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E. Anthony Muhammad

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# The concept of alterity: its usage and its relevance for critical qualitative researchers in the era of Trump

E. Anthony Muhammad<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Alterity is a concept with an extensive yet elusive history. Popularly conceived of as radical difference and Otherness, I identify alterity as the source of much of the virulent forms of racism, sexism, islamophobia, and other dichotomies in society that pit one group against another. Coming out of the tradition of critical qualitative inquiry, I offer a genealogy of the concept of alterity through various contexts and disciplines with a focus on its use in traditional Western philosophy. Within this tradition, the alteric relationship between the Self and the Other was typified by a preeminence bestowed upon the Self and an adversarial, totalizing posture taken toward the Other. Relying on a hermeneutic methodology, I theorize the development of alterity within this tradition as the root of the Eurocentric project of hegemony and subjugation that has culminated in and solidified White supremacy and that manifest today as Trump era articulations of racism and nativism in American society. Detailing the early twentieth century postmodern turn in Western philosophy which rehabilitated the Other from the tyranny of the Self, I use that history as a model for reclaiming the racial, cultural, and religious Others that continue to be marginalized throughout American society. Enlisting the notion of borderlands from border pedagogy, the ethics of care of Emmanuel Levinas, and the tenets of critical qualitative inquiry, I argue for a deliberate and focused project of activist research and critical pedagogy to not only rehabilitate and give voice to marginalized groups but to also deterritorialize the borderlands between the Self of White society and those who have been Othered by White society.

**Keywords** Alterity · Otherness · Phenomenology · Emmanuel Levinas · Ethics of care

## Resumo

La alteridad es un concepto con una historia extensa pero esquivada. Popularmente se ha concebido como diferencia radical y otredad, pero yo identifico la alteridad como la fuente de muchas de las formas virulentas de racismo, sexismo, islamofobia y otras dicotomías en la sociedad que enfrentan a un grupo con otro. Partiendo de la tradición de la inves-

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✉ E. Anthony Muhammad  
Emuhammad@georgiasouthern.edu

<sup>1</sup> Georgia Southern University, 275 C.O.E. Drive, Room 3138, Statesboro, GA 30460, USA

tigación cualitativa crítica, ofrezco una genealogía del concepto de alteridad a través de varios contextos y disciplinas focalizando su uso dentro de la filosofía occidental tradicional. Dentro de esta tradición, la relación altrérica entre el Yo y el Otro fue tipificada por una preeminencia otorgada al Yo y una postura adversaria y totalizadora adoptada hacia el Otro. Usando como base una metodología hermenéutica, teorizo el desarrollo de la alteridad dentro de esta tradición como la raíz del proyecto eurocéntrico de hegemonía y subyugación que culminó con el surgimiento de la supremacía blanca y que perdura hoy en día en las articulaciones de racismo y nativismo de la era Trump que aún impregnan a la sociedad estadounidense. Detallando el giro posmoderno de principios del siglo XX en la filosofía occidental que rehabilitó al Otro de la tiranía del Yo, utilizo esa historia como un modelo para reivindicar a los Otros raciales, culturales y religiosos que continúan siendo marginados en toda la sociedad estadounidense. Elazando la noción de tierras fronterizas de la pedagogía fronteriza, la ética del cuidado de Emanuel Levinas y los principios de la investigación cualitativa crítica, defiendo un proyecto deliberado y enfocado de investigación activista y pedagogía crítica para no solo rehabilitar y dar voz a los grupos marginados, sino también para desterritorializar las fronteras entre el yo de la sociedad blanca y aquellos que han sido Otredad para la sociedad blanca.

Two of the most defining events of twenty-first century America were the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States (U.S.). While these events are seemingly unrelated, what they share is the divisiveness and “Othering” that ensued in their wake. With 9/11, the anti-Muslim sentiment that swept America resulted in a process of “de-Americanization” for Muslims where an “Us/Them” dichotomy manifested in discriminatory actions, stereotypical discourses and a demonizing of both Arabs and the religion of Islam (Cainkar 2009). Trump’s record of racist comments and discriminatory actions dates back to at least the 1970s (Graham et al. 2019) and through the use of racist and bigoted language, Trump amassed a wave of popular support that resulted in his winning the 2016 presidential election (Schaffner et al. 2018) and was poised to earn reelection in 2020 (Devega 2019). The notion of Othering from post 9/11 America and the Trump era in politics are exemplars of alterity, and in these cases, a perniciously antagonistic form of alterity that sought to demonize those different from the White Self. In the above examples and in American society in general, alterity manifests as oppositional borders between racial and cultural Others. These borders are often polarized and dichotomously depicted as in Black versus White, Christian versus Muslim, and U.S. native versus immigrant. These borders, though not physical, are nonetheless “historically constructed and socially organized...and enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms” (Giroux 1988, p. 166). As with Muslims after 9/11 and with Blacks and Latinos during the Trump administration, alterity worked to construct difference “through various representations and practices that name, legitimate, marginalize, and exclude the voices of subordinate groups in American society” (Giroux 1991, p. 61). It is within the cultural and racial borderlands between the White American Self and America’s non-White Others that the opportunity for emancipation and transformation can be realized. These are the racial/cultural borderlands to be traversed by educators and researchers alike, whether from STEM or not.

Just as an understanding of the terrain, to include both the geographical and sociocultural landscapes (Gallard et al., 2020) is integral to any journey, a mapping of the history and development of alterity is equally important in navigating its borderlands. As such, in

the discussion that follows I begin with a description of alterity followed by a review of how alterity has been conceptualized over time. I then examine the use of alterity within the Western philosophic tradition with an emphasis on the representation of the Self/Other relationship and its role in the development of White supremacy. From there, I discuss the resurgence of the Other by highlighting the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1987a, b, 1995, 1996). Finally, I close this article by emphasizing the importance of resisting and transforming the Othering process by being a border-crossing (Giroux 1988) educator and a critical qualitative researcher in an increasingly diverse and hostile world.

## Alterity

Alterity, as a concept, is as complex as it is simple. In defining the term, describing what alterity *isn't*, is just as important as describing what *it is*. This is accomplished by illuminating the complexity involved in this deceptively straightforward term. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, alterity is defined as “the fact or state of being other or different; diversity, difference, otherness; an instance of this” (Oxford English Dictionary 2019). Typically, the use of alterity within various fields has centered on its reference to a separate and distinct counterpart, something/someone external to self, an “exteriority” (Levinas 1969, p. 290). Characterized in this way, “alterity is simply the consciousness of self as unique from Other” (Roberts 2007, p. 5). In much of the discourse on alterity, the “Other” has been seen as “all persons outside of one’s self” (Maloney 2009, p. 2), as “the human Other” (Levinas, 1996, p. 12), as “that enigmatic, mysterious ‘strangeness’ beyond synthesis, thematization, and comprehension” (Cooper and Hermans 2007, p. 305), and, quite simply as, “not like I” (Boesch 2007, p. 5). Others have even envisioned alterity as a process. As described by Deborah Madsen (2012),

Alterity names the process by which an “Other” is constructed. It carries the double sense of both the subject position of “Otherness” in which someone is placed and also the adoption of that subject position as the Other’s perspective. Alterity is then a double process of placement and perception. (p. 1)

Michael Taussig (1993) envisioned alterity relationally when describing it as “every inch a relationship, not a thing in itself” (p. 130). In like manner, for Rosemary Maloney (2009), alterity was said to simply be “respect for the Other” (p. 33). And for Hyesook Son (2002), “alterity constitutes the grounds under which separation is possible: the subject exists because the Other is irreconcilable with it” (p. 5). For these writers, alterity can be viewed as “less a thing or a noun than it is a process or verb, a process of ‘Othering’” (Madsen 2012, p. 1). Given the variation of meanings ascribed to alterity, some have found it useful to distinguish between the use of Other as referring to a physical Other as opposed to an abstract Other. For example, in Emmanuel Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*, the French words *autrui* and *autre* are translated as “Other” (*autrui*) and “other” (*autre*), respectively. In this case, *autrui*/Other “refers to the personal other, the other person” and *autre*/other “refers to otherness in general” (1969, p. viii).

In line with these multiple conceptualizations of alterity, Dan Zahavi (1999) envisioned three different types of alterities. For him, the Other in alterity can take the form of “(1) nonself (world), (2) oneself as Other, (3) Other self” (p. 195). Elaborating on Zahavi’s words, Soren Overgaard and Mads Gram Henriksen (2019) added that alterity represents “anything that eludes or transcends a subject’s grasp” (p. 381). Seen in this way, alterity as

the “nonself” represents all things that are “not I.” In this articulation, all inanimate things as well as the external world in general would constitute the nonself. Intriguingly, “Oneself as Other” points to the alterity that our own selves present to us. It describes the inability we sometimes face of not being able to grasp certain aspects of ourselves. For example, physically, the use of mirrors notwithstanding, we don’t have the ability to see or grasp our own faces nor our own backs. And in the case of psychopathology, many personality disorders are representative of “oneself as Other” due to the inability of one to know or fully grasp the psychological turmoil transpiring inside oneself. Zahavi’s third form, “Other self,” describes alterity as all the subjects or people that we encounter in the world; those who constitute a self, separate from our own.

Another multifaceted conceptualization of alterity made use of a developmental arc. Psychologist Clive Hazell (2009), in one of the more lucid offerings on the topic, used the concept of a developmental arc to map out “different conceptions of alterity” (p. 144). Hazell saw alterity as the product of a developmental process within one’s self and he suggested five levels that depict alterity’s growth and progression in the psyche over time and through experience. He notes that “as this development takes place so the sense of self and alterity is altered” (p. 139). Additionally, Hazell’s framework of alteric development is useful due to its ability to correspond well with the ways alterity has been taken up in the various disciplines of the social sciences and humanities.

For Hazell (2009), initially, the idea of alterity does not exist within an individual. This stage represents an undifferentiated state before the Self and Other have separated in the eyes of the individual. This psychological phase is inhabited by those who are self-serving and “untroubled by a conscious or concern for others” (p. 132). In the second phase of alteric development, conceptions of the Self and Other are primarily informed by “sensory impressions and physical experiences” of and with Others (p. 139). It is characterized by an “I am me; you are you” and a “We are separate” orientation toward Others. Though there is some sense of a connection with Others, the defining feelings of this phase are separateness from Others and aloneness. The alteric separation of Self and Other at this level is where most people in society operate. In psychology, for example, Jean Piaget’s notion of the ultimate development of object permanency during the sensorimotor stage, the realization that objects exist independent of the Self, is emblematic of the development of alterity at this phase. Additionally, this type of dichotomous representation of Self and Other is typical of the us/them alteric relationship depicted in the field of cultural studies. In the world of cultural criticism, alterity is often used to distinguish between cultural Others. Such is the case in the juxtaposition of the Occident or Western societies with The Orient or Eastern societies. Here, The Orient is seen to be an exoticized and objectified Other to the Western world (Said 1979).

Progression into the third phase of alteric development is characterized by a deepening sense of connectedness to the Other. Seeing the Self “and Other,” “with Other” and “as Other” are the psycho-emotional milestones of this level. The work of existentialists like Carl Rogers is subsumed under this approach. In Rogers’ (1961) approach for example, being helpful to the Other is based on a contingency. For Rogers, “if I can form a helping relationship to myself—if I can be sensitively aware of and acceptant toward my own feelings—then the likelihood is great that I can form a helping relationship toward another” (p. 51). Similarly, the Self “as Other” depiction of the alteric relationship is found in many artistic representations. Hazell (2009) notes that “double selves, doppelgangers and multiplicities are often used as means of exploring alterities” (p. 48) within literary and film genres. One contemporary example of this is the 2019 film “Us” by critically acclaimed director Jordan Peele. In the film a vacationing family is terrorized by their Others in the

form of their doppelgangers from the underworld. In these and various other artistic renderings we encounter Hazell's third developmental phase of alterity in ways that depict *Other-that-is-oneseif* and *self-that-is-an-Other* (Hazell 2009). George F. Lau's (2013) work in archeology is another example of alterity as an interrelation between Self and Other. In his view the self comes about through the existence of the Other. Lau noted that "our status as individuals and selfhood are not predetermined at birth or even the course of our adult lives. Rather, we constantly develop personal statuses through engagements with others" (p. 24). His unique application in the field of archeology saw alterity as "otherness manifested and...countenanced through various means, such as weapons, images, clothing and types of settlements" (p. 24).

In Hazell's (2009), fourth developmental phase of alterity, the connection between Self and Other established and strengthened in the previous phase grows deeper still. Here the alteric relationship takes on a sense of individual responsibility. In this phase, an "unconventional notion of self and other" is developed out of a "transcendent self-other unity" found most often in "poetry, speeches of inspired leaders, gurus, and some psychologists" (Hazell p. 141). One of the most notable examples of the alteric relationship of this phase is the philosophical ideas of Emmanuel Levinas (1969). Basing the alteric relationship around the notion of care for the Other, Levinas (1969, 1987b) felt we had an obligation to allow for the Other to be experienced on its own terms, in other words, in its absolute Otherness. For Levinas, this was a sacred and solemn responsibility in our interactions with Others. This type of individual responsibility toward the Other would be exemplified in the ideas of another philosopher, Hans Georg-Gadamer. Gadamer's (1994) position on the openness needed to achieve an understanding of an Other, be it a text, a person, a work of art, mirrors Levinas' concern for the Other. According to Gadamer,

When we try to understand a text, we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author's mind but, if one wants to use this terminology, we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying could be right. If we want to understand, we will try to make his arguments even stronger. (p. 292)

In Hazell's (2009) last phase of alteric development, the fusing of the Self and the Other that takes place at this level is depicted mostly in philosophical and theological traditions. Whether it be the Hindu/Sanskrit traditions that view the Self as intricately interrelated with all, the Sufi Islamic traditions where the Self is lost in the Other and the Other lost in the Self, or the Gnostic tradition of Pleroma; totality and completeness, these traditions represent alterity in a way that stresses the connectedness of the Self and Other through an erasure of the Self due to its inseparability from the Other (Hazell 2009). An exemplar of alterity at this level of refinement is the religious traditions of Buddhism. In the Buddhist principle of no-self, the Self is seen as relational to the Other in that, "in order to be open to and accepting of changes in others, I must be open to changes in myself, because my 'self' is constituted by my relations with others" (Kalmanson 2010, p. 202). In this way, the Buddhist principle of the no-self resembles Levinas' depiction of the alteric meeting of the "I" and the "Other" where, "the relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching...it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain" (Levinas 1969, p. 51). It is this similarity, this transformative fusion experienced in Hazell's fifth level of alteric relations, that signals the "immediate connection between the emptiness of no-self and the alterity of the other" (Kalmanson 2010, p. 203).

As evidenced by the many interpretations and conceptualizations discussed above, alterity as a term is multifaceted. Over the course of its various usages many ideas have come to be associated with the term, so much so, that they often are assumed to be an inherent component of alterity itself. In what follows I offer a brief discussion of some of the ways the meaning of alterity has been artificially expanded through a fusing with these related, but not synonymous, concepts.

## What It Isn't

Given the prevalent use of alterity in various fields as well as its amenability to countless scenarios, much has unnecessarily been added to the concept of alterity. As such, a "shaving off" of some of the added meanings is warranted in order to arrive at a purer, "bare bones" understanding of the concept (Hazell 2009). Several points to consider when reflecting on alterity and its implications are offered by Hazell (2009) as an effort to "further elaborate and clarify the definition of the concept" (p. xvii). Noting the general misunderstanding of the meaning of alterity, Hazell initially set the parameters of his discussion of the term by disabusing it of various notions centered around difference, derision, and silencing/marginalizing.

## Difference

As the fundamental idea undergirding most definitions of alterity, difference can be misleading when trying to grasp the complexity of the term alterity. Defining alterity as "the state of being different; diversity, difference, otherness" often gives the impression that alterity and difference are coterminous. In fact, the "difference" denoted by alterity need not be drastic. For example, the twin towers of the World Trade Center were two almost identical buildings. Outside of being two completely separate buildings, their "differences" were virtually undetectable. When speaking of the "difference" within alterity, that difference does not even necessarily point to a physically distinct entity. In their articulation of the notion of "self-otherness," Mick Cooper and Hubert Hermans (2007) argued that "otherness...*can* be experienced within one's own being" (p. 306), as in the example of multiple personality states within the same person. The authors go on to note that self-otherness can manifest as "experiencing elements of our own being as mysterious, enigmatic, and transcendent to our 'self'" (p. 308). These examples again underscore how the "difference" inherent in alterity need not be radical nor does it necessitate the presence of an external Other as is often inferred.

## Derision

Hazell's second point is that, an Other need not always be viewed derisively. In other words, the Other, in being different from self, does not always have to be characterized negatively. In fact, in some instances the Other is often "idealized or worshipped" (Hazell p. xviii). One of the clearest examples is that of religion where the ultimate Other, God, is honored through veneration and praise. The same is true in instances where the Other is represented as an idol or a hero/heroine. Similar to this link with derision, alterity is also frequently viewed as being synonymous with marginalization.



## Silencing/Marginalizing

While often taking a back seat to the preeminence of the Self, the Other need not be silenced or marginalized. This is often seen in adolescent peer groups where the Other is a part of an “in crowd” while the Self, by not being a part of the in crowd, is actually the one that becomes marginalized (Hazell 2009). Relatedly, many Others maintain a neutral or even a central role with respect to the Self. To be sure, and as discussed in the following section, the philosophical tradition has indeed historically marginalized the Other by relegating it to something to be subsumed and integrated into the world of the Self. This approach privileges the view of the Self because it defines and appropriates the Other, not on its own terms, but through the terms, categories, and understandings imposed on it by the Self. The point to be made here is that marginalization and silencing, though endemic to the Western philosophical expression of alterity, is not endemic to alterity itself.

By clarifying what alterity is and what alterity is not, I have attempted to paint a clearer, more comprehensive picture of the meaning of the concept by addressing its definition, its multiple meanings, and its varied appearances in the theories and tenants of the social sciences and humanities. The one field however where alterity has been addressed in the most explicit and deliberate fashion is philosophy. In the next section, I provide an overview of the use and depiction of alterity in Western psychology. Following this discussion, I problematize the Western philosophic tradition on two fronts, its presumed universality and the racism endemic to it and some of its foundational thinkers.

## Constructing the border: Alterity in the Western philosophic tradition and its foundational role in white supremacy

The antagonistic racial and religious alterity of American society is solidified by “borders saturated with terror, inequality, and forced exclusion” (Giroux 1991, p. 62). The genesis of these oppositional structures can arguably be traced to the beginnings of the Western philosophic tradition. Since Socrates’ articulation of his doctrine of anamnesis (Treanor 2006) and Plato’s formulations in *Sophist* (Rosen 1999), Western philosophy has been focused around discussions of alterity and Otherness. To grasp the ubiquity of alterity in Western philosophy, one should understand that “almost all philosophical thought addresses the issue of alterity implicitly (Hazell 2009, p. 19). Rene Descartes’ “*cogito, ergo sum*,” (1637), I think, therefore I am, adequately frames philosophy’s approach to the Other. Descartes’ *cogito* crystallized the distinction between Self and Other because it “describes an opposition within the individual’s consciousness which leads to questions of skepticism about the other such as whether one can know other minds or how ‘I’, the subject, can know the other” (Wexler n.d.). In Western philosophy, the default assumption was that the Other was something to be figured out, understood, comprehended, and brought in to the sphere of one’s understanding. Viewed in this way, the general disposition of the Self toward the Other was essentially one of conquest where the totality of the Other was to be reduced, reinterpreted, and refashioned into an entity that fits neatly within the Self’s preexisting worldview. This is the crux of Aristotle’s statement that “all men by nature desire to know” (Treanor 2006, p. 3) and this is further witnessed by the fact that, “when confronted with otherness, scientists, explorers, philosophers, and theologians have generally attempted to analyze the foreign phenomenon in order to learn something—indeed ultimately everything—about it” (Treanor 2006, p. 4).



Ultimately, what the Western philosophic tradition produced was a philosophy that gave preeminence to the Self over the Other. This view of one's Self, which alternately is referred to as "I," the "ego," or the "same," emanating from the Renaissance and Enlightenment period, was one that aligned the Self with "reason, autonomy, and independence from others" (Anderson 2016, p. 2.) It was a Self that functioned to assimilate the Other into itself, to subdue the Other in an effort to make it understandable and intelligible. Brian Treanor (2006), in citing William James, pointed out that the rationality of the Western philosophical Self "encourages us to eliminate the 'unease' and 'perplexity' associated with a lack of understanding, replacing it with the 'relief and pleasure' of rational comprehension" (p. 4). Thus, in the purview of Western philosophy, the Other was never seen as an autonomous entity in its own right. Rather, the Other was seen as that which must be taken from the realm of the unknown and assimilated into the sphere of the known. Said differently, the sovereign alterity of the Other was always made "same" by being subdued by and incorporated into the understandings encompassed within the Self.

## Universality and the racialized alterity of Western philosophy

Despite the ubiquity and the "taken for granted" nature of the Western philosophic tradition historically, I am compelled to offer my personal critique in advance of the philosophical problematizing detailed in the following section. In my view, there are two fatal flaws inherent in Western philosophy. The first is the assumption of universality ascribed to it in general. In describing Western philosophy's assumption of universality, George Yancy (2011), using Descartes as a proxy for Western philosophy writ large, notes that "the Cartesian self is a universal or de-contextualized predicament, one unaffected by the exigencies and contingencies of concrete history. In short, Cartesian epistemic subjects...are substitutable pure and simple and faced with the same epistemic global problems" (p. 553). But, in pointing out the racial contradiction at the heart of this "universality," Yancy says,

In thinking of the history of Western philosophy as constituting a family with cross-generational (monochromatic) ties, it is important to note that Black people were never even part of the family; they were always already outsiders, deemed permanently unfit to participate in the normative philosophical community. (p. 552)

Due to this negation of Blackness, the Eurocentric Western philosophic tradition has been and remains able to fraudulently function as a "transcendental norm" only by its "ontological distortion and nullification of Black bodies" (p. 554).

The second inherent flaw of the Western philosophical tradition is the racism and anti-Blackness exhibited by many of its foundational thinkers. For example, David Hume, in explicating his views of Black people, proclaimed that, "I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation" (Hume 1777/1882, p. 252). In the words of Immanuel Kant (2011), "The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous" and "not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something great" (p. 58). Further indication of Kant's disdain for Black humanity was his dismissal of the opinion of a Black carpenter due simply to his being Black. Commenting on something the Black carpenter said, Kant (2011) dismissively proclaimed, "There might be something here worth considering, except for the fact that this

scoundrel was completely Black from head to foot, a distinct proof that what he said was stupid” (p. 61). And for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (as cited in Zambrana 2017), the geographical conditions faced by Blacks in Africa have caused them to lack any “drive... toward freedom” and “no propensity...for culture” (p. 254). This culminated in Hegel’s view of Blacks as a “race of children that remain immersed in a state of naiveté” (p.254).

In my pointing out the prejudiced views and pronouncements of foundational philosophers, the argument could be made that I am engaging in presentism, the ill-advised tendency to judge the past by superimposing the values of the present (Hunt 2002). This is a charge I deny. To be sure, the views of Kant, Hegel, Hume and others were indeed informed by the prevailing, though derogatory, norms of their day. My critique of them however, does not impose modern ideas upon individuals in an era where those ideas did not exist. In fact, the same humanistic arguments that undergird my critiques of these philosophers were indeed in existence during their time. For example, based on the denial of individual rights and freedoms under slavery, enlightenment thinkers themselves have been credited with inspiring the philosophical impetus for the abolitionist movements in Europe and America (Wallenfeldt 2019). Hegel (as cited in Zambrana 2017) himself, for example, in addition to his racist views cited above, simultaneously endorsed “the possibility of equal justice for all men and the futility of a rigid distinction between races which have rights and those which have none” (p. 253). Additionally, just as our modern-day value for humanity and the moral treatment of people is informed by the Judeo-Christian heritage, the enlightenment era was also permeated by those same Judeo-Christian influenced ideas. Much of the work of European and American abolitionists and the anti-enslavement position of the Quakers were built upon the same religious principles we cite today. And let us not neglect the millions of enslaved Africans who most certainly had views on the proper and humane treatment of human beings that were simpatico with our current views. In short, the value for human life and the standard of moral actions on which I base my critique of enlightenment thinkers are not just a modern phenomenon, they were wholly in vogue in the enlightenment era as well, and further, they were even espoused by enlightenment thinkers themselves. Rather than imposing the values of the modern era on past generations, my critique of enlightenment thinkers points out the contradiction in their thinking and their willful neglect of time-honored principles of decency and respect shared by both the modern and past eras alike.

Fueled by the anti-Black sentiments of its pioneers, its subjugation of the Other, and its “transcendental norm” of Whiteness, Western philosophy ultimately produced a virulent form of racialized alterity in society which ideologically gave supremacy to the White Self while simultaneously subjugating the Black Other. This hegemonic “White supremacy” became a vital component of Euro-American imperialism. Commenting on the necessity of a racialized Other in perpetuating White supremacy, Tommy J. Curry (2017) pointed out that, “At the center of this complexity, the regenerative arc, so to speak of this ideology is the caricature of racialized men as threats to the social and biological reproduction of White order” (p. 4). Seen in this way, a racialized Other is integral to White supremacy because, “for the idea of an all-powerful White male figure to achieve cultural institutionalization and buy-in from the masses, the dominant culture needs its ‘nigger boys,’ its ugly inferior, its ‘other’ in order to construct itself as superior and beautiful ‘men’” (p. 4). Through Western philosophy’s normative, racialized ontology of White supremacy, Black people became the Other in need of subjugation and control in society. Ultimately however, a challenge would emerge to this Eurocentric philosophy where the Self reigned supreme and this challenge would prove to be a paradigm shifting and democratizing force.

## **Deterritorializing the borderlands: the postmodern toppling of the self and the recovery of the Other in phenomenology and Emmanuel Levinas**

As discussed, the racist, universalist core of Western philosophy was built upon the preeminence of the Self. In addition to the landscape of Western philosophy, the territories built upon Western philosophy, both geographic and philosophical, became grounded in the preeminence of the European Self as well. With the rise of postmodernism, a decentering of the Self was introduced into philosophical thought. These postmodern critiques of traditional philosophy pointed to “ways in which those master narratives based on White, patriarchal, and class-specific versions of the world can be challenged critically and effectively deterritorialized” (Giroux 1991, p. 55). The impact of these critiques was immediate and profound.

As described by Ellie Anderson (2016) in *Alter Ego: A Response Ethics of Self Relation*,

If the nineteenth century heralded the death of God, the twentieth century proclaimed the death of the self. The dominant modern view of the masterful, agential subject toppled, and along with it went the ideals of pure self-knowledge and willful application of the moral law. (p. 1)

The ultimate “toppling” of the preeminence of the Self, which had been firmly instituted by Western philosophical tradition, can be attributed to the emergence of the poststructuralist ideas that emerged around the mid-twentieth century. The erosion within the dominant Western philosophic tradition of the sovereign and agential Self “was to a great extent inspired by Nietzsche, developed through Heidegger, and radicalized by philosophies generally considered ‘poststructuralist’” (Anderson 2016, p. 2). Theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler authored the ideas that would bring the dominant Western tradition of the Self under assault (Anderson 2016).

Out of this postmodern tradition came a critique of Western conceptions of the Self that took aim at the subjugation of the Other. As such, the rehabilitation of the Other within the Western tradition, galvanized around the “question of otherness” (Treanor 2006, p. 2) and came out of the desire of the Western philosophic Self to account for and apprehend everything it encounters. As mentioned earlier, the Self in Western philosophy resists that which will not fit into its preexisting frameworks. It responds to the Other (or the unknown) with a constant quest to interrogate, understand, and assimilate the unknown. Guided by the motto “a place for everything and everything in its place” (Treanor 2006, p. 2), the Self of traditional Western philosophy cannot tolerate an Other that refuses to fit into its neat and tidy system of understanding. The fracturing and dislodging of the primacy of the Self by the poststructuralists inaugurated the era of the recognition and legitimization of the Other *qua* Other, and by extension, forced philosophy to reconsider “what it means for something or someone to be other than the self” (Treanor 2006, p. 2).

## Phenomenology and the self

During the twentieth century, the reevaluation of the Self and the Other became a prominent theme in modern philosophic thought. One field in particular, phenomenology, was seen as instrumental in shaping the “philosophic trajectory of modernity” (Son 2002, p. 2). Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), a German mathematician turned philosopher, is generally credited with founding phenomenology. For Husserl, phenomenology was an attempt to get “back to the things themselves” (Husserl 2001, p. 168). Established as an effort to firmly situate the natural sciences on secure philosophical grounds, Husserl’s phenomenology sought to engage in stringent reflection on “the role of the perceiving consciousness in the constitution of the perceived world” (Davis 1996, p. 10). The “things themselves” as grasped by Husserl’s “perceiving consciousness” forms the basis of intentionality, the idea that “consciousness is consciousness of something” (Sartre 1956, p. 23). In this intentionality Husserl did indeed acknowledge alterity when he referred to “other egos, who surely are not a mere and intending *in me*, merely synthetic unities of possible verification *in me*, but according to their sense, precisely *others*” (Husserl 1982, p. 89). Thus, within intentionality and our lived experiences we find alterity in Husserl, the awareness or knowledge of something different and outside the Self. Such an awareness became the lynchpin of Husserlian phenomenology.

Another German pioneer in phenomenology, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), added to the conception of alterity within the field. Like Husserl, Heidegger’s notion of Dasein which can be roughly translated as “being in the world” or “existence,” saw the Self as intimately connected to the world outside itself. The importance of this connection with an Other was evident when he wrote “the world is always the one I share with others. The world of Dasein is a *with-world*...Being-in is *being with Others*” (Heidegger 1962, p. 155.) Unlike Heidegger, Husserl’s Self has been described as primary and absolute and also as “the first apodictic certainty from which all others must be derived” (Davis 1996, p. 10). Heidegger, in decentering the absolute primacy of Husserl’s Self, inserted Dasein as the central focus of phenomenology. In doing so, Heidegger refashioned Husserl’s reliance on the transcendental Self that is unaffected by time and history with a Being-ness that is “totally immersed...in the world, in experience, facticity (the rootedness of the human subject in contingent, physical reality) and desire” (Davis 1996, p. 16). Thus, Heidegger’s phenomenology effectively dislodged the preeminence of the Self, of consciousness, that had remained in Husserl’s phenomenology as a vestige from traditional Western philosophy. Describing this immersion in the world and hence an existence inextricably linked with other beings, Heidegger tells us that, “Being with Others belongs to the Being of Dasein, which is an issue for Dasein in its very being. Thus, as Being-with, Dasein ‘is’ essentially for the sake of others” (Heidegger 1962, p. 160).

Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of care

As a student under both Husserl and Martin Heidegger, the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) popularized the German phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger throughout France. While an ardent phenomenologist in his early philosophical career, Levinas eventually took issue with the Self/Other relationship as characterized by Husserl, Heidegger and ultimately phenomenology in general. Critiquing both Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas came to see both of their ideas as suffering from solipsism, the egocentric view that the Self is the only thing that can be known to exist. In the case of Husserl, Levinas’ critique was that his transcendental phenomenological view of the Self /Other relationship suffered from a debilitating “intellectualism” which held that “the primary and fundamental attitude

when facing reality is a pure, disinterested contemplation which considers things as ‘merely things’” (Levinas 1995, p. 128). Referencing Heidegger’s *Dasein*, the all-important notion of being-ness, Levinas pointed out that the “supremacy of the same over the others seems to be integrally maintained in the philosophy of Heidegger” and as a result, “the *Dasein* Heidegger puts in place of the soul, consciousness, or the ego, retains the structure of the same” (Levinas 1987a, p. 51). To Levinas, the problematic remnants of solipsism in both Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology ultimately mirrored the Western philosophic tradition of the Self by failing to see the Other on its own terms.

For Emmanuel Levinas, rescuing the Other from the tyranny of the Self, became the focus of an ethics of care. By introducing ethics into the conversation of the dynamic between the Self and the Other, Levinas (1969, 1987b) firmly established a break with the solipsism of the Western philosophic tradition. In describing the difference in Levinas’ approach, Park (2004) informs us that “the Other...is a contested site, a source of tension between epistemological and ethical commitments. Whereas epistemology struggles to comprehend, to absorb, to assimilate the Other as productive of a greater totality, ethics seeks to care about the Other” (p. 2). In differentiating his ethical approach to the Other, Levinas (1969, 1987b) established that the Other is not something only to be harnessed or grasped by the Self in an effort to assimilate it into the Self’s pre-existing understanding of things. Rather, the Other is in fact “absolutely Other” (Levinas 1987b, p. 4), it resists being grasped and bludgeoned into that which is understandable to the Self. In other words, for Levinas, “if one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power” (Levinas 1987b, p. 90), and the Other, as “absolute Other,” refuses and transcends the Self’s attempted exercise of power.

For Levinas, an ethical treatment of the Other means releasing it from the categorizing and totalizing gaze of the Self. In this release, the Self actually “loses its very mastery” (Levinas 1987b, p. 74) of the Other. Levinas’ ethics not only emancipates the Other from the Self, it empowers the Other as well. By reclaiming its alterity, its exteriority from the Self, the Other remains unknown, unknowable even. In explaining how this empowering of the Other is ethical, Levinas (1969) suggests that,

A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (p. 43)

Seen in this light, the intersubjectivity between the Self and Other need not be an appropriation of the latter by the former. Instead, the dynamic interaction is one in which the Other, through its absolute alterity, resists the categorizations forced upon it by the worldview of the Self as it seeks to know and understand. Through the “strangeness” of the Other, its alterity, the Other becomes irreducible to the understandings previously held by the Self and hence, the Self’s assumptions are called into question and forced to deal with the Other on its own terms. In this way, Levinas’ ethics is one of care and respect as it sets up a framework of “justice” by calling for the Self to “take on responsibility for the Other” (Levinas 1987b, p. 24).

## The “sacred” experience of the Other and border crossing as models for critical qualitative inquiry in the age of Trump

As has been shown, in the Western philosophical tradition, the preeminence of the Self abounds. In the work of Levinas, we find the entry way to dealing with the Other in more ethical, thoughtful, and humane ways. Charting a new course, Levinas embarked on a path that rescued the Other from being consumed and assimilated by the Self of Western philosophy. Rather than eliminating the Other and attempting to transform it from an unknown to a known, Levinas’ philosophy sought to “preserve the otherness of the other and to respect the difference that distinguishes the other from self” (Treanor 2006, p. 5). By replacing the primacy of the Self with respect and care for the Other as Other, Levinas established the idea that ethics, not ontology or epistemology, is the “first philosophy” and by doing so, drastically changed the trajectory of contemporary philosophy (Hand 1989).

Levinas, born into Judaism, constantly interjected religion into his studies and his philosophical writings. Given such religiosity, it comes as no surprise that, in his discourse on the alterity of the Other, Levinas frequently invoked the Divine. In equating the absolute alterity of both God and the Other, Levinas’ ethics asserted that “the wholly Other, God, shines in the face of the Other” (Levinas 1987b, p. 23). This linkage of faith and alterity is extended in Levinas’ accounts. The sacred character of the relationship between the Self and Other was summed up in the introduction to his *Time and the Other* when it was said that, “to care for one’s neighbor more than oneself, to take on responsibility for the Other, ethics, and to take on the Other’s responsibilities, justice, is to enter into a *sacred* rather than an ontological or epistemological history” (p. 24). It is this sacred disposition toward the Other that should characterize all of our research and educational efforts.

### Border crossing

The idea of borders and borderlands depicted throughout this work references the landscapes of society. Specifically, those racial, cultural, and social territories that exist in the alteric relationship between the Self that is White society and America’s non-White Others. In this context, to be a border crosser is to be one who moves “in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power” (Giroux 1991, p. 53). In ways similar to Levinas’ rehabilitation of the Other, being a border crosser means deconstructing the master narratives imposed by society and then reconstructing them by “recovering those forms of knowledge and history that characterize alternative and oppositional Others” (p. 53). Border crossing means that those designated as Other are empowered to cross if not obliterate cultural, racial, and societal borders imposed by the dominant White society in an effort to project their voice, extol their difference, and not only reclaim but also remake their histories, voices and visions as part of their rehabilitative and recuperative efforts. In this way, engaging in border crossing is simultaneously an act of resistance and recovery. Said differently by George Yancy, “the moment of *resistance*...is the moment of *becoming*, of being made *anew*” (Yancy 2017, p. 108).

Levinas’ ethics of care, his sacred relationship with the Other, as well as engaging in border crossing should be the standards that informs qualitative research in general, but especially in the era of Trump. In the face of demonizing tweets, racialized policies, and dehumanizing cultural attacks, these measures are needed now more than ever. With the

increasing normalization of antagonistic forms of alterity, engaging in “activist research” (Denzin 2017, p. 9) is an invaluable tool in combating the negation, the oppression, and subjugation by the Black, Brown, immigrant, disabled, and LGBTQ communities Othered by the revival of racism, nativism, and homophobia in society today. To be sure, White supremacy, racism, and White nationalism are embedded within American society and certainly predate the presidency of Donald Trump (Johnson and Urquhart 2020). However, the fact that a Trumpian brand of populist, antagonistic alterity became mainstream so quickly in what was supposedly a “postracial” America is why I feature it prominently in this paper. Through reviving and once again normalizing outright racism and divisiveness, Trump’s brand of antagonistic alterity manifested in comments about “shithole countries” and Mexican “rapists,” in policy initiatives endorsing Hispanic/Latinx family separations and Muslim bans, and in both tacit and outright endorsement of the continued disproportional murder of Blacks at the hands of police.

As an educator and a critical qualitative researcher, myself, I recognize that this reality necessitates the propagation of research, theories, studies, and evaluations aimed at alleviating inequality and bringing justice and equity to the lives of those deprived of both. Examples of this kind of activist pedagogy and research can be found in classes where teaching history involves “enacting the voice of the other” in a way that uses “historical inquiry as a pedagogical tool to trouble issues of race, class, and gender within the dominant narrative” (Blevins et al. 2015, p. 71). In navigating the many dilemmas associated with the burgeoning field of online research, critical inquiry and activist research can proceed by illuminating the ways that “critical qualitative researchers can innovatively negotiate the ethical issues that can occur within a dynamic context and challenge the status quo through conducting this type of research” (Morison et al. 2015, p. 223). Even in religious studies, critical inquiry in the form of narrative inversion (Acevedo et al. 2010), mythmaking (Berg 2005), and theological phenomenology (Finley 2017) can be used as means to counter the dominant meta-narratives that plague ostracized and marginalized religious groups in society.

By seeking to emancipate Othered groups from the apprehending, totalizing, and negating gaze of an increasingly hostile and violent society, critical pedagogy and activist research that traverses the borderlands is not unlike the Levinasian ethical duty toward the Other. If in our teaching and research we “care for our neighbors more than ourselves,” we “take on responsibility for the Other,” and we seek to do “justice” through our work, then we are in fact engaging in “ethically responsible activist research” (Denzin 2017, p. 9) while simultaneously deterritorializing the borderlands imposed by dominant society. It is this degree of care, consideration, and responsibility that should always characterize our teaching, our research, and our every encounter with an Other.

## Coda

Alterity, that which represents difference and Otherness, has a long history in Western thought. Its philosophical roots are grounded in the anamnesis of Plato, Descartes’s cogito, and the various disciplines of the social and human sciences. In truth, the notion of alterity likely extends as far back as man’s first grasp of the concept of God, the Supreme Being, the ultimate Other. In large part, the characterization of alterity in Western thought has been one where the self is confronted with an Other, an unknown entity that presents a dilemma to the preexisting world as understood within one’s self. The prevailing view has



been that the self, in an attempt to regain coherence and understanding, attempts to interpret the Other through the lens of understanding that already exists. In doing so, the Other is never really seen as it is, it is grasped and bludgeoned into that which fits neatly within the world as understood by the self. The twentieth century however saw a transformation in the idea of alterity. Coming out of phenomenology and guided by Emmanuel Levinas, the idea of the Other began to be strengthened. By rehabilitating the Other as something not to be overcome or subdued but rather, as something wholly separate, distinct, and autonomous, a new paradigm had entered into and fundamentally changed Western philosophy. This responsibility toward the Other that characterized Levinas' ethics, itself a deterritorializing effort, finds its reflection in the tenets of critical qualitative inquiry which build upon a respect for the Other and an obligation to their care and wellbeing. Toward this end, activist research and critical pedagogy inherently embrace alterity and intuitively respect notions of difference and together can be used to create "new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective—a view from 'nowhere'" (Giroux 1991, p. 69). Resultantly, educators and researchers can effectively reshape the borderlands between the Self of White society and those Othered by it.

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**E. Anthony Muhammad** is an Assistant Professor of Educational Research at Georgia Southern University. His research agenda combines qualitative methodologies and critical frameworks in an effort to educate, emancipate, and transform. His research interests include black existential philosophy, the phenomenology of black embodiment, philosophical hermeneutics, and the intersection of racial and religious alterity.