almost instinctual level. That's what I used to

think about this question of racializing assemblages.

I think, of course, it is completely applicable to the contemporary moment. What we saw, and what we continue to see with the police killings, is precisely that literal knee-jerk reaction of police officers not thinking about Black people as being fully human and therefore being expendable and killable.

One of the main points that I wanted to highlight in that project with that theory is that racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness are not just ideas and structures, but they're these forces, assemblages that we all have to live with in one way or another. Saying that anti-Black racism is bad is not actually enough. There has to be a much deeper overhaul of how we think of ourselves as human beings in the world for change to occur.

In your theory of racializing assemblages, you discuss "race as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans." Could you expand on this? Is this idea related to the three-fifths clause of the Constitution?

One of the things that Wynter talks about is that all cultures have these biological, cultural ideas about what it means to be fully human. What has been different about the last six hundred years is that the white Western European version has become the global version of what it means to be human. That whiteness becomes something that is desirable, not only in the United States and Western Europe, but also on the African continent, in Asia, etc..

To give you a more perhaps concrete example of how something like this works: I've been teaching at Northwestern [for] 20 years beginning this fall, and things have really changed. Northwestern has made a lot of strides in terms of reaching out to Black and Brown students, particularly from economically disadvantaged communities. But in my conversations with the students and in my experiences with hearing administrators talk, no one really thought about what would have to be done when the students were actually on the grounds. It's like, 'you're here; we invited you.' But there's so many different [obstacles].

The way that I think about it is that given a lot of complicated circumstances, my parents hated institutions. I realized at some point when I was an adult I actually don't know how to deal with all these things because I never actually saw adults in my life dealing with institutions in any kind of healthy way.

"Saying that anti-Black racism is bad is not actually enough. There has to be a much deeper overhaul of how we think of ourselves as human beings in the world for change to occur."

But more deeply, I also never learned to make demands of the institutions because they always seemed like these antagonistic, evil things. [These are] things that you don't learn in one day. I think it's similar with this whole question of particularly anti-Black racism, where there is continually this expectation, 'oh, you're free now,' 'you can vote now,' etc.. But all these other kinds of underlying things are continually not really addressed.

In a lot of conversations with students who also didn't come from necessarily middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds, that's one of the things I constantly heard. Students were just like, 'Well, I know there are all these resources, but I actually don't know where to go and who to ask and to be persistent. If someone says no first…' Those are all things that you have to kind of learn by doing.

I do think that institutions are not great, if not horrible, about actually taking those kinds of things into account. [It] would require a deeper kind of change and actually require them to think about what it actually means for someone who is Black, from an economically disadvantaged background, to be a student.

- **Have you seen opportunities where Northwestern could have supported someone a little bit better or supported a group a little bit better? Do you have some suggestions that you feel like would work but just have not been implemented yet?**

One of the things that I really liked to see—and this was also coming from talking to a lot of students—is much better mental health resources and particularly mental health resources that are specific to non-white students. Over the years, I've interacted with students who've been through major traumatic events while they were students. They needed help immediately, and the way that the University handled that was just shameful. [Faculty] can help support and try to facilitate things, but we're literally not qualified to do that in so many different ways.

Beyond that, I'm just not that optimistic, and this is not only specific to Northwestern. I try to do what I can to the best of my abilities in the space that I have, rather than … changing the broader institution.

Mental health resources, more financial resources for students, [hiring] students who mentor other first generation students, etc.—those would be the kind of things that I would like to see implemented. Also, divestment from the police.

- **Thank you for sharing those ideas. We recognize it's a time of change, and we're hopeful that the University will listen to students and faculty who are making these demands, creating these petitions and will implement genuine change.**

I do think that while students are at the University for the four years, they actually do have a certain amount of power.

The University is also really good about saying, 'oh, we're gonna create a task force' that will then say all of these things and then 50 million more things have been said since the 1980s. It just ends up going into this broad ether, and no actual change has happened.

They also love to use the summer as an opportunity because everybody's gone; things are quiet. That's when they tried to shut the Black house down. The Black Alumni Association brought it to everyone's attention maybe five years ago, in July or August, when everybody was away… It wasn't until there were large scale protests from alumni, from students, and from faculty that [the University] then said, 'oh, we're actually going to put the money into renovating the building as opposed to tearing it down.' The only reason is because they were shamed. Pressure was put on [the administration] consistently; otherwise [the Black house] would be gone now. ■

The 1851 Project

Sunny Williams

Interview by Kevin Bai	Written by Soumya Jhaveri

Sunny Williams (Pritzker '12, Medill '15), is a co-founder of TinyDocs, a company that makes health and wellness cartoons to teach children and their families about healthcare issues. Williams spoke with the NURJ about his experience at Northwestern, his intentions behind founding TinyDocs, and his goals for the future.

He states that Northwestern administration is interested in listening to Black students, but that much more can be done, such as diversifying the alumni board. Williams served on the alumni board for several years.

"As I looked around, I saw very little people who look like me. And you know that just speaks volumes, because these are folks who are going out and asking for donations, on behalf of the University, so that impacts who you are reaching out to and who you are also continuing to keep involved in the going ons of Northwestern after they leave campus," Williams said.

Northwestern and other institutions can make themselves a more diverse and inclusive community by focusing on recruitment of minority students.

"One is keeping these folks who are incredibly smart and talented — keeping them in the loop and keeping them engaged — you know, offering them positions on alumni boards offering them positions in the trustees," Williams said. "I don't think they've done an effective job there, and there's plenty of room for improvement."

Additionally, creating programming for minority students and creating allyship with minority organizations on campus could help foster a more welcoming environment, according to Williams.

He cited his own experience at Northwestern's Pritzker School of Law, where he was paired with a mentor, with whom he could discuss what it was like to be a Black law student.

"I feel like enough diverse people on the board just makes the alumni board stronger and makes the university stronger because you know you're creating community and these deep connections that people go on to do really awesome things."

Williams said his inspiration for founding TinyDocs was due to his own experience with the healthcare system as a child.

"When I was a kid, I was in hospitals and I met a lot of doctors who were very thoughtful and kind and of well meaning, but unfortunately they weren't the best at communicating complex health issues," Williams said.

This created a lot of stress and anxiety for him as he was about to undergo surgery and wanted to understand what was going to happen to him. Williams drew upon this experience several years later, when he was practicing law in Chicago and wanting to find a way to make an impact on the world around him.

"I just thought, you know, what if we created these animated stories with characters that kids just love," Williams said. "These characters walk them through in language that was accessible to kids and their health journeys."

He began to recruit artists and medical professionals who had the skill sets to turn this dream into a reality. TinyDocs uses a medical board of advisers to ensure they put out the most accurate and unbiased content. They hope to create content around medical racism soon, Williams said.

"I'm very aware of the studies that have been done and the folks on our board are very aware of this very unfortunate regretful thing," Williams said. "If it happens once that's one time too many. So hopefully that changes with the awareness around Black Lives Matter in this new world."

"In order to get anything done, any change in this country, you have to have buy in from a lot of people, not just the population that's been targeted."

He believes that the reason the current Black Lives Matter protests have been larger and more long-standing than in previous years is due to both the release of videos, which make it harder to ignore, as well as the fact that many populations aside from the Black community have been rallying behind the cause.

"In order to get anything done, any change in this country, you have to have buy in from a lot of people, not just the population that's been targeted," Williams said.

He admits that one of the ways the racism inherent in American society has affected him is by sometimes making his entrepreneurial journey especially difficult, but he has channeled this into the motivation to be more successful.

"There are centuries of structural racism in this country that one has to overcome," Williams said. I've always kind of grown up with this mindset that we just have to be twice as good as everyone else in order to succeed, or at least get equal access to something and just try to be so damn good that they can't ignore you. And that's what I'm constantly in pursuit of every day. In pursuit of excellence, so that I put myself and I put my employees and I put this organization in the best position to create impact and be successful." ■