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Who Belongs? Immigrants, Refugees, Migrants, and Actions Towards Justice:

A Conversation with Tim Wise

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The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis has traditionally published interviews with individuals who have strong connections to our special issue topics. We believe that interviews are important ways to contribute to the conversation surrounding critical issues in social justice. This interview features Tim Wise, whose recent work focuses on antiracist education and methods for dismantling institutional racism.

*Tim Wise is an antiracist activist, essayist and author of seven books on racism, inequality and white privilege. He is among the most prominent anti-racist writers and educators in the United States. Over the past 25 years he has engaged audiences in all 50 states, at over 1000 college and high school campuses, at hundreds of professional and academic conferences, and to community groups across the country. While visiting Iowa State University Tim Wise interviewed with us to discuss *Who Belongs?* by providing a brief historical perspective of immigration, the current political climate, and the role of activism.*

Q. Our first question is what drives you to do this type of work surrounding social and racial justice on that where did it start for you, why is it so important? Does it relate to some personal experience in your life that motivated you to become an activist for marginalized individuals?

Well, as I've talked about many times before, I think there's a series of experiences that propel any of us who do this work to do the work and so it's never one thing, it's a lot of things. It has to do with family upbringing. It has to do with the people you meet, the mentors you have, the teachers you have, the things that just happen to you throughout the course of your life. I mean, I grew up in the South and I grew up in a family that was pretty

*Tyanez Jones, Isaiah McGee, and Michael DuPont interviewed Tim Wise for this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*. Inquiries regarding Tim Wise's work can be directed to jctp@iastate.edu

acutely in tune with the civil rights struggle even though they were a bit too young to have been activists.

So I was raised with a certain consciousness and a certain awareness by parents who had that consciousness and awareness. They weren't radicals by any stretch. They were just sort of old school liberals, but made certain decisions that I think were sort of instrumental in putting me in a spot to see certain things or maybe understand certain things that the typical white kid growing up in the '70s not only in the South but anywhere wouldn't have necessarily seen or understood. So I went to preschool at Tennessee State University, a historically black college. Most of my peers, most of the people running that program were black women. Most of the peers were black kids.

So essentially what that did was it set me up for a situation where, by the time I was in elementary school, and it was an integrated school, it's about 40% black, and you see those kids being treated differently and you see them being tracked low in remedial level classes regardless of their ability. You see them being disciplined more harshly regardless of their actual misbehavior relative to your own. For most white people, they probably wouldn't have even thought twice about it because being separated from black kids was sort of their every day.

But because I had been at TSU, that was very odd for me and so that level of separation, that level of otherness just didn't really comport with my early education and so it stuck out in my head. It's not that I knew what it was. I didn't have a name for it. I didn't have a way to really understand it but I knew that something was happening and I knew that something was happening that was affecting my friends, the people that I identified with having been at TSU and that it was having an effect on me, that I was literally being separated from the people I cared about and the people that I liked and I didn't know why.

You need to just sort of file that away and it just becomes a cornerstone or a bedrock for further development as you see that going on throughout the course of your life. So those are like the early experiences that I think gave me maybe a lens that was different. Ultimately, it really required me I think going to college in New Orleans and being struck with the contrast between a very white institution, Tulane, and a very black city. Again, something most white kids at Tulane, 35% of whom are from the New York area, from the North Shore of Chicago, from Boston, from places that are very different from the South, they wouldn't have noticed it because, again, to be in a mostly white space is just their everyday life. To me, Tulane was about the whitest place that I'd ever been. It was really odd to sort of be hit in the head with that level of racial isolation, for me at least.

I had amazing mentors. Some of them were academics, but most of them were community people that helped to take that foundation that I had, again laid by my family, and actually develop that into something.

Q. What have you learned about the history of discrimination in this country to explain how oppression and issues of power still manifest themselves today? Specifically looking at your past work, and hearing you speak, you've talked a lot about the working class divide and how that has been used to fight against communities of color by elite groups. As you consider that, how has that changed or evolved or manifested differently today compared to-

Well, the way that I understand the history is that there's very little that's new about any of what we see today. I think that discrimination and racism, they shape shift from generation to generation. They shape shift from century to century in terms of the qualitative way in which they play out, but for the most part, there is a continuity and it goes back 400 years. To me, everything that you see today can be explained with a proper understanding of history. I think it's important to understand that because when people are operating under the illusion that what we're seeing today is different or unique or unprecedented, it becomes very disconcerting and you don't really know how to respond to the monster you've never seen before.

Whereas, if you understand that this monster really isn't that different than the monster that folks have been fighting for 400 years, then even though you don't necessarily know how to defeat that monster, because obviously we haven't defeated them yet, it's not as frightening because it's like, "Oh, I know what that is. I know what this is that this person is doing, whether it's Donald Trump or whether it's whomever. I've seen this before and our ancestors fought this before. People of color have overcome this, at least to some extent, before and white allies have organized against this before." So, I think a lot of it is a constant thread of manipulation, a constant thread of creating hierarchies of value and power, mostly to hoard opportunity for the elite and convince others who are not at all elite, that they have more in common with those that are than they do with other struggling people who are racially, or ethnically, or culturally different than themselves.

All of that stuff you just see repeated over and over and over again. I think that once we get a handle on that, if we understand that history, if we understand the way that, that works, then we can begin to take action against that machinery. I think for the most part we don't see it and so by misunderstanding our history and misunderstanding the way in which these things are embedded in the American Political Experiment, we sort of flounder around trying to grasp at straws to figure out what the proper response is going to be, rather than recognizing that this is as fundamental to the American Experiment as anything and so is the resistance to it. We can take heart from and lessons from those that have resisted before, even as we have shape our own resistance to meet these particular times.

Q. How do you see racism and privilege, harming immigrants, refugees, migrants in the United States and possibly even globally?

Well, I think there's very little doubt that white supremacy is embedded in the way that we respond to immigrants, and the way in which we define the circle of nationhood and who belongs and who doesn't belong. It's been that way for a very long time, and the first law that was passed in this country was The Naturalization Act of 1790. It's the first law after The Constitution was ratified. It says very clearly, all free white persons and only free white persons can be citizens of the United States. Of course that remained the definition of citizenship until after The Civil War and after emancipation. Since that time, of course, it's remained contested territory, who qualifies, who doesn't. It's always been rooted in a notion of whiteness as property, as Cheryl Harris at UCLA calls it. It's always been noted in this idea of whiteness as the arbiter of belonging.

So, in the present day, there's very little doubt in my mind that the reason we're having such an argument about refugees, the reason why we're having so much argument about migration is because these migrants are disproportionately from the global South. If they

were from the global North, I don't think we'd be having this conversation. We certainly weren't having this conversation in the mid-1990s when large numbers of central European refugees were fleeing violence and civil war in Bosnia and Serbia and those kinds of conflicts. We weren't saying, "Oh, I don't know if we have room for them." We're not, apparently, very concerned about the fact that 40% of people without proper documentation in this country right now are visa overstayers and not people who crossed the border, Southern or otherwise. A disproportionate number of those are European or Canadian. We don't see particularly exercised about their presence here.

It seems to me, pretty obvious, that whiteness is still the dividing line and that our primary concern about immigrants, about refugees, about migrants, is that they're from the global South. They are the other. They are not us. They are therefore coming with different motivations. It's not just that they're coming, "illegally," they're motivations are different. We white people, we came for principles like liberty and freedom and they're coming for stuff. It's all very much rooted in this notion of high minded value ascribing to or adhering to Europeans and taking advantage adhering to brown folks.

So, I think that white supremacy is very much at the root and sometimes people are honest about it. I have much more respect for the Richard Spencers of the world and white nationalists who openly acknowledge that's their purpose, is to recreate a white America, because they're very open, they're very honest, and the others are far less so when they deny that, that's what they're doing or when they say, "Oh, we just want them to come the right way. Legally." That's not really what you mean, because you could make that happen tomorrow. You could simplify, streamline the legalization process. You could make it take six months. You could say, "Look, we're going to do a quick background check, make sure you're not some international criminal, and then you can come in, and you can be legalized." You could do that. No one proposes that. It's because they don't really want certain people here legally, illegally, documented, undocumented. It's about who's coming, not how they're coming.

Q. How should advocacy groups and other coalitions shape their messaging to provide a message of hopefulness over rhetoric, fear, and crisis? Maybe another way of also asking that is, what have groups done wrong? What can we do differently?

I think the way that we frame the issue of immigration is a really good example. I'm talking about now, liberal people, talking about people who claim to be humanitarian and supportive and caring and compassionate. I think we frame the issue almost entirely wrong. For years, the liberal framing of immigration has been, "Well, no really they contribute more than they take out." So it becomes about numbers, it becomes about the mathematical computation of, "Are the benefits of immigration, do they outweigh the public cost?" Well, I think the data says that the benefits do outweigh the costs, but once you frame the issue that way, once you frame it as reducing human beings to monetary units and deciding that, that's going to be the basis of value, you're creating a really disgusting precedent and a really problematic precedent because if the amount that people produce is what makes you valuable relative to what you cost, then by definition, elderly people are not very valuable, children are not very valuable.

Just last week, Chris Kobach said when he was being interviewed on Fox or one of the stations, here's this guy, he's the immigration consultant to the President, he's on the Voter

Integrity Commission, he's the Secretary of State in Kansas and Kobach says, talking about DREAMers, he says, "They're net takers." That's his statement. "They're net takers." I thought to myself, first of all, these are people that came on average when they were six years old. Now they're in their mid-twenties, disproportionately. So from six to about eighteen, they were children. Children are net takers. That's what children are. If you find a child that isn't a net taker, that kid is working in a coal mine. You need to get them the hell out and save them. Children don't pay taxes. Children do take out more than they put in, by definition. They've only had about seven or eight years to even been in the labor force, and if they went to college they've only had five or six or less. So of course people are net takers, so is every old person who's not producing anymore, so is every infant, we don't euthanize them.

At some point, this is debate, but the reason that Kobach can say that and that can be the framing, is because liberals have exceeded to that framing. Liberals have actually made it about, "What are the net benefits versus the net costs," instead of using a human rights framework, which says that people have a human right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is what Thomas Jefferson says, the fact that he didn't believe it, doesn't mean that we can't. These are beautiful words. His rhetoric is lovely. The fact that he didn't actually adhere to it or live up to it, is his shame, but that doesn't mean that we can't use those words and human rights framework.

So people either have a right to be free or they don't. People either have a right to try to pursue a better life for their families, or they don't. If our families did, those who came from Europe, then surely other people do and to suggest otherwise is inherently supremacist. It's inherently unfair and unjust and yet liberals have to change our framing because the way that we ... DACA is a good example.

To talk about, as President Obama did last week, to say, these people have done nothing wrong, the implication being their parents did, but you can't blame the kids. Well, what did the parents do wrong exactly? Exactly what did they do? What they did was they left a country where they were desperate, either fleeing political violence, crime, religious oppression, economic injustice, they came for the same reasons that Europeans came and probably far more noble reasons because in fact many Europeans came to dominate land and take land. At the very least, they came for the same reasons. So to say they did anything wrong, is to suggest that a parent would be a better human being and I guess a better parent to look at their child and say, "Yeah I know we can't eat and I know that if we cross that boarder we might eat, but Gosh I wouldn't want to break the law."

I think if that's a decision that you make, I question whether you're a good parent or not. I actually think that most people who have the means to cross that boarder, would cross that boarder. I think if England had been right next door to the United States, if Ireland had been right next door to the United States, if Russia had been right next door to the United States, I dare say that all of our ancestors would have crossed that damn boarder and given two shits about the law. We would have just come. You would just do it. The idea that we wouldn't, that we would just look at our kids and say, "Sorry, we're going to have to die," is just preposterous.

Until we frame the issues differently, we're sort of giving into the other side, which makes it about a monetary debate and I think that framing will always work to the detriment of human rights. I don't think progressive people can ever out argue right-wingers on

monetary value, that's their turf, that's what they care about. We have to talk about it as a human rights issue and a much more moral and ethical issue.

Q. With the current political administration being the way that it is, what should institutions of higher learning do to make sure that we're implementing socially just practices as far as being inclusive and welcoming or inclusive to all students?

I think institutions have to be very clear about their intentionality and to be very clear about their right, inherently, to seek to craft community and to built community how they see fit. That is to say, that they have the right, and I would even argue, obligation, to create community in a way that prepares people for the world in which they live and that means that they have the right to go beyond these traditional criteria that I think right-wingers in particular would love for them to use, which is why schools continue to get sued over Affirmative Action, because essentially the argument is, "You're supposed to only admit people based on this and this and this criteria and this test score." Schools have a right to say, "Actually that's not our criteria, we have the right to decide what makes you qualified to be here and one of the things that makes you qualified is an openness to the creation of equitable institutions and if you're not down for that, here's our mission. We have a mission statement, and we have the right to live this mission statement."

This mission statement essentially says, whether it's public or private schools, doesn't matter, you can read any school's mission statement, they call talk about creating lifelong learners in a global environment, dah-dah-dah-dah-dah, doing all of this stuff that's related to diversity, multiculturalism and I know that nine times out of ten that stuff is just boilerplate that you put on a website and nobody really thinks about it.

At the same time once it's out there, I think a school has a right and an obligation to say, "Well this is what we mean and we're going to mean what we say and we're going to say what we mean and we're going to actually craft policy to bring that about. That means, if you're not down with that, you're not qualified to be here. If you're not down with that mission, you're not qualified to be a student here. I don't give a damn what your SAT is, if you're not down for that, you're not qualified to teach her, you're not qualified to be on staff here. These are bonafide qualification requirements. We're no more obligated to bring you in, in the name of free speech, than a church is to hire an atheist to play the organ. There's no obligation. If you're not down with our mission and what we're here for, we don't have to hire you. You have the right to be opposed to our mission. You have the right to be a racist, you have the right to be a sexist, you have the right to be all these things. You do not have a privilege of being at this institution. We are not obligated to provide you a platform to exercise your stupidity. We have a mission and we have the right to live it."

I think schools need to be clear on that and when it comes to issues of immigration, I think schools need to be very clear that they're going to serve as sanctuaries for folks and that they're prepared to defend as sanctuary space, undocumented people who contribute to that institutional integrity and that culture at that institution. They have to be prepared to stand against state legislatures, which will repeatedly threaten their budgets and remind the state legislature that they do more for the state than the state does for the college.

A couple of years ago when the State of Missouri went after University of Missouri for, I don't know why, I guess it was because of the protests that the black student's launched and not kicking them all out or kicking the football players off the team for

threatening not to play, because that's what all the trustees care about is weekend football. Instead of standing up and saying, "To hell with y'all. You think that Springfield," that's Illinois, what's the capital of Missouri, Columbia, Jefferson City, "You think Jefferson City does more for us than we do for y'all? Without the University of Missouri, this state has nothing." Certainly not that area. "Columbia has nothing if it's not for this institution." They provide the jobs, they provide the economic stimulus. "Y'all can go pound sand."

At some point, colleges are going to have to say, "We're not taking orders from a bunch of guys that have no connection to this institution what so ever, just because your daddy went here 50 years ago. We don't really care what you say. We're going to stand up and we're going to be bold and if you want to fire us, you're going to have to fire all of us." I think schools just need to have some guts and stop kowtowing to reactionary law makers who threaten them, rather than standing on principle. They've got their missions, they've got their vision and value statements, and they need to start being very intentional about living those.

Q. What are the important conversations taking place that will shape justice based actions and decisions regarding immigrants, refugees, migrants, here in the United States? In looking at what those important conversations are, can you frame that from a standpoint of, is there a place where even people from the right can also center themselves in this conversation?

Well, I don't think people on the right ever have a hard time centering themselves. I'm sure they'll find a way to do it. I think the conversation that they're more than willing to have on the right, and I think we have to be just as prepared to have, and those of us who aren't, the right is trying to have a conversation or force a conversation about, "What is America? What is an American?" They're very clear. They perceive it, or the white nationalist right perceives it as white. Christian Evangelist perceive it as Christian. Those who aren't quite that extreme might say, "Well you don't have to be white, and you don't have to be Christian, but you have to demonstrate a fealty to Judeo-Christian values and 'our way of life.'" They might define it in slightly less racist terms, but it's still sort of this culture bound notion of what an American is.

Although I think their interpretation of that issue, and their answer to that question is obviously a faulty one, it is the right question. We do need to be having a conversation about what does it mean to be an American, or US American. What does it mean to be in this space? How does one really live that Americanism? Does it have to be through this particular filter that they use or is it something grander? I think that's a long standing debate. That's a debate about the US as an ideational nation versus a blood and soil nation. That conversation has always been happening. It's happened in every iteration of anti-immigrant hysteria that we've every experienced. It's not like it's really new, I just think we need to join in that. Let's have a conversation about what does it mean to be an American.

Richard Spencer is not wrong when he says that the founders envisioned this as a white male republic. He's actually right. He understands American history better than most liberals who believe it was always intended to be a multi-cultural democracy, which is clearly a lie. So then, what does that mean? What does it mean that Richard Spencer is right about how most of the founders envisioned the country? I don't happen to think that it

means that we therefore have to bow to what the founders thought. Just like there's a lot of horrific stuff in The Bible, so when the right-wingers talk about The Bible says this, The Bible says that, it's sort of stupid for liberals to go, "Well that's not what it says." No, it's what it says, but you don't have to listen to it. You're not duty bound to prostrate yourself in front of scripture or Thomas Jefferson just because they said something, just because they believe something.

That's the debate we ought to be having. Let's have a discussion about how does one live Americanism. I think you can make the argument that the people who come to this country, documented or not, have a greater appreciation for this society than those of us born here. Those of us who were born here get to take a lot of things for granted and we do, particularly when we're really privileged. Surveys found, in the last several years, that a disproportionate number of native born Americans can't name two of the rights in the first Amendment, can't name half of the Bill of Rights, are more likely to know all of the characters in The Simpsons than they are what the first Amendment says. There was a survey of teenagers taken about 10 years ago, which found that something like 49%, so half, couldn't find New York on a map. 30% could not find the United States on a map.

I think maybe we ought to have a conversation about what makes you an American and what does it really mean to be an American. A third of Americans that have been given the citizenship test, can't pass it. Maybe we do want to talk about what the ideals are that we're aiming for and what we expect of people. We can't just ask others, who are coming here, to demonstrate that when we don't even ask that of ourselves. To me, that's an important conversation.

I think there's also an important conversation that people of color have to have about how they're going to work together to overcome white supremacy. What happens too often is when new comers of color come to the United States, they're almost instantly pitted against existing people of color. Then there are those who will manipulate that divide quite deliberately to keep folks from uniting. There's always this long standing tension between black and brown for instance, that's rooted often times in an understandable place. It might be, black folks who look at new comers of color and say, "Get in line. We've been fighting for justice for a long time, and we've got to get ours first." You'll hear that from well meaning folks, not realizing the strategic absurdity of that argument. The idea that somehow we've got to get ours and then we'll get around to you.

That's what white folks have been saying to black folks for a long time. "Well, we've got to have the Missouri Compromise, and we've got to have this compromise." Every time the word compromise was used in history it was a way to compromise [inaudible 00:28:41] to black people. For then people of color to play that game with each other or for brown folk to come here and fall into patterns of anti-blackness because they're taught as well, that blackness is this floor beneath which you cannot allow yourself to fall, keeps that divide and conquer. People end up manipulating it.

Every time there's an anti-immigrant rally, there will be some, it's always a rally put together by white people, but they'll find that one black pastor who's got 37 people in a pew on Sunday, and they'll put him up on the dais to speak. He'll get up and rail and rant about the Mexicans this and the Mexicans that, taking black folks jobs. Just this one black dude and meanwhile, they could shut down that boarder tomorrow, they're not going to give those jobs to black folks, but that divide and conquer is a really good way to keep

black and brown folks fighting each other, not dealing with the larger issue of white supremacists.

Several years ago I was asked to come out to LA and it was at a time when there was a lot of internal strife in the public schools, some of it was gang related between black folks and [inaudible 00:29:43] folks. They said they wanted me to come out and speak to the students. I said, "Well, I'll be happy to do it, but I need you to know what I'm going to say before I say it because I don't want to touch off anything. I'm going to come out and talk about how they need to put all their bullshit aside because white supremacy is the real enemy." I gave them this whole spiel about what I was going to say. Needless to say, they didn't ask me to come out. They just wanted me to come out and tell them, "Don't be in a gang. Work together and be peaceful." I was like, "No, I'm going to come and tell them who the real enemy is." They're like, "Yeah, okay, we're going to find somebody else."

To me, those are the conversations. People of color have to engage in a conversation about unity and solidarity, white allies have to do the same, but the larger discussion is this conversation about what does it mean, or what should it mean to, "Be an American." I don't think most people born and raised here ever really engage in that conversation. We just sort of take it for granted that we are and we're entitled to all the blessings of the country, rather than sort of seeing that as this serendipitous thing over which we have no control and for which we don't deserve any credit.