Robert F. Williams and Militant Civil Rights: The Legacy and Philosophy of Pre-emptive Self-Defense

Tommy J. Curry and Max Kelleher

Abstract: Robert F. Williams, despite being a central historical figure and noted theorist of the Black radical tradition, is ignored as a subject of philosophical relevance and political theory. His challenges to the racist segregationist regime of the South influenced generations of thinkers and revolutionaries. However he is erased from the annals of thought for his use of armed resistance. This paper aims to introduce his life and work to philosophy as material for study and situate his program of pre-emptive self-defense within the Black radical tradition.

Introduction

Though considered by historians and Black Studies scholars to be among the forefathers of Black self-determination struggles, anti-colonialism, and Black Studies paradigms, Robert F. Williams as well as his philosophy of self-defense remain inexplicably absent—having never been engaged—in the discipline of philosophy.1 Despite the various works of scholars in history, law, and political theory over the last several decades attempting to disabuse multiple publics of the popular dogma holding segregation to be the bedrock of American racism in light of the ever-changing dynamic of white

supremacy, academic philosophy remains dogmatically affixed to a racial origin story which continues declare that American racism was ameliorated by the integrationist policies generated as a response to the American civil rights movement.\(^2\) The integrationist narrative endorsed throughout academic philosophy has not only been shown to be false by historians and social scientists, but also theoretically incomplete.\(^3\) Contrary to the popular mantra suggesting that the hearts and minds of white Americans were changed by the societal reorganization caused by desegregation and subsequently integration, where


Similarly, contemporary sociological studies reinforce the unchanged state of white anti-Black racism. Leslie H. Picca and Joe Feagin’s *Two-Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage* (New York: Routledge, 2007) and Joe Feagin’s *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2014) both make the point that white racist attitudes and the social institutions have changed little since the 1960s. Even more surprising is the work of Phillip Attiba Goff et al. “Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences” (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94 [2008]: 292–306) in implicit bias, which argues that white Americans conceptualize Blacks, specifically Black males, as animals (gorillas) and more deserving of violence. The themes and research found within this small listing of research can, of course, be extended backwards for several decades, if not a century.

today we are only dealing with the (less racist) remnants of white ignorance which respond to moral and rational appeal, some Black political theorists have rejected the idea that white racism can be dealt with non-violently and have instead endorsed armed self-defense and militant responses against white terrorism (lynching, rape, castration, KKK/WKKK intimidation). In a very important sense, Robert F. Williams’s publication of *Negroes with Guns* (1962) is a testament to the continuation, not the birth, of the militant civil rights strategies introduced with T. Thomas Fortune’s agitationist philosophy and further developed by Ida B. Wells-Barnett in the late 1800s.⁴

The history of civil rights and American race relations proceeds from a romantic view of racial change which erroneously presupposes that appealing to a virtuous white character is the basis of all attempts to solve or respond to anti-Black racism. This presupposition demands nonviolence to be the only strategy made available to oppressed people that challenges racism while honoring the personhood and humanity of white Americans. This view has led many scholars and laypersons alike to idolize the nonviolent strategy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. over and against his more radical contemporaries like Malcolm X or the Black Panther Party. This “Cliff’s Notes” version of history however grossly exaggerates and overlooks the interdependence nonviolence has historically shared with militant armed revolt(s) during the same period. Charles E. Cobb Jr., for instance, remarks in *This Non-Violent Stuff will get you Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* that though controversial: “armed self-defense was a necessary aspect of the civil rights movement ... wielding weapons, especially firearms, let both participants in nonviolent struggle and their sympathizers protect themselves and others under terrorist attack for their civil rights activities. This willingness to use deadly force ensured the survival not only of countless brave men and women but also the freedom of the struggle itself.”⁵ Akinyele O. Umoja’s *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* continues the recent focus on grassroots self-defense efforts by Black political organizations throughout the country as proof of the necessity armed resistance had to the isolated successes of nonviolence throughout the country. Umoja’s work shows that poor Black Southern people, specifically Black men, created progressive and revolutionary political organizations from the ground up and became advocates of programs and philosophies that stood in sharp contrast to more bourgeois and now canonical(-lized) thinking about civil rights organizations like the NAACP. Commenting on the rise of

---

the *Deacons for Defense*, Lance Hill argues “Although the Deacons began as a simple self-defense guard to compensate for the lack of police protection, they soon developed into a highly visible political organization with a clear and compelling alternative to the pacifist strategies promoted by national civil rights organizations.” Far from being exceptions, these organizations were local and prolific. They were created by Black communities, organized specifically by Black men, to protect and enable the activism of Blacks (men, women and children) politically given the absence of the (white) state’s ability to recognize Black civil and constitutional rights.

The erasure of Williams, as both theorist and historical figure, is the product of two disciplinary tendencies. The first is the inability of Eurocentric disciplines to conceptualize the Black radical tradition outside the ahistorical self-referential nature of (white) theory. The disciplinary resistance of philosophy towards mining the material history (actual archives, testimonies, newspapers, etc.) of Black political organizations prevents academic philosophers from seeing Black political organizations as various schools of thought. There is a tendency to reduce Black organizations, regardless of their function as activist or academic, to political forums at odds over specific Black identities. This framing of Black organizations ignores the actual function these entities had as social spaces wherein Black political theories were formulated, debated, and tested as politics in the real world. The disciplinary view of theory is indicative of philosophy’s failure to grasp the intricacies and historical emergence of the Black political tradition throughout the centuries beyond the isolated figures selected to be compatible with the philosophical canon. The second disciplinary tendency which has limited the exploration of Williams as a theorist and figure is due to the fear and anxiety caused by militant Black male political resistance involving violence or armed resistance. This anxiety is not race specific. While white disciplines have simply dismissed the armed resistance of Blacks, particularly Black men as hateful; the barbaric Black equivalent of white Klan violence in many cases, Black feminist historiography originating in the *Black Macho* mythology of Michelle Wallace, and carried forth in subsequent Black disciplines have simply dismissed the armed resistance of Blacks, particularly Black men as hateful; the barbaric Black equivalent of white Klan violence in many cases, Black feminist historiography originating in the *Black Macho* mythology of Michelle Wallace, and carried forth in subsequent Black

---


feminist works equating militant resistance—the use of the gun—with patriarchy. This rendering has supported an ahistorical determination that carelessly makes all Black male attempts to protect themselves equivalent to their desire to imitate white patriarchy. Though popular, this mythology has failed to hold up to historical scrutiny.\(^8\) Simply stated, the Black radical tradition both exceeds and stands in contradiction to the categories presently deployed to demarcate its boundaries as “useful” political theory.

This article is an attempt to introduce the political philosophy of Robert F. Williams to academic philosophy as an extension of previous works in the history of Black militant civil rights theory.\(^9\) It is important to note that Williams’s thinking is revolutionary, but revolutionary in that his thinking is an articulation of programs long practiced and offered by the works of Black thinkers (like T. Thomas Fortune, John E. Bruce, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett) throughout the nineteenth century. In section I, we offer a philosophical biography of Robert F. Williams explaining his preference of racial explanations over class dynamics during the 1960s. In section II, we offer Williams’s analysis of American racism and white supremacy as well as his criticism of mainstream civil rights ideology in his infamous text *Negroes with Guns*. In the final section of the essay we articulate Williams’s philosophy of pre-emptive self-defense.

---


Williams’s work expands the purview of Black political theory, deepens the complexities of Black masculinity, and stands in sharp contrast to the dogmatic rejection of militant armed resistance currently offered by democratic theory.

The Life of Robert F. Williams and His Movement towards a Philosophy of Racism over Class Consciousness

Williams’s childhood was immersed in segregation and inequality. Born in Monroe, North Carolina, in 1925, Williams grew up listening to the stories of racial injustice from his formerly enslaved grandmother. The unabated violence the young Robert witnessed under Jim Crow would inspire him to become a NAACP lawyer and civil rights activist. At the start of World War II, Williams, then a young man, moved North seeking work. Williams was then drafted into the segregated military in 1944. He served for a year and a half before returning home to Monroe, North Carolina. Early in 1947, Williams met a young Black girl named Mabel Ola Robinson; on June 19th of the same year, they wed. Having returned from war as a veteran but seeing more violence at home against Blacks fighting for simple enjoyments like libraries or swimming pools led Williams to question the nonviolence program of the NAACP. Williams applied for a charter from the National Rifle Association in Washington, DC, which led to him founding a local Black defensive group, mostly comprised of Black male veterans, known as the Black Armed Guard in the late 1950s. This group of Black men challenged the inequality of the status quo, and would come to fight not only for Black human rights, but for their very survival.

Robert F. Williams was not just an activist; he was a militant journalist, a respected and successful lawyer, and the president of the Monroe chapter of the NAACP between the 1950s and early 1960s. It was the crisis of the world before him that he sought to understand and respond to throughout his work. His philosophies of integration, militant activism, and Black self-defense against clearly present and abhorrent institutionalized racism and violence influenced and inspired other activists, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Huey Newton. Despite the great range of thoughts and thinkers influenced by the life and work of Robert F. Williams, he, himself, remained deeply convinced

of the perils within empire. In his obituary, which appeared in the *New York Times*, David Stout wrote, while “[Mr. Williams] lectured, visited schools and worked on his autobiography, [he], according to his son John . . . was pessimistic about American society to the end.”


As a young child, Williams was terrorized by the materiality of anti-Black racism. At the age of eleven, Robert witnessed a white police officer named Jesse Alexander Helms violently assault a Black woman. The young Robert “looked on in terror as Big Jesse flattened the [B]lack woman with his huge fists, then dragged her off to the nearby jailhouse, her dress up over her head, the same way that a cave man would club and drag his sexual prey.”

This sexualized racism was symptomatic of the temperament found in the classes of poor whites in Monroe, North Carolina. Most of the residents in Union County, both Black and white, were poor laborers. For many white farmers, who relocated there at the turn of the century pursuing their dreams of finding “pure nuggets [of gold] in the branches or on the hillsides,” their life was one of bare scarcity. By the 1920s, the economy shifted from mines to mills and this poor white population did everything in its power to sustain its employment above that of Black workers. Justifying the segregation of Black male workers in these mills, mill owners argued it was “wrong to work Negroes in association with white women and children,” thereby enforcing the sexual racial dogma of the Black male as both rapist and sexual deviant.

These white supremacist ideologies that ensured the sole employment of whites did not stop the violent strikes of white workers against their employers. Class divisions between whites still mattered. Gun battles and death ensued, but were quieted by the propagandist stratagem designed by mill owners and white politicians who charged that “Communists had targeted the cotton mills in order to advance their radical agenda of race mixing and social overthrow.”

As Timothy Tyson remarks: “Karl Marx exaggerated only slightly when he claimed that these hardworking people had nothing to lose but their chains. The links that white supremacy had hammered into those chains bound white people in Union County not only to their poverty but to an ineffably deep sense of themselves as white Southerners. The bloody history of race and class conflict in the piedmont made it clear that white supremacy and the bitter legacy of slavery divided workers far more powerfully than self-interest could unite them; it was a lesson that Robert Williams learned over and

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 6.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 7.
over again.”

Williams understood that the history of racism would prevent the class solidarity between Blacks and whites commonly advocated by the left. As Williams notes: “The enslavement and suppression of Negroes in the American South were going on before Karl Marx was born, and Negroes have been rebelling against their oppression before Marxism came into existence. . . . The fact that Jim Crow discrimination and racial segregation may very well be based on economic exploitation is beside the point.”

For decades, philosophers have simply ignored the depth of sexualized racism foundational to Jim Crowism, specifically the violence directed against Black men by white women. Even the horrors white men committed against Black women are often spoken of, but rarely understood within the history of Jim Crow. Robert F. Williams formed the Black Armed Guard as a means to protect Black people (Black men, women, and children) from the Ku Klux Klan and local police who were largely motivated by these sexualized racist myths. For many philosophers, it is difficult to accept the complex history of racism and the gendered vulnerability of Black men and boys alongside the rape of Black women and girls. Fixated upon a white Eurocentric rendering of history, the male is alleged to be all powerful and never vulnerable to the whims of the female. However, a serious reading of history shows a very different dynamic in the Black experience especially regarding the consequences of engaging white womanhood.

One of the Black Armed Guard’s first engagements with the Klan came in 1957 when they sought to protect Dr. Albert E. Perry. When Williams joined the local chapter of the NAACP, it was on the brink of collapse. As Williams recounts, “When I objected, I was elected president and they withdrew, except for Dr. Albert E. Perry. Dr. Perry was a newcomer who had settled in Monroe and built up a very successful practice, and he became our vice president.”

In the summer of 1957, after several attempts to disrupt the work of the local NAACP and a number of death threats against Dr. Perry, “An armed motorcade attacked Dr. Perry’s house, which is situated on the outskirts of the colored community. We shot it out with the Klan and repelled their attack and the Klan didn’t have any more stomach for this type of fight. They stopped raiding our community.”

The night after what was thought to be a victory—Williams and his guard of veterans driving the Klan away from Dr. Perry’s house—Dr. Perry was met by the Monroe police with a warrant for his arrest on the charges of “criminal abortion on a white woman.”

---

20. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 71–72.
of this white woman was Lilly Mae Rape; a powerful symbol of the ideology standing behind the accusation of Dr. Perry. The impoverished and illiterate Rape asked Dr. Perry on multiple occasions for an abortion, but as a devout Catholic he refused. According to Perry, “The last time she came to see him . . . he told [her] that there were too many dangers in a white woman even in his office, reminded her that he had told her already not to come back, and demanded that she get out.”

25 Black men were well aware of the readiness of this justification to punish them. As Perry later stated to the executive secretary of the NAACP Roy Wilkins, “I would have had to been crazy to have done such an act in the face of all the animosity against me. I am Vice President of the local branch and it is because of this that I have been framed.”

The very next year, in 1958, this peculiar chauvinism was demonstrated again—this time against two young Black boys in Monroe, North Carolina. In what has popularly been referred to as the Kissing Case, two young boys David Ezell Simpson (eight) and James Hanover Grissom (ten) were imprisoned, sentenced to reformation, and threatened with death for participating in a children’s game involving a (white) girl sitting on a boys lap and kissing him. Unfortunately, Simpson and Grissom were Black, and the kiss of a white girl, even that of a child, violated the segregationist white supremacist order of the day. Despite various firsthand accounts by the children themselves that this was a game created by the group of white boys and girls, the dominant white version suggested the two boys were rapists.

The “white—and official—version” maintained:

Two negro boys trapped the three white girls in a culvert and told them that the price of escape would be a kiss. Two of the girls, according to this rendition of events, managed to elude that levy. The third—a seven year old—either kissed or was kissed by Hanover Thompson (one of the African American boys). White sources asserted that one of the African American boys had held the girl while the other had kissed her or even tried to rape her. Local officials openly accused the boys of “molesting three white girls” and quietly suggested to reporters that what actually had occurred was a rape attempt.

Tyson goes on the explain that the Carolina Times, a local Black newspaper, interviewed separate eyewitnesses, and concluded that “the girls, in a game, had sat voluntarily on the laps of Black and white boys and kissed them playfully.” Tyson is undoubtedly correct in pointing out the non-existence of manhood for Black men in the sense that “No Black man could safely protect ‘his’ women from any white man, while the Black male who ventured

25. Ibid., 91.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 93.
28. Ibid., 92.
29. Ibid.
across the color line represented not merely a threat to a particular white man but to white supremacy generally—and was likely to be dealt with as such,”30 but the boundaries of Black male oppression is not simply had in the denial of what is traditionally thought of as the parameters of white manhood. Black men and boys are historically targeted for being the representation of sexual savagery. As James Baldwin notes in “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” “to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one’s own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others.”31 To be Black and male then is having a social genesis rooted in one’s transfiguration as a phobic entity—a living sciaphobia. This was even applicable to eight and ten year old boys. Sexual assault from white men on Black women strengthened and supported white supremacy, and was, therefore, not only tolerated, but commonplace. The mere threat of sex between a white woman and Black man, or the faint idea of a Black man living after offending white womanhood as such, was enough to disrupt the ideological order of white supremacy. Such trespasses against white women could only be met with death. Historically, white supremacy has routinely demonstrated its power to deny Black males social being, precisely in that it denies them the ability to have socially recognizable roles as husbands, fathers, and as the Kissing Case demonstrates, children. However, white supremacy also makes them vulnerable to the whims of women in ways unimaginable to the white male patriarch.

This power was not solely isolated to white men, but is also at play in the functioning of white womanhood. “Not only did white Southerners generally regard murder as an appropriate response to suggestions of sexual interest in white women on the part of Black men. They also seemed to believe . . . that any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern [white] woman.”32 When Sissy Sutton, the mother of the white girl who kissed James Hanover Thompson, found out that she had kissed a Black boy, she said: “I would have killed Hanover myself if I had the chance.”33 Sissy Sutton’s father formed a lynch mob, (arming himself with a mob of his friends, and going on a manhunt for the Black children); hoping to find them before the police for some deep-South, vigilante, backwoods justice. The mob formed by Sutton had gone to Thompson’s house. Mrs. Thompson recollected decades later that “these people—that family—had been to my house with guns and said they

30. Ibid., 94.
32. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie, 97.
33. Ibid., 95.
were going to kill me.” The boys, who were eventually spotted pulling a red wagon down a local road, “oblivious to their peril,” ended up taking a vicious beating by police who had jumped out of their car, “guns drawn”, and began making threats on the boys’ lives. Hanover Thompson recounts years later being slapped by an officer, and being told, “We’ll teach you little niggers not to kiss white girls,” just before taking head and body blows by armed officers. Keep in mind these boys are eight and ten years old. When a hearing was finally held, it was not a legal debate over the innocence of the defendants, but was rather simply an opportunity for the Judge to announce the punishment. As president of the Monroe NAACP, Williams tried to get help from the national office, “But the national office of the NAACP wouldn’t have anything to do with the case because it was a ‘sex case. A seven-year old white girl had kissed a nine-year-old Negro boy on the cheek and the national office didn’t want any part of it.” This was a demonstration of the power of white womanhood. It was such a powerful identity that even Black civil rights organizations knew they could not overcome it.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Robert F. Williams was primarily driven by his recognition of the vulnerability of Black men and boys. The radicalizing event which led to his break with the NAACP was actually due to the rape of Mrs. Mary Ruth Reid. According to Williams, “Mrs. Reid was eight months pregnant, [and] the victim of an attempted rape by a white man who came to her house, drove her from her house, and then beat her.” Mrs. Reid tried to escape but her attacker caught her. She was only able to escape due to the courage of her six-year-old son, who hit the white rapist with a stick. Mrs. Reid escaped to her white neighbor’s house and called the police. Williams recounts that “the neighbor was a white woman and she came to court that day with Mrs. Reid. She came and testified that she had seen the defendant chasing Mrs. Reid and that Mrs. Reid had come to her house in an excited and hysterical state, without shoes, and with her clothes torn from her.” As one could imagine, many in the Black community did not believe the courts would offer any protection to Mrs. Reid. In fact, Mrs. Reid’s brothers had intended to kill her white rapist before the trial. Williams says, “I persuaded them not to do anything. I said that this was a matter that would be handled legally.”

What Williams recalls about the trial is chilling. The attorney defending the white male attacker made one argument to the jury. He said:

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Williams, Negroes with Guns, 22.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 25.
Judge, Your Honor, and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you see this man. This is his wife. This woman, this white woman is the pure flower of life. She is one of God’s lovely creatures, a pure flower. And do you think this man would have left this pure flower for that?” And he made it appear as if the colored woman was actually on trial. Then the defense ended by saying, “It’s just a matter of whether or not you’re going to believe this woman or this white man.”

Appealing to the jury’s racist sentiments, the attorney asserted no white man could honestly desire a Black woman over the beauty of a white lady. After hardly any deliberation, the white man was acquitted of all charges. This event, understandably, did not sit well with Williams, and it is clear from his writings that this was indeed a pivotal moment. This trial influenced Williams in two ways: first, Williams loses faith that the American system could ever be racially impartial, and second, Williams takes on the weight of Black women made vulnerable and without protection from white men. These Black women, who were hopeful for justice and simple protection, were crushed. Williams internalized this failure of the law to protect Black women explicitly in his text. He offers a vivid recounting of this moment. “The courtroom was full of colored women and when this man was acquitted they turned to me and said, ‘Now what are you going to do?’ You have opened the floodgates on us. Now these people know that they can do anything that they want to us and there is no prospect of punishment under law and it means that we have been exposed to these people and you’re responsible for it. Now what are you going to say?”

This moment highlights a fascinating and often ignored dynamic in Black male gender formation, namely Black masculinity being responsive to the demands, frustrations, and aspirations of its time—dynamic. Black masculinity was never imitative of white men. This was a capacity denied to Black men throughout the centuries. As such, “Black women as well as Black men transmitted lessons about what Black manhood should mean.” Black women deployed traditional gender stereotypes to hasten the political programs and needs they thought necessary. Far from being idle in the formation of civil rights gender ideology, Black women placed demands on Black manhood and conditioned the response.

Williams’s answer to this question posed to him by the women of his race inspired him to create the philosophy he takes with him to his death. The consistent failure of the courts to protect Black people and arrest the tyranny of state actors like police, and extra-state terrorists like the Klan,

41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 25–26.
43. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie, 141.
44. Ibid. The accounts of Black women’s activism alongside the militant aspects of the civil rights movement are stunning. In both the cases of Dr. Albert Perry and Mrs. Mary Reid Black women were present in hundreds.
made clear to Williams that “in a civilized society the law is a deterrent against the strong who would take advantage of the weak, but the South is not a civilized society; the South is a social jungle, so in cases like that we had to revert to the law of the jungle; that it had become necessary for us to create our own deterrent. And I said that in the future we would defend our women and children, our homes and ourselves with our arms. That we would meet violence with violence.”

This trial was critical for Williams. This trial meant much more than one woman not receiving due justice, but was rather a symbolic struggle for something much bigger. Williams felt that “the force of these complex racial and sexual dynamics” was what was at stake.

He understood that white violence against Black women was not just an attack on women but an attack upon the race; a demonstration of their women’s debasement and their men’s inability to confront violence. Like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and T. Thomas Fortune the century before him, Williams understood that the rape of our women, the death of our men, and the criminalization of our Black boys was part of the racist architecture designed to keep the entire race subservient and dehumanized. Many scholars married to the disciplinary arrangement of knowledge will likely resist the historical contextualization of Williams’s position, choosing only to see the objectification of women, rather than the at large strategy to destroy the race; a tactic of racist whites to not only objectify Black women, and target them in hopes of emasculating the Black men and deterring any concrete action against white violence or white life. This was a reformulation of Black masculinity, where these Black men were protecting friends and wives, sisters and daughters, while racist whites were attempting to use these women as tools for the dehumanization of the Black community as a whole.

**Negroes with Guns: The Twentieth-Century Inspiration behind the Militant Civil Rights Movement**

Despite the long history of, and varied justifications for, armed resistance offered over the last two centuries by oppressed Blacks throughout the Diaspora, the envisioning of armed resistance by Blacks in the academy and throughout the public remains quite narrow. People routinely fantasize about the power of Harriet Tubman’s shotgun while traveling the Underground Railroad, or reference the symbolism of Black Panthers standing in front of the Alameda County Courthouse with rifles, or may even mention in passing Frantz Fanon’s call for revolutionary violence, but rarely if ever are these representations connected to a theoretical analysis of the various arguments presented by Black activists and organizations justifying armed resistance. Revolutionary violence and the arguments used to justify its

practice are quite different from the arguments used to justify the use of self-defense by many proponents of armed resistance; despite this distinction rarely being upheld in academic discussions concerning the political use of violence. This failure of attending to the philosophical basis and theoretical nuance of Black theorists advocating armed resistance has led to a dogmatic engagement with the militant civil rights tradition, where any and all calls for violence by Blacks becomes irrational, rage filled revenge, fueled by hate, patriarchal, and barbaric. In other words, despite the centuries of white philosophical traditions enduring alongside and even justifying armed revolt, riot, and just/unjust war, philosophy is thought to end with discussions where Blacks theorize or advocate the extinguishing and challenging of white life. As Black political theorists, we cannot continue to ignore this collapsing of inquiry when confronted with the long history of Black thinking outside of the liberal tradition, or the anxiety created by engaging the sexualized mythos of the armed Black male militant. We must challenge this persistent retreat into racist caricature. This tradition is too historically important for theorists to allow it to be dismissed by liberal thought, and framed erroneously by Black feminist historiography.

*Negroes with Guns* is written in the spirit of veteran intellectualism. Williams was a trained Marine with knowledge of the justifications used by the government to kill and defend the constitutional freedoms of citizens; a category he believed truly applied to the rights originating in the birth of Black people in America. As Truman Nelson argues:

> It was the consciousness that they were citizens and men that Williams tried to implant in his community. If the Government would not protect their rights by due process, then they must do it themselves. He simply

would not recognize that he, as a Negro, was barred from any of the privileges and immunities of the whites . . . particularly if those privileges were part and parcel of a governmental structure, paid for by Government funds. This conferred upon him, so he thought, a legality which superseded the racist legality of Southern municipal law. It made a virtue, an act of patriotism and faith, out of resistance. 48

Historically, Black veterans have urged a strong sense of rights and economic justice for Black people. In December 1944, for example, in response to the gang rape Recy Taylor suffered in September of that year, Black male soldiers reacted to the indifference of then Governor Chauncey Sparks towards the crime, despite confessions from the assailants (Robert Gamble, Dillard York, Billy Howerton, Herbert Lovett, Luther Lee, and Joe Culpepper). 49 This indifference was tyrannical, and few citizens understood this better than the Black soldiers in the U.S. military. According to Danielle McGuire, “Thirty-three soldiers from somewhere in Belgium put down their guns and picked up their pens to sign a petition addressed to Governor Sparks. They demanded he use his gubernatorial powers to intervene in the case.” 50 These soldiers argued that “Failure to act in such a case is a matter of grave concern to everyone believing in the principles of American democracy—the principle for the equality of all before the law, regardless of race, color, or religion; particularly to those of us who face a ruthless enemy to preserve that democracy.” 51 Eugene Henderson, a Black seaman, wrote to Governor Sparks stating: “I have risked my life many times to deliver supplies to our armed forces and our allies. My morale drops when I learn that a woman of my race has been brutally raped by six white men and nothing done about it.” 52 Henderson then asks a powerful question to Governor Sparks: “Isn’t Negro womanhood as sacred as white womanhood?” 53 The outrage of Black troops to the rape of Recy Taylor was enough for white members of the military to urge Governor Sparks to act. 54 This was the culture from which Williams emerged and the basis of his disengagement with the rule of law when it fails historically to protect the rights and lives of Black Americans. Black American men were risking their lives for the ideas of freedom which they believed would translate into actual political rights and power for the race. The attack on Black women and children showed them that their sacrifices meant nothing, with-

50. Ibid., 28.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 29.
54. Ibid.
out a concrete translation of their sacrifices into respect for the personhood (manhood and womanhood) of Black people in America. Williams believed that if Black soldiers could kill abroad, they could certainly use their training to defend the rights of Blacks, even if it meant violence, at home.

Contrary to the popular imagination, “When Robert F. Williams seriously questioned the concept of non-violence over a decade ago he was a lone voice with very little support. He posted this question during the early part of the Martin Luther King era that had started with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955; the historic decision of the Supreme Court on school segregation announced that previous year had set in motion the possibility that Black Americans were now on the road to full citizenship. All of them did not indulge in this illusion, knowing that it would take more than court decisions to change their condition.” Black citizenship was illusory. As Williams said “To us there was no Constitution . . . the only thing left was the bullet.”

Throughout *Negroes with Guns*, Williams describes the normalized violence and the death of Black people during the Civil Rights movement which inspired him to create a philosophy of armed resistance. Contrary to the popular ideas of our day, desegregation had failed. Throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s, Black Americans were being killed, brutally raped, and lynched. The moral plea of King did not singularly arrest the death of Black people. This demanded a response other than appealing to the murderers of Blacks and their courts and laws for justice. Williams recognized that white supremacy and the rule of law were inextricably woven together such that the supposed rights guaranteed to Blacks by the Constitution, and the then recent Brown v. Board of Education decision would always be denied. *Negroes with Guns* was written as a response to this violation and is rooted in the recognition that “In civilized society the law serves as a deterrent against lawless forces that would destroy the democratic process. But where there is a breakdown of the law, the individual citizen has a right to protect his person, his family, his home and his property. To me this is so simple and proper that it is self-evident.”

**Racism and the Negrophobia of White America**

Throughout Robert F. Williams’s corpus, racism emerges as the lynchpin sustaining America’s societal order and enabling-justifying-permitting the savagery of white America towards Blacks. Racism is not one’s undesirable or mistaken set of beliefs; some constellation of erroneous ideas or stereotypes

---

about the character of Black people, rather racism is a “mass psychosis” allowing whites to have no regard for the life of Blacks as humans or citizens. This distance from the reality of Black humanity (in the white mind) is the cultural foundation of white America’s barbarism towards Black citizens, and sustains the mythology from which American values like justice, fairness, and democracy are denied to Blacks who represent the non-human in the geopolitical binary determined by what is white-human-citizen and what is not. The destruction and repression of Blacks is the architecture of American society—the dehumanization of Black Americans allows white society to fulfill its obligation towards civilization. Insofar as whites perceive the nature of Blacks (their evilness, their danger, their uncivilized character) as threatening to destroy America and erode democracy (civilized governance), whites can rationalize the separation and suppression of Black life as necessary to the preservation and propagation of the ideals that sustain America as a white republic. The necessity of Black death to the sustaining of this order means that Black Americans experience social and political life as a struggle for physical survival against the bedrocks of America’s democratic structure (white citizens, police, and courts). This inevitably denies the Black American their humanity and ability to flourish. As Williams states:

It is not the nature of things that grow, to flower and bloom in perfection when the twisted jungle of the battle of survival shuts out the sunlight and chokes off the very substance of life. This is a law of nature. A human being is a much more delicate thing of growth and the Afroamerican is no exception. The Afroamerican’s stance of growth in the social jungle of the USA has left some weird and distorted figures of the human species. The social conditions, created to dehumanize the Negro, have become a vicious circle rotating a double cuffing edge.

This is the condition of the Black American: a thing defined by the caricatures of whites, an entity whose life is measured solely by the distance it achieves from the creature birthed by the white imagination rather than what it contributes to the memory and history of the actual world. Black being is condemned to live and die striving to be absolved of the Nigger—an ontology that stains the soul of Blacks from birth like that of first sin—rather than flourishing in a self-actualized life as a human being.

This shows us that racism is a creative psychosis. It grows, reinvents, and persuades generation after generation of its veracity by establishing as fact that the sociological conditions of Black Americans arise from some natural essence in Blackness. This is how Black inferiority comes to mean that which is animalistic, criminal, and violent; a threat to whites and white society. It obligates that which is white to preserve itself, and the society to confine

58. Ibid., 110.
and repress that which is Black. In this sense, the white American is both origin and interpreter of the narratives invented to advance the anti-Black mythos which serves as the socio-cultural framework from which American ideals emerge. The white American, not as an individual but as a function of its political design, lives out democracy through creating and protecting the anti-Black rationalizations of the society. For example, while the history of the Ku Klux Klan (both men’s and women’s organizations) have become synonymous with violence and terrorism in American history, there was a deliberate attempt to justify such violence through white womanhood. Williams recognized this as central to the legitimacy given by whites to make terrorism against Blacks, specifically Black men, permissible. Williams notes:

People have asked why a racist would take his wife into a riot-torn community like ours on that Sunday. But this is nothing new to those who know the nature of Klan raiding. Many Southern racists consider white women a form of insulation because of the old tradition that a Negro is supposed to be intimidated by a white woman and will not dare to offend her. White women are taken along on Klan raids so that if anything develops into a fight it will appear that the Negro attacked a woman and the Klansman will of course be her protector.

This violence against the Black community, engineered upon the sacredness of white womanhood—the stratagems deployed to justify its execution—identifies a meaningful aspect of white savagery towards Black people. There is an appeal to the caricatures of the white public—the shared mythology learned by white individuals as children—as if the figments/pigments of their imagination are real. When violence is committed against Black Americans, especially Black men as in the case of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, etc., the act of killing the Black beast reassures the white public of the reality of their phobias. As Williams argues: "The architect of the social jungle has been caught in the spiral of his own web. Thus, in his brutal handiwork to reduce the Black man to a miserable bundle of docile and submissive inferiority complexes, the white man has become a

60. For a history of white women’s Klu Klux Klan organizations, see Kathleen Blee, Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Nancy MacLean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Two important understandings emerge from these texts: first, white women were well aware of the gender dynamics of anti-Black terrorism and actively participated in and valued the position they were granted within this anti-Black nexus which defined and protected white womanhood; and second, white women were responsible for committing numerous acts of violence against Black men and Black people more generally. History tends to exclude white women in its account of anti-Black violence.

61. Williams, Negroes with Guns, 48.
victim of his own brutality. He has transformed his nature to that of a raging, ferocious beast. His very conduct has given him a hate complex tempered with guilt.” 62 This is the complexity obstructing moral appeal and sympathy towards Blacks. Blacks merely become disposable things—the conquering of the whites’ fear of these haunting shadows.

Appeals to the conscience of the white oppressor class were useless and politically ineffective given the history of white domination the world over, according to Williams. Echoing the sentiments of W. E. B. Du Bois’s “Whites in Africa after Negro Autonomy,” which was published the same year as *Negroes with Guns*, Williams did not pretend to love the white race. He believed, as Du Bois did, that “as a race they are the most selfish of any on earth.” 63 This ethnocentric partiality was the reason Williams argued that “The white racist has built up a process of immunization to human compassion where the Negro is concerned.” 64 The lack of compassion, the inability of whites to even contemplate or imagine the Black as human, is what makes the violence directed towards Blacks and their deaths appear unremarkable and necessary to America’s social order. This violence taught Black Americans to accept their condition—to rationalize the deaths, lynchings, and terrorism aimed at their people—as the practical path to equality. Non-violent activists and theorists accepted that the lives of the oppressed must be sacrificed so that whites can eventually grasp the brutality of American racism. Williams saw this proposition as unacceptable; he rejected that the deaths of the oppressed was the means by which white life could be civilized, and made morally aware. He was of the view that anti-Black violence and death made Blacks interiorize pacifism and fearful of direct political confrontation with the white state. As he says, “The greatest tragedy of all is the fact that this long process of violent conditioning of the Afroamerican has created a race where true Black masculinity is a rare commodity.” 65 This situation was easily apparent to Williams:

From the time the first Negroes were made slave captives in Africa, the white masters have left no stone unturned to dehumanize the Black race. Throughout the history of the Afroamerican in the racist USA, racist whites have perpetually striven to create an inferiority slave complex in this wretched soul. All of the social forces of the white man’s society, including Christianity have been directed toward the objective of creating an entire race of subhumans.

The 400 years of brutal oppression of the Afroamerican in the New World have rendered him a broken, twisted mass of fears, and fathomless

---

65. Ibid.
phobias. The noble sounding words of liberty, justice, democracy and Free World have been no more than vague fantasies of tantalizing mockery. He has been treated worse than a step child by a deranged and sadistical step mother. He has been like a frustrated child lullabied to sleep by songs of hate and tenor. He has been awakened in the morning by the terrifying sounds of thunder and violence. No, there has been no melodious robin singing outside his cabin window at sunrise. The bird that greets him is Jim Crow and its melody is misery and death.66

Robert F. Williams’s understanding of the imperial conquest which created slavery and the effects of racism on Blacks is clear. Racist domination is part of a program designed to break the oppressed; a regimen of dehumanizing violence and repression making the oppressed afraid to challenge the white oppressor class. This system is apparent, but where Williams differs from his Black bourgeois counterparts is that he insists: “We know that racism is part and parcel of the social system, but we are not out to promote theory, we want to provoke action.”67

Robert F. Williams’s Philosophy of Pre-emptive Self Defense

The foreigner laughed at Robert F. Williams when he described the “segregated pet cemetery in Washington D.C. where an Afro-American cannot bury his dog,” but such extremity was indicative of the segregationist psychology that emerged from the racist logics of white America.68 If one accepts, as Williams does, that “The stranglehold of oppression cannot be loosened by a plea to the oppressor’s consciousness,”69 then the theorist and activist both seem committed to at least understanding Williams claim: “Social change in something as fundamental as racist oppression involves violence.”70 To some, the notion of a pre-emptive self-defense sounds strange. While there is a long standing tradition of self-defense, the protection of one’s self or property against siege, such a stance is thought to be an exception; only responding to the most egregious transgressions against an individual. There is a similar but different understanding at work in Negroes with Guns. Racism determines the boundaries between white humanity and what they define as their relationship to that which is not human. Such distance means that whites will rarely perceive a violation of Black rights or a devaluing of Black humanity, so violence is never-ending. As such, Williams contends that “you cannot have progress here without violence and upheaval, because it’s a struggle for survival for one and a struggle for liberation for the other.”71 Racism then is consistent violence against the

66. Ibid., 3.
68. Williams, Negroes with Guns, 110.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
oppressed such for the sake of preserving their distinction and distance from
the white oppressor class. Simply stated, “The racist is a man crazed with hys-
teria at the idea of coming into equal human contact with Negroes.”72

Because violence is ubiquitous in the American South, Williams asserts
when the law fails to protect the rights of Blacks, Blacks must take up arms
to protect themselves (their homes, their wives, and their children). Rather
than being a revolutionary sentiment aimed at overthrowing the govern-
ment, in toto, Williams asserts “the right of Negroes to meet the violence of
the Ku Klux Klan by armed self-defense. . . . It has always been an accepted
right of Americans, as the history of our Western states proves, that where
the law is unable, or unwilling to enforce order, the citizens can, and must act
in self-defense against lawless violence. I believe this right holds for Black
Americans as well as whites.”73 Williams illustrates the stance vividly in his
chapter entitled “Self-Defense Prevents Bloodshed.” In 1961, the NAACP
chapter of Monroe, North Carolina picketed the town’s swimming pool de-
manding integration of this public space. When the demonstrators would
break for lunch in a picnic area reserved for white people only, an area that
should not exist five years after desegregation, groups of whites formed aim-
ing to intimidate the Black protestors by firing rifles at the trees above their
heads. When the police was asked to stop the whites from shooting at the
protestors, his reply was “Oh, I don’t hear anything.”74 Williams appealed to
the Justice Department to protect the Black picketers; they replied this was a
matter for the local police. A few days later, an attempt on Williams’s life was
made. A 1955 Desoto sedan tried to run him off a cliff. When he presented
his damaged vehicle to the police chief, the police chief laughed and said “I
don’t see anything. I don’t see anything at all.”75 As the white dissenters and
police presence grew around the Black protestors, so did the violence. In
what could have certainly been the end of Robert F. Williams, a white driver
rammed his car into a ditch. The police saw the incident and chose not to
intervene. The white driver exited his car with a baseball bat yelling “Nigger,
what did you hit me for?”76 This happened while the observing white crowd
screamed “Kill the niggers! Kill the niggers! Pour gasoline on the niggers!
Burn the niggers!”77 Williams had two pistols and a rifle in his car. It was
these weapons that saved his life and prevented him from being lynched.

Some find it fanciful to believe violence against whites is ever necessary
to address racism, but these individual also lack knowledge of what racism

72. Ibid., 111.
73. Ibid., 39.
74. Ibid., 42.
75. Ibid., 44.
76. Ibid., 45.
77. Ibid.
truly is: the unrelenting violence and genocidal logics producing endless Black deaths with little recourse for the loss of those lives. Williams believes he survived that day for the operation of one maxim: “When an oppressed people show a willingness to defend themselves, the enemy, who is a moral weakling and coward is more willing to grant concessions and work for a respectable compromise. Psychologically, moreover, racists consider themselves superior beings and they are not willing to exchange their superior lives for our inferior ones. They are most vicious and violent when they can practice violence with impunity.”

Similar to the charge against lynch mobs advanced by Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the reason every Black home should have a special place for a Winchester rifle, Williams recognized that challenging white life was ultimately the key to Black survival. Because racist orders cannot see Black people as human beings, there is not any regard for the suffering, pain or even death of Blacks. Such logics can only be uprooted; they cannot be persuaded. This is where one begins to grasp the meaning of his pre-emptive program.

Two years after the publication of *Negroes with Guns*, Williams pens two short essays entitled “Urban Guerrilla Warfare” and “USA: The Potential of Minority Revolution” in *the Los Angeles War Cry* establishing the case for pre-emptive self-defense. These shorter essays in many ways anticipate Williams’s thinking about armed resistance against a militarized police state employing war tactics against Black civilians at home while sending Black men to fight imperial wars abroad; the central concern of his 1968 publication *Listen Brother!* In “USA: The Potential of Minority Revolution,” Williams argues that self-defense and violence is necessitated “When a brutally oppressed and dehumanized people are denied the peaceful channels through which to activate redress and when their peaceful petitions are answered with ruthless violence the only recourse left to them is to meet violence with violence.”

This presents a perplexing quagmire in that even non-violence is met with violence. Like his earlier caveat from *Negroes with Guns*, Williams insists “We prefer peaceful negotiations, but our oppressors have proved to us that they are not susceptible to such mild pressures for reform and that they will utilize massive violence to attempt to contain our struggle.”

Since every action is met with violence, be it peaceful protest or simply being Black, self-defense is a disposition adopted in relation to the racist society as a whole, not only its most extreme examples of anti-Black violence.

Following the model of the Black Armed Guard, Williams says “The lesson of Monroe teaches that effective self-defense, on the part of our brutally

78. Ibid., 40.
oppressed and terrorized people requires massive organization with central coordination. External oppressive forces must not be allowed to relieve the besieged racist terrorists. The forces of the state must be kept under pressure in many places simultaneously. The white supremacy masses must be forced to retreat to their homes in order to give security to the individual families.\textsuperscript{82} The Black oppressed class are already on the losing side of violence regardless of their stance, Williams simply argues that given the same end the oppressed cannot afford to not challenge the violence of the state and its white supremacist masses. In this scenario, “The oppressors have more to lose than the dehumanized and oppressed in such a conflict. Our people have nothing to lose but their chains.”\textsuperscript{83} This is not to suggest that Williams is driven by a romanticism regarding his use of violence. He accepts that

there would be great losses on the part of our people. How can we expect liberation without losses? Our people are already being admonished by the nonviolent forces to die for freedom. We are being told to sacrifice our lives in situations of diminishing returns. If we must die, let us die in the only way that our oppressor will feel the weight of our death. Let us die in the tried and proven way of liberation. If we are going to talk about revolution, let us know what revolution means.\textsuperscript{84}

Liberation requires bloodshed. The only difference is that Black and white academics, scholars, and theorists are willing to concede this necessity when speaking of the tolls taken on by the oppressed Black peoples of history, but shudder to theorize this stance when the demand is placed upon white lives. Such an insistence is usually met with the idea that violence corrupts, and would destroy such a revolutionary program. This apologetic against the militant Black tradition is fascinating, since an acceptance of the premise that violence morally corrupts cultures and actors would seem to lead one to conclude that ethics and the moralities produced by such frameworks are generally beyond the capacities the white culture asserting them. Is it not the violence of the white oppressor which inspires the oppressed to arm themselves and risk their very lives to resist this imposition of death?

Contrary to the moral peril of Blacks caused by pursuing an armed resistance strategy, Williams does not believe that violence against the white oppressor is sadistic and fueled by the hate of whites. He takes great caution to convey that self-defense is rooted in justice, not revenge, and targets the agents who commit atrocities against Black America—these tyrants could be white and/or Black. Williams insists that “Afroamericans must remember that such a campaign of massive self-defense should not be based upon a lust for sadistical gratification. It cannot be a campaign for vengeance,

\textsuperscript{82} Williams, “USA,” 7.
\textsuperscript{83} Williams, “Urban Guerilla Warfare,” 6.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
however, sweet and deserving vengeance may be. Such a campaign of self-defense and survival must be based on the righteous cause of justice. It must not be anti-white but anti-oppression and injustice. Uncle Toms should be as much a target as racist whites."\(^{85}\) Williams’s movement was not one of violence for the sake of violence, or a way to take out pent-up anger. This revolution had a cause and a goal, and Williams was determined to keep that in the forefront. Williams sought to create a systematic articulation of militant resistance capable of activating the pursuit of rights and justice for Blacks in a system demanding their subservience and oppression. Robert F. Williams undoubtedly established the twentieth century program of militant civil rights, and it was one focused on the realization of justice and liberation, not decadent racial identity politics. The militant tradition articulated by Williams commits the practitioner to an unflinching paradigmatic analysis of material systems: racial, economic, and historical.

**Conclusion**

Robert F. Williams is a pivotal figure in the history and advancement of Black political theory. It is a great injustice that his seminal work *Negroes with Guns* remains excluded from examination and analysis due to the fear and anxiety his identity and politics cause within disciplines. His life marks the limits of liberal thought and offers a steadfast challenge to the progressive left. Rather than simply being an example of an imaginary Black Nationalist politics, his life and activism show what a reflective Black (male) mind countering the assassination attempts by the FBI, the terrorism of the Klan, and multiple threats against his life produces as anti-racist revolt. Williams was adamant that he did not lead a political movement, instead he argues that he led “a movement of people who resented oppression.”\(^{86}\) His work aims to inspire Blacks to actively contemplate the multiplicity of resistance strategies, and not confine themselves to one morally determined course of action. In a twenty-first-century world that looks eerily similar to the 1950s and 1960s regarding the public executions of Black men, and condition of Blacks more generally, Williams’s work allows us to reconceptualize what is at stake in our protests and appeals to the American public. Is it the case that Black men can simply predetermine that all their resistance shall be based on non-violence? Can Black Americans who find themselves at the mercy of the police demand of all protesters that they never arm themselves against the state? Is non-violence truly the only political philosophy Black Americans are obligated to act through when confronting a militarized police state and rampant vigilantism in the white public? Williams would insist the answer to these questions is simply: No. — • —