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5 Questions with Dr. Stephen Marshall by

American Studies

We return on the eve of Spring Break by publishing one of our classic features. Here's an absolutely fascinating conversation between **Ph.D. student Christine Capetola** and **Dr. Stephen Marshall**, associate professor of American Studies and African and African Diaspora Studies.

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CC: What’s your favorite project to work on and why? In the past or maybe right now, whichever...

SM: Well... I’m having a lot of fun with my research right now. I don’t feel nearly the same amount of pressure that I felt trying to get first book done. The first book, actually, was not connected with my dissertation. The dissertation was an entirely different study that was probably too large an undertaking for someone in that stage of their career. The kind of question I was pursuing in the dissertation was not only a huge question but one that became really politically salient as I was attempting to revise. The dissertation was on the problem of evil as a political problem, the political as particular kind of interpretation and engagement with evil. I looked at Hannah Arendt, St. Augustine,



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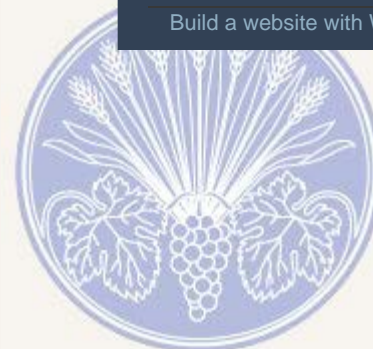
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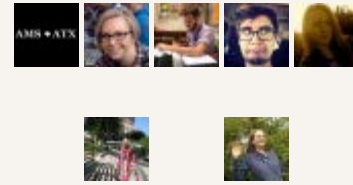
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and James Baldwin as thinkers who in different ways understand the political in these terms. So I'm writing about evil and, as it turns out, September 11th happens and everybody and their mother begin to talk about evil. I find myself responding to everybody and I realize that I could probably spend another three, four years working on this project to do it right. So after three years on it, I turned to a smaller project that I had been kicking around for a little while and that turned into my first book.

But of course after spinning my wheels on the problem of evil for two, three years, I was under a lot of pressure to get this book done in time to get tenure. So, that wasn't a lot of fun. There's a chapter in my first book where I write about James Baldwin and I really did feel like I was inspired when I wrote that. I mean, I actually wrote it out by hand. I was smoking cigarettes at the time so I sat right out there (*points to outdoor space at Flight Path*) and Shirley [Thompson] and Solomon, my son, were out of town and over a two day period I just basically wrote out a large part of that chapter. Those moments of inspiration are rare and special but I can't say that... I don't claim that as fun. Fun is something like I used to experience when I was a graduate student. After I completed my coursework and before I began writing my dissertation, I was reading everything that I wanted to read at my own pace. That's kind of where I'm at right now, pursuing

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the questions that I'm interested in, engaging authors that I want to engage. I'm certainly feeling there's a time constraint, that I need to get this second book finished fairly soon but not feeling like my livelihood or the livelihood of my family depends on me getting this thing done tomorrow.

So what are some of those questions that you're thinking about right now?

So there are a couple of things. The general problematic is this question about the afterlife of slavery; that is, the problem of slavery as an ongoing reality of American culture and politics. However, what I am interested in is turning from prevailing investigations which track this reality on and within black life to an investigation that thinks this problem through the problem of mastery- the political constitution of mastery as a legitimate but threatened practice that must remain silent yet always in need of special forms of protection. So, I'm thinking about the political legacies of this problem; where within American culture and politics one finds traces, and in fact, actual reconstitutions of it.

I've been recently looking very closely at Du Bois's arguments about the way the post-Reconstruction consolidation of capital incorporates the ethos and management techniques of the plantation- spiritual commitments to and practical experience with dominating nature that were part and

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parcel of the southern slaveholding experience but foreign to northern capitalistic practices among smaller property owners. So I'm thinking about the skills and expertise of the plantation finding their way into corporate practices.

And, also with the way in which the reconstitution of unfree black labor in the south occurs alongside the imperial constitution of virtual slavery in other parts of the world facilitate the emergence of what DuBois describes as the unprecedented power of the super corporation.

There's another piece to this as well which is trying to figure out how it is that other practices of mastery show up in more mundane and quotidian practices, some of which become central to African American life. So, how is it that Americans from all walks of life come to adopt commitments and practices that were originally rooted in the exercise of mastery? What does this mean for a cultural and political community which claims to have abolished slavery? What does it mean for a counter-tradition and political culture which has historically understood itself as organized around the quest for freedom? Does it mean that when we take the full measure of the problem of mastery we must come to see freedom as always that something which stands outside the law and all the authoritative normativities which prevail in the U.S? Is freedom always fugitive?

As per [Fred] Moten...

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Moten, exactly. Moten famously claims that fugitivity is expressly anti-political. Not simply apolitical but actually anti-political. According to him, you have to guard against the development of political interests because these interests implicitly connect you to institutionalized forms of race governance and state normativity. So the experience of fugitivity, the experience of always being one step removed from the law means this refusal to stake a claim in yourself as an interlocutor with these logics.

I'm not totally comfortable with that. At the same time, I'm not comfortable with other interpretations of black fugitivity which claim that the experience is sedimented in the radicality of those slave narratives which pushed the American regime to incorporate blackness and black folk within its conception and practice of liberty. This view seems to flatten out the centrality of the fugitive's experience of flight, evasion, and discipline to remain undetected by the law. So, I think there is real work to be done around identifying the distinctive politics that flow from the experience of fugitivity. What are fugitivity's conditions of possibility? What kinds of supports does it require and how does it exist in relationship to countervailing forces? If it seeks to reproduce itself what must be done now and in the future to maintain and/or defend itself? This is a political problematic that seems to me unavoidable for those of us interested in recommending

fugitivity as an exemplary practice of freedom. So, it is in light of these concerns that I've been drawn more and more to literary figures, Toni Morrison in particular. So I'm having a lot of fun with this, reading widely in history and philosophy and putting this into conversation with political philosophers and literary artists has been a blast.

So what are some connections that come to mind for you between these questions and things going on both in academia and in the world outside of that?

One of the most exciting developments in my field and one of the most exciting things at the University of Texas is the emergence of black political thought as a recognized intellectual paradigm. For political science, actually political theory, to finally acknowledge the authority and wisdom of these texts pushes the margins of the canon and the field. To be forced to reckon with the philosophical autonomy of these texts even as we acknowledge their engagement with central questions of the canon and discipline means recognition of the need for a kind of specialized engagement with these texts. And, to reckon with the concerns of this literature that go beyond the traditional canon means the possibility that the entire enterprise of political theory may be undergoing important change.

The University of Texas was founded as an institution to carry out the project of

reconstituting the nation along lines imagined by nostalgic former confederates. One important founder was a large plantation owner from Mississippi who moved to Texas, and decided to invest in the mission of cultivating white manhood for a new south. Since then, there's been a slow and uneven opening to blackness at this university- first, with the admission of a small number of students and then with the hiring of a small number of black faculty. Today, we have this major opening where permanent institutions devoted to scholarly engagement with blackness have been created to serve the interests of the entire university. This is a pretty dramatic transformation and wonderful opportunity. I think the acknowledgement of black political thought and black studies have been really important interventions.

You know this question of mastery is for me at the heart of the crisis of black vulnerability in our present moment. The racialization of crime and the criminalization of blackness are obvious and well documented examples of the afterlife of slavery. The recent spate of indefensible killings of young black men under suspicion of criminality by law enforcement and their auxiliaries are too easily regarded as a break from or malfunction of the regime of American liberalism. And what this view does is displace victims and families of victims as the center of moral concern and focus attention on the frailties of ostensibly just American institutions. And of course, this

focus obscures how black vulnerability to surveillance, interdiction, and incarceration is and always has been constitutive of our politics. So what I'm asking is what if what we're really wrestling with when thinking about these killings is the normal operations of post-slavery liberalism?

What if that's the regime that we live in? American liberalism and various projects of attempting to master blackness go hand in hand.

I started thinking about the problem of mastery long before the vulnerability of black men to executions became topical. It actually came to me as I was thinking about this dispute between Du Bois and Douglass about the survival of the power and spirit of the confederacy. But as I began to think about it, it began to illuminate for me the continuities between a number of unpleasant political moments. I think a number of people are increasingly coming to believe that while we have this extraordinary array of theoretical formulations to make sense of the political past, we don't really know the fundamental character of the regime we inhabit right now. We don't know where we are. And I suspect part of this has to do, as George Shulman says in *American Prophecy...*, this is because we orient ourselves in light of models which presuppose the political experiences of Europe rather than the experiences of new-world political modernity. We need to devise the theoretical tools and frameworks that

actually engage our experience and history to describe where we're at right now.

So in thinking about these questions and more specifically about these frameworks, who are some people or projects that you find inspiring? And the people could be people of the past or contemporary scholars or different kinds of thinkers and activists...

I'm really intrigued by Moten. I think that among many of the contemporary writers I'm engaged with, he has a lot of wisdom.

But I don't think he's fully fleshed out the all of the political assumptions and implications of this wisdom. So much of the power of his ideas comes flow from provocation and performance.

He's a very performative writer. And poetic. A lot of it comes out through the poetry.

That's right. But... I think the implications of his ideas need to be fleshed out. Because I think he has uncovered some really powerful and inspiring principles. What I love about Moten's work is that as dark as the work gets in its engagement with black abjection and black vulnerability, unlike self-described Afro-pessimists who say, "This is cause for despair, wrath, and the end of the world," Moten says there's absolutely nothing wrong with black folk as they are. Let's engage the darkness but

acknowledge and celebrate the life within the darkness. I love that, I love that project. For me, it accords with the best of the African American political tradition but also with the democratic project of the great tragic poets like Sophocles and Euripides. It also accords with the project of the great prophetic writers of the ancient Hebrew tradition like Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. And, with Marx. There's something like this in Marx.

But with respect to figures that I derive sustenance from... More than anyone else right now, Toni Morrison for me is the most visionary intellectual regarding blackness and freedom. Her writings about slavery, to me, continue to be the most penetrating, the most complex, and the most rich. I'm talking about reading *Beloved*. With every read you walk away with something else to think about. Of course when I read *Home* I see Morrison wrestling with many of these same problems, only, in this instance, formulated in terms of the post-emancipation problem of home, escape, mourning, and solace. I think she has this profound historical grasp, an amazing sensitivity to the continuities between a variety of crisis points that are constitutive of American life in general but black life in particular. And I also think she's the most sober visionary... I think that she imagines an alternative future. But I think she's sober, visionary, and deeply humane. And radical.

Do you think utopic could be the

word, maybe in a way that's not naive?

What I love about Morrison, is that her work is surprising and visionary, but not utopian. Utopia in its classic sense refers to nowhere. It literally means nowhere. But it's also a genre of literature that posits an ideal place from which one can engage in the kind of critique that one cannot find evidence for anywhere in the world. It's an ideal city created in speech that affords you with critical tools.

However, I think Morrison is in the world and she's saying that we have to open our eyes to the existence of certain practices of community, certain commitments to particular purposes—and certain kinds of mature sacrifice in the service of these purposes and communities. These constitute a radical alternative that already exists but we can't think it because we're so habituated to seeing the inferior status of the persons who engage in these ideas and have been engaged in them for a long time. To engage the brilliance and wisdom of these persons and practices means that we have to dislodge so much of what we're invested in, so much of what we think the world and the good life consists of. We would have to dispense with so much of what we think a properly political life looks like, so much of what we think an intelligent life looks like, in the end it's not clear that what Morrison offers is any less difficult to achieve than the achievement of a perfectly just society. But her worldly

vision can guide our thinking in a way similar to the way utopias can.

As very in your current project as you are, have you had a lot of time to think about future projects that you would like to do?

You know what, I have, actually. And the thing about talking about this is in the same way that the evil project didn't get done, this little project here may get done before that. Ultimately, I want to write that book about evil and I think I'm in a much better position to write it after I finish the book on mastery.

But before I write the book on evil, I want to write a book about basketball, about American basketball—and freedom. I want to write something both philosophical and historical. I want to talk about the development of the game within black communities as a pedagogy of freedom that democratized the experience of freedom that begins when kids in cities across the United States decide they're going to refuse menial jobs and work on their craft on the court as a profound act of freedom. And over time, when these kids who manage to achieve a kind of virtuosity within the game, both in terms of their physicality but also in terms of their artistry, they vividly dramatize an experience of freedom.

People are doing things with their bodies on the courts and in public view that, in fact, transmit an experience of what it means to defy time honored conventions

and what passes for laws of nature. They enact for public view what it means to prevail against prevailing constraints as a result of practice, creativity, and self discipline, not force.

In a way that's not abstract at all.

Nooo, not at all, exactly.

But something happens in the 90s. There's this kind of explosion of big data in sports.

There's a whole industry called basketball analytics where they develop quantitative metrics to assess the efficiency of different shots on the floor, norm the kind of physiques and skills that one needs to get to these positions. And, you get, beginning in the 90s, these super athletes who are also really amazing players. Michael Jordan, my God. Kobe Bryant, my God.

LeBron James. These guys are just... well they're just extraordinary. But it's not clear this is freedom anymore, though. And it's weird to watch some of these guys play as if they are overpowering... like they have somehow *mastered* the game. So I want to wrestle with that. I love that; I'm a basketball junkie.

Is there a team or teams you're partial to?

Yeah. I'm a Laker fan, University of Louisville fan. So Rick Pitino is the coach of the Cardinals now. But he was hired in the early 90s to coach our ancient rivals at the University of Kentucky. So he, when he was hired at Kentucky, reoriented the

culture and tradition of the program away from its segregationist-basketball past. For those of us from Louisville, especially black folk, it was an article of faith—my family's from Louisville, Kentucky—that you hated the University of Kentucky. Just hate them with a passion. And I used to unreflectively hate them. But since Pitino has reoriented the tradition, I now also root for the University of Kentucky.

My son is nine years old and a really good basketball player. He's really good. And one of the things that's been just wonderful is to be in a position to kind of use the game to teach him life lessons, lessons about freedom, practice, self-discipline, concentration, execution and things like that. In addition to all this, it's also been really wonderful to become a part of the amateur athletics scene here in Austin.

Every weekend there will be one or two gyms specifically designed to accommodate youth basketball. You have hundreds of people who come out to watch kids play.

And it's a really fascinating assortment of people—a multi-racial, class-diverse space.

Families as well. And thinking about this kind of amateur sports as a manifestation of American civil society, whether it's simply a reflection of the dominant commitments in American civil society or a kind of counter-public if you will is interesting. But it's also a nice break from the academy. It's a really nice break from work. Shirley says that she feels like she's under siege by meatheads in our household. But she never misses a game.

She's always out there.

Alright, one more question—and it's a pretty straight forward one. In one sentence, what is American studies to you? Or maybe a few sentence if you can't do just one.

Never trained in an American studies department. I have no idea what American studies is. My hunch is that American studies is the interdisciplinary investigation of the life of anything that could be connected with America. Notice I said life because here because I'm trying to say that cultural practices, intellectual currents, spiritual investments, political institutions that are constitutive of life. And these are just a few of the ways in which one could fill out "the life."

I think one of the most difficult things about American studies is actually just keeping track, making sense of America. What does America mean to American studies people? Everything. A lot. Which is great, just great. Most of the people I know who are doing American studies are cultural historians. However, there's a smaller group of people I know who are doing American political development and American political thought. I think George Schulman is one of these people. And so while I think this may be a small piece of Americans studies it is one that my friends who do cultural history insist is becoming more important. So that's a horrible answer.

I think it gets at the complexity of it.

I hope that this answer doesn't show up on the blog. People are going to be like, "My goodness..."

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