

1 **Reintroducing Derrick Bell into contemporary**  
2 **discourse: A review of ‘Racism and Resistance: Essays**  
3 **on Derrick Bell’s Racial Realism’**

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7 Edited by Timothy J. Golden, “Racism and Resistance: Essays on Derrick Bell’s Racial Realism”  
8 presents a diverse set of perspectives from scholars in philosophy, law, theology, and rhetoric that critically  
9 engage with and expand upon Derrick Bell’s theories and scholarly works. This review approaches  
10 this work from outside the disciplines of its contributors and evaluates the volume for its accessibility,  
11 interdisciplinarity, and application of Bell’s theory of racial realism in contemporary discourses on racism  
12 and anti-racism. “Racism and Resistance” is divided into four parts, each containing two chapters. This  
13 review focuses on Part 1 – Racial Realism, Religion, and the Negro Problem and Part 4 – Racial Realism  
14 and Theology, as they are excellent examples of both the disciplinary range of this book and the authors’  
15 command of Bell’s body of work.

16 Keywords: Derrick Bell, racial realism, African American civil rights, critical race theory, racism, race  
17 relations

18 **1. Introduction**

19 In “Racism and Resistance: Essays on Derrick Bell’s Racial Realism,” Timothy J.  
20 Golden and a selection of scholars in philosophy, law, theology, and rhetoric critically  
21 engage with and expand upon Derrick Bell’s theories and scholarly works. The theory  
22 at the center of this volume of essays is Bell’s concept of “racial realism”, which  
23 posits that that racism is not an anomaly of our legal, political, and social orders, but  
24 rather a foundational and enduring feature.

25 **2. Brief focus on Bell and CRT**

26 Bell did not suddenly or randomly land on the concept of racial realism. His  
27 educational path and professional endeavors led him to conclude in 1992 as a NYU

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28 visiting law professor that, “It is time we concede that a commitment to racial  
29 equality merely perpetuates our disempowerment. Rather, we need a mechanism  
30 to make life bearable in a society where blacks are a permanent, subordinate class.  
31 Our empowerment lies in recognizing that Racial Realism may open the gateway to  
32 attaining a more meaningful status.” (Bell, 1992, p. 377) Moreover, it is “Unhappily,  
33 [that] most black spokespersons and civil rights organizations remain committed to  
34 the ideology of racial equality. Acceptance of the Racial Realism concept would  
35 enable them to understand and respond to recurring aspects of our subordinate status.  
36 It would free them to think and plan within a context of reality rather than idealism.”  
37 (Bell, 1992, p. 377)

38 While Bell is often credited as one of the founders of critical race theory (CRT),  
39 some of Bell’s substantive contributions to CRT predate the coalesced identity of  
40 critical race theory. There are some who state the genesis of critical race theory dates  
41 to the work of the Institute of Social Research founded in the 1920s. Yet, most of  
42 those engaged in current CRT discourses consider critical legal studies (CLS), started  
43 in the late 1970’s, as the space where the seeds of CRT germinated. In turn, CRT  
44 discussions gained substantive momentum within CLS conferences in the late 1980s.  
45 (Dunbar, 2008)

46 Bell’s concept of Interest Convergence, for example, is considered to be a seminal  
47 tenet of CRT, yet, it was conceptualized parallel to the early days of CLS. Interest  
48 Convergence is the idea that “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will  
49 be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites.” (Bell, 1980).  
50 “The application of interest convergence has evolved beyond those of identifying as  
51 black and has further evolved beyond the limited application of race.” (Dunbar 2023,  
52 p. 369)

53 More relevant to the discussion within this book review is Bell’s concept of racial  
54 realism, which is another prequel contribution to CRT. Racial realism seems even  
55 more relevant when applied as a lens to view and assess the current social and political  
56 divisive discourses in many locations around the world. Perhaps even more relevant  
57 now than at any other time since it was conceived in the early 1990s. (Doval &  
58 Souroujon, 2022; Drolet & Williams, 2018; McAdams & Castrillón, 2022)

59 Ultimately many of those who were the activist legal scholars who generated the  
60 energy as well as the scholarly and community organizing that gave CRT life were  
61 both influenced and inspired by Bell. That statement remains true today. (Cobb, 2021)

62 Curry’s book forward frames the philosophical urgency of recovering (and apply-  
63 ing) Bell’s work, by further shaping the relevance of this edited monograph as, “the  
64 first engaged reflection with Derrick Bell’s corpus as political theory.” (Golden, 2022,  
65 p. xiii) As such, the applicability of Bell’s work continues to expand to include not  
66 only legal and philosophical context but discussions of interest to historians and those  
67 working within information intensive environments.

### 68 **3. The lens of this review**

69 The authors of this review approached this volume not as a legal scholars, theolo-

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70 gians, or philosophers, but from the perspective of public history, librarianship, and  
71 archival practice. While there are overlapping principles of analysis between all these  
72 disciplines, there are key differences in approaches to developing historical context.  
73 From this perspective, there was a, perhaps misguided, expectation to see the analysis  
74 of more primary historical sources. Despite this, the analyses present in this volume  
75 were easy to follow. The accessibility of the selected chapters for this review speak to  
76 the relevance and urgency of Bell's work, and recalls the multi- and cross-disciplinary  
77 appeal and applicability of Critical Race Theory broadly. It also demonstrates the  
78 potential for further discussion and analysis of Bell's work by more disciplines.

79 'Racism and Resistance' works to (re)introduce Derrick Bell's work into the current  
80 discourses of the fields of philosophy, theology, law, and rhetoric. Timothy J. Golden's  
81 introduction for this volume opens with historical and legal context which situates  
82 Bell's argument of the permanence of racism in American law, politics, and social  
83 orders. Golden discusses the relevancy of Bell's scholarship to our contemporary  
84 political and social landscape with great urgency. He discusses the failures and  
85 consequences of the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump as well as  
86 the increasing hostility of America's legal system and police force towards Black  
87 Americans. Golden also introduces an idea that will be reiterated and emphasized in  
88 most proceeding chapters: the hope to be found in the concept of racial realism.

89 This volume is divided into four parts each containing two chapters. This review  
90 will focus on the chapters of Part 1 – Racial Realism, Religion, and the Negro Problem  
91 and Part 4 – Racial Realism and Theology. These chapters are excellent examples of  
92 both the disciplinary range of this book and the authors' command of Bell's body of  
93 work.

#### 94 **4. Chapter analysis**

##### 95 *Chapter 1 – The Last Decade of Derrick Bell's Thought by George H. Taylor*

96 The first chapter of this volume, written by George Taylor, continues from the  
97 introduction to further explore the foundations of Bell's work. In his discussion of  
98 the course that he co-taught with Bell in 2006, Taylor highlights how the themes of  
99 religion, race, and the law intersect in Bell's later works and argues the uniqueness  
100 and endurance of Bell's contributions to Critical Race Theory. The chapter provides a  
101 portrait of the range and depth of Bell's scholarship, his commitments to combating  
102 injustice, and reflections of his personal faith. It also sets the stage for how faith,  
103 theology, philosophy, and Christianity will be explored within Bell's work and how  
104 those ideas connect with racism and with the fight for racial justice. Taylor establishes  
105 a sort of continuum between legal (and political) scholarship and theology, with  
106 philosophy as a connecting concept. There is discussion of faith generally in the  
107 first section of this chapter. This focus opens the subject to theologians outside of  
108 Christianity, but this volume does offer insights specifically from this faith.

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109 *Chapter 2 – Derrick Bell and the “Negro Problem” by Bill E. Lawson*

110 Chapter 2 expands on the legal and historical context of racial realism. In con-  
111 junction with the introduction and Chapter 1, scholars unfamiliar with Bell and his  
112 work will have a solid understanding of his work, methodologies, references, and  
113 perspectives on scholarship. In this chapter, Bill E. Lawson specifically uses the  
114 historical and legal context of the ‘Negro Problem’ and how America has attempted  
115 to solve it. Ultimately, he concludes that the racist ideology that Black people are  
116 inherently inferior and only fit for forced labor combined with the lack of a solution  
117 to the ‘Negro Problem’ is at the heart of racism’s permanence in America. This essay  
118 is a good example of how while this volume is multi and cross disciplinary, it is  
119 not always interdisciplinary. From an historian’s perspective, there is an opportunity  
120 (in this chapter and others) for the use of historical methodology in support of the  
121 argument. While this chapter’s legal scholarship is robust, and legal scholarship and  
122 historical scholarship overlap in many ways, the use and analysis of primary sources  
123 outside of court documents as well as the incorporation of broader social, economic,  
124 and political contexts would have been a welcome addition.

125 *Chapter 7 – Rethinking Hope: The Importance of Radical Racial Realism for*  
126 *Womanist Theological Thought by Kerri Day*

127 Chapter 7 explores Christian theology and its connection to Bell’s scholarship.  
128 Written by Keri Day, this chapter builds from Bell’s argument on the permanence of  
129 racism to expand on traditional womanist eschatological visions of a world where  
130 injustice is eradicated. Day argues that through an application of racial realism,  
131 defiance to racism can be understood as a theological good in relation to hope. This  
132 chapter is particularly valuable to the volume, as it clearly dispels the notion that  
133 racial realism is an argument based in pessimism. Of all authors in this work, Day’s  
134 theological perspective embodies Bell’s activist vision. Her work speaks specifically to  
135 the person experiencing the permanent phenomenon of racism and how empowerment  
136 and hope can be found in a seemingly never-ending battle in the reclamation of  
137 black humanity. Other chapters in this volume surely discuss hope, but they don’t  
138 necessarily provide guidance in how to find it or access it within racial realism.  
139 This chapter also critically highlights intersectionality within anti-black racism in  
140 America with the attention Day brings to the ways in which gender and sexuality  
141 shape discrimination and inequality.

142 *Chapter 8 – Liberalism, Christendom, and Narrative: Paradox and Indirect*  
143 *Communication in Derrick Bell and Søren Kierkegaard by Timothy J. Golden*

144 Timothy J. Golden is the author of the eighth and final chapter of this volume. He  
145 argues that Bell’s use of fiction in his scholarship is an example of an ‘outgroup’  
146 counter narrative that disrupts dominant, racist narratives. Building off of this, Golden

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147 employs Søren Kierkegaard's concepts of 'indirect communication' and 'passion'  
148 to further argue that the paradoxes within racial realism are catalysts to perpetual,  
149 radical resistance to racism. The chapter positions Kierkegaard and Bell as two  
150 scholars with similar approaches to their moral grievances within Christianity and  
151 the American legal system respectively. In doing so, Golden squarely places Bell  
152 within the canon of philosophy and continues the theoretical and scholarly connection  
153 between theology and racial justice as seen in previous chapters of this volume.  
154 Though Golden incorporates a significant amount of philosophical concepts and  
155 references many figures from the field, he provides enough background context for  
156 the uninitiated to fully understand and follow his argument.

## 157 5. Closing thoughts

158 Some approaches found in this text focus on the idea of racial realism in the foun-  
159 dations of systems, in the persistence of racism, and in how individuals experience,  
160 interpret, and respond to racism. The trans- and intra-disciplinary nature of Bell's  
161 work is celebrated in this volume and reflected in the range of scholars included.  
162 As core concepts and methodologies of CRT have been adopted by scholars across  
163 disciplines and geographies, so has Bell's thesis of racial realism. This adaptability  
164 speaks to the endurance of not only the value of Bell's scholarship, but also of racial  
165 oppression and its impacts.

166 While Golden and the other contributing authors of this volume wholly reject  
167 reactionary politics and affirm Bell's thesis on the permanence of racism, they do  
168 not fully embrace a revolutionary ethos in this academic work. Rather, the rich and  
169 varied analyses of Derrick Bell's work and methodologies are contributions to the  
170 beginnings of a conversation around proactive, hopeful academic engagement with  
171 race and racism.

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