

## *Chapter Six*

# **Problematic People and Epistemic Decolonization**

## *Toward the Postcolonial in Africana Political Thought*

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### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the West and the rest in political thought has been one of the constructions of the world in which the latter have been located outside and thus, literally, without a place on which to stand. Hidden parenthetical adjectives of “European,” “western,” and “white” have been the hallmarks of such reflection on political reality and the anthropology that informs it. For the outsiders, explicit adjectival techniques of appearance thus became the rule of the day, as witnessed by, for instance, “African,” “Asian,” or “Native,” among others, as markers of their subaltern status in the supposedly wider disciplines. The role of these subcategories is, however, not a static one, and as historical circumstances shift, there have been ironic reversals in their various roles. In the case of (western and white) liberal political theory, for instance, the commitment to objectivity by way of the advancement of a supposedly value-neutral moral and political agent stood as the universal in an age in which such a formulation did not face its own cultural specificity. Where the parenthetical adjective is made explicit by critics of liberal political theory, such a philosophy finds itself in the face of its own cultural particularity, and worse: It finds itself so without having done its homework on that world that transcends its particularity. On the one hand, liberal and other forms of western political theory could engage that other world for the sake of its own rigor or, more generously, rigor in general. But such an approach carries the danger of simply systemic adjustment and application; it would, in other words, simply be a case of re-centering the west by showing how the

non-west offers ways of strengthening western thought, much like the argument used in elite universities, that the presence of children of color will enhance the education of white children. On the other hand, there could be the realization of the ongoing presence of the non-western in the very advancement of the western. Just as the assertion of “white” requires the dialectical opposition of black (as the absence of white), the coherent formulation of western *qua* itself requires its suppressed or repressed terms. Modern western discussions of freedom require meditations on slavery that become more apparent in their displacements: Think of how slavery in the ancient Greek world has received more attention from western political thinkers, with few exceptions such as Marx and Sartre, than the forms of enslavement that have marked the modern world.<sup>1</sup>

Yet even here there is a misrepresentation in terms of the very structure of exclusion itself. The “outsider” is, after all, paradoxically also an “insider.” For alongside white western political thinkers have always been their Africana counterparts, hybrids of the western and other worlds, who, in their criticisms and innovations, expanded the meaning and scope of the west. Anton Wilhelm Amo, the Asante-born philosopher who was educated in the Dutch and German systems and eventually taught at the University of Halle, offered not only his readings of international law and questions of political equality in the eighteenth century, but he also challenged the mind-body dichotomy that informed its insider-outsider political anthropology. The Fanti-born Ottobah Cugoano, in similar kind and in the same century, brought this question of insider-outsider to the fore in his discussion of the theodicy that dominated Christian rationalizations of slavery and racism. Theodicy, which explains the goodness of an omnipotent God in the face of evil and injustice, is often identified by Africana (African Diaspora) thinkers as a hallmark of (white) western political thought.<sup>2</sup> Even where the (white) thinker is admitting the injustice of the system and showing how it could be made good, the logic of ultimate goodness is inscribed in the avowed range of the all-enveloping alternative system. Such a new system’s rigor requires, in effect, the elimination of all outsiders by virtue of their assimilation. This is a paradox of the question of systemic self-criticism: In such an effort stands the potential completeness of a system through its incompleteness, its ongoing susceptibility to inconsistency, error, and, at times, injustice. What this means is that making a system more rigorous is not necessarily a good thing. The result could be a complete injustice avowed as the culmination of justice. The “role” of the Africana political thinker, then, requires doing more.

In one sense, the role of the Africana political thinker is no different from the traditional western thinker, which is the articulation of thought with which one struggles in the political world. But in another sense, the Africana role in-

volves bringing to the fore those dimensions of thought rendered invisible by virtue of the questioned legitimacy of those who formulate them. Such thought faces a twofold path. The first is the question of recognition. If it is a matter of recognition by those who have traditionally excluded them, then the logic of that group as the center is affirmed, which would make such contribution, albeit of great interest, conservative.<sup>3</sup> The second is an appeal to reality beyond questions of centered recognition. Here, the project is to articulate political reality itself, which entails a criticism of the centered standpoint and its own particularity: The centered standpoint is a false representation of reality. The task then faced by the Africana western political thinker becomes manifold: (1) since the modern political world has formulated non-western humanity, particularly indigenous Africa and the indigenous peoples of the New Worlds, as sub- or even non-human, a philosophical anthropology as the grounding of social and political change freed of dehumanizing forces is necessary; (2) since thought does not float willy-nilly but requires an infrastructure on which to appear and become consequential, creative work on building such infrastructures, which includes the kinds of political institutions necessary for their flourishing, is necessary; and (3) meta-reflection on the process of such inquiry is needed if ideas themselves are to meet the test of scrutiny.<sup>4</sup>

In my own work on Africana philosophy, such as *Existential Africana* and *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, I have explored how contemporary Africana philosophy, as a hybrid of thought from the African Diaspora in the modern world, offers a set of challenging questions and innovative responses with which humanity should grapple. These efforts involve showing the importance of phenomenology in political theory and, in effect, the importance of Africana philosophy in phenomenology. In this chapter, I offer an outline of the argument that undergirds this work through an exploration of how the modern construction of problem people and the epistemic structure that supports such a category are theorized by W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon. After outlining their positions, I will offer a discussion of how their innovative understanding of epistemological colonialism—at the semantic and syntactic levels (i.e., even at the level of method and methodology)—addresses the tasks of philosophical anthropology, infrastructural conditions, and metareflective critique raised here.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PROBLEM?

Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, posed this insight into the condition of black folk at first through the subjectivist formulation of how does it *feel* to be a problem. His own meditations on problematization had begun a few

years earlier when he composed "The Study of the Negro Problems," namely, that groups of people are studied as problems instead of as people with problems. The result is the emergence of "problem people," and since the logical course of action toward problems is their resolution, their elimination, then the fate of problem people is unfortunately grim.

It is significant that Du Bois formulated this problem experientially and eventually hermeneutically, from how does it feel to be a problem to, in *Dark-water*, the *meaning* of suffering wrought by it. Donald Matthews has argued that the roots of this reflection are located in the thought of Wilhelm Dilthey, who, along with Husserl, offered a phenomenological approach to the study of modern humanity. Phenomenology examines the constitution of meaning from conscious reality. Dilthey and his European intellectual descendants, who include Karl Jaspers, were keen on the understanding of the human sciences as fundamentally more interpretive than exact. It was a concern that was rife in nineteenth-century European thought, which included Max Weber's efforts at creating rigorous social science and Bergson's concerns with the relations of mind to matter and the articulation of awareness and durationality, much of which converged in the thought of Alfred Schutz in Vienna in the 1920s. In the United States, these concerns were advanced in the thought of Du Bois, but we should bear in mind that the questions that brought Du Bois to such social theoretical reflection preceded his doctoral Teutonic encounters in Germany. He was, after all, animated by a realization that although he shared the social world of the white Other, his reaching out was weighted down with an air of transgression. Ordinary activities in that social world were displaced when he attempted to occupy the anonymous roles that made them possible. For he was not simply a student and then a professor; he was not simply a man and then a citizen. Being black, he found himself as an adjectival problematic in each instance. That his *lived* understanding of self as this problematic would have been a contradiction of his understanding of himself as a human being, the question of interpretation offered the hope of explanation. His situation was not, in other words, ontological; it was not about what he "is." The situation was about how he is interpreted, about what other people *think* he is. The relation between meaning and being beckons him, then, in an ironic way, for in the human world, meaning collapses into being, but the latter need not have meaning.

Although he did not make it explicit, Du Bois's analysis of the situation of problem people involves an indictment of theodicean dimensions of the modern world. Theodicy, as we have seen, involves proving the compatibility between the goodness of God and the presence of evil and injustice. Malfeasance, in this view, is external to God. In the modern world, where rationalizations have been secularized, the role of God is replaced by systems

that are asserted as deontological or absolute. The goodness of the system means that evil and injustice are extrasystemic. Problem people, then, are extrasystemic; they belong outside of the system. In effect, they belong nowhere, and their problems, being they themselves, mean that they cannot gain the legitimating force of recognition. It is the notion of a complete, perfect system that enables members of the system to deny the existence of problems within the system.

A system that denies its incompleteness faces the constant denial of its contradictions. In the modern world, this required avowing freedom while maintaining slavery; humanism while maintaining racism; free trade through colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Du Bois, in raising the question of the meaning of living such contradictions, of reminding modern triumphs of their dialectical underside of slavery, racism, and colonialism, brought forth a logic of reversals. On one level, there were the contradictions. The “universal” was, and continues to be, an over-asserted particularity. The disciplines by which knowledge is produced often hid, by way of being presumed, a Eurocentric and racial prefix in which European and white self-reflection became the supposed story of the world. Since studying the particularized black involves understanding the relation of whiteness by which it is constituted, the scope of black particularity proved broader than the denial of white particularity. In short, the universal, should it exist, would most certainly be colored. But the logic of universal and particular is already flawed by virtue of the anxiety that should occur at the moment each human boundary appears complete. Here, Du Bois thus moves the question of problem people into their lived reality: “What does it mean to be a problem?” returns to “How does it feel to be a problem?” and becomes also “How does one live as a problem?” and in those movements, the question of the inner-life of problem people—a problem in itself since it should be self-contradictory—emerges. What can be said of the inner life of those who should lack an inner life?

Du Bois, as is well known, formulated these problems as those of double consciousness. In its first stage, it involves being yoked to views from others; one literally cannot see oneself through one’s own eyes. The dialectics of recognition that follow all collapse into subordination, into living and seeing the self only through the standards and points of view of others. Without their recognition, one simply does not exist. To exist means to appear with a point of view in the intersubjective world of others. But to do so requires addressing the contradictions that militate against one’s existence in the first place. Paget Henry (2005) has described this next move as “potentiated double consciousness.” It requires that “second sight” in which the contradictions of one’s society and system of values are made bare. Double consciousness, in this sense, unmask the theodicean dimensions of the system. Where the

political system presents itself as all-just, as complete, the result is the abrogation of responsibility for social problems. But how could social problems exist without people who are responsible for them by virtue of being the basis of the social world itself?

### WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SOCIAL WORLD?

“[Society,] unlike biochemical processes,” wrote Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “cannot escape human influence. Man is what brings society into being” (p. 11). Human beings are responsible for the social world, from which and through which meaning is constructed and, consequently, new forms of life. Fanon recognized that the process of creating such forms of life also held and generated its own problems; the battle, in other words, against the colonization of knowledge and colonizing knowledge required addressing its source at the level of method itself. Colonialism, in other words, has its methodology, and its goal requires the colonization of method itself. The battle against epistemological colonialism requires, then, a radical, reflective critique (as well as a radically reflective one), and so were Fanon’s efforts in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where every effort to assert an understanding of human behavior under a system of accommodations, a system of promised membership, resulted in failures. Announcing that he preferred to examine these failures, Fanon raised a paradoxical methodology of suspending method. To make the human being actional, his avowed aim, required showing the failures of a world in whose palms rested an ugly seed: The happy slave.

That the happy slave is a project of modern freedom led Fanon to considering the contradictory implications of freedom struggles. Colonialism, for instance, raised a peculiar problem of ethics. To act “ethically” required a commitment not to harming others. But if inaction meant the continuation of a colonial situation, then the notion that harm is absent only where certain groups of people are harmed becomes the order of the day. Harm would be maintained in the interest of avoiding harm. Fanon’s insight was that this contradictory situation could not be resolved *ethically*, since ethics, as with method, was here under scrutiny. Colonialism, in other words, introduced a fundamental inequality that outlawed the basis of ethics in the first place. When Fanon argues that we need to set humanity into its proper place, he means by this that this ethical problem has a political cause. In other words, unlike the modern liberal paradigm, which seeks an ethics on which to build its politics, Fanon argues that colonialism has created a situation in which a politics is needed on which to build an ethics. I have called this, in my book *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, the tragedy of the colonial condition.

When ethics is suspended, all is permitted. And where all is permitted, consent will become irrelevant and violence one, inevitable result. Fanon's meditations on violence have been notorious precisely because they have been so misunderstood in this regard. As long as the ethics of colonialism—in effect, colonial ethics—dominates *as ethics*, then decolonization would be its enemy; it would be unethical to fight against it. This was the basis, Fanon observed, of the rationalization of colonialism as an ethical enterprise through the interpretation of the colonized as enemies of values:

Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil (p. 41).

The “Graeco-Latin pedestal,” as Fanon calls this, would be an impediment to action by placing upon decolonization a neurotic situation: A condition of membership that it could not fulfill since its admission would by definition disqualify the club. Fanon, the psychiatrist as well as theorist of decolonization, understood that the demand of decolonization without innocent suffering fails to account for the innocence of those who suffer colonization; in effect, since innocence suffers on both accounts, it stands as an irrelevant criterion.

It is perhaps this insight on the suspension of ethics that made Fanon's concern about the inheritors of decolonization, those entrusted to forge a *post-colonial* reality, more than a dialectical reflection. For, just as Moses could only lead the people but not enter the Promised Land, so, too, do the generations that fight the decolonizing struggle face their illegitimacy in the post-colonial world. The type of people who could do what needs to be done in an environment of suspended ethical commitments is not the kind who may be the best suited for the governing of mundane life. Fanon's analysis of the national so-called postcolonial bourgeoisie is a case in point. Locked in the trap of political mediations with former colonizers, the effect of which is their becoming new colonizers, the task of building the infrastructure of their nations lay in wait, unfulfilled and often abandoned. This seizure of the post-decolonization process leads to a yoking of national consciousness by nationalism, of making the interest of the nation collapse into the interest of groups within the nation *as* the nation, and a return of the political condition that precedes an ethics. Part of the liberation struggle, then, is the emancipation of ethical life.



## WHO RULES THE WORLD?

This question, raised by Ortega Y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses*, gets to the point of coloniality and the question of postcoloniality and its relation to political theory. Rule, after all, is not identical with politics. It involves, by definition, setting standards, and the ancient relationship of priestly leaders and kings to their subjects was free of politics the extent to which fundamental inequalities had divine and cosmic foundations. Affairs between priests and each other, kings and their kind, or even priests and kings were another matter. There arose a sufficient level of equality between powers to call upon resources of rhetoric and persuasion, and it is from such a discursive transformation of conflicts that politics was born. Such activity, as its etymology suggests, is rooted in the city, a space and place that was often enclosed, if not encircled, in a way that demanded a different set of norms “inside” than “without.” Within, there is the tacit agreement that conflicts need not collapse into war, which means, in effect, the maintenance of opposition without violence, of, as the proverb goes, “war by other means.” In this case, the internal opposition afforded a relationship to the world that differed from what awaited beyond city walls. Out there was the space of violence par excellence, the abyss in which all is proverbially permitted. Ruling the polis, then, demanded a set of norms unique to such a precious place, and where rule is distributed nearly to all, the conflicts over standards require discursive safeguards.

The modern world has, however, been marked by the rise of rule over politics in relation to certain populations.<sup>6</sup> Colonialism, its, in Foucauldian language, *episteme* and, in Mudimbe’s, *gnosis*, renders whole populations receiving their orders, their commands, as the syntactical mode of existence itself. Standards are set, but they are done so through a logic that both denies and affirms the spirits that modernity was to hold at bay. Our analysis of Du Bois and Fanon reveal that a problem with colonialism is that it creates a structure of rule over politics in relation to the colonized. Since, as we just saw in our discussion of the roots of politics versus mere rulership, the discursive dimensions of politics properly require a sufficient level of equality between disputants, then the call for political solutions requires, as well, the construction of egalitarian institutions or places for the emergence of such relations for a political sphere. We find, then, another dimension of the ethical in relation to the political, for the political construction of egalitarian orders entails, as well, the basis for new ethical relations. In other words, the construction of a standard that enables ethical life requires a transformation of political life as well from the violence on which it was born to the suspension of violence itself. Such a suspension would be no less than the introduction



of a public realm, a place in which, and through which, opposition could occur without the structure of the command. But here we find paradox, for how could such a space exist without peripheral structures held together by force?

## A POSTCOLONIAL PHENOMENOLOGY

The examination of consciousness and the realities born from it has spawned a variety of phenomenologies in the modern world. I am, however, here interested in examinations of consciousness that emerge from a suspension of what is sometimes called the natural standpoint but which I prefer to call an act of ontological suspension. By suspending our ontological commitments, it is not that we have eradicated them but that we have shifted and honed our foci. Such an act of suspension affects, as well, our presumptions, which means, as in Fanon's reflections on epistemological colonization, that even our method cannot be presumed. One may ask about the initial moment of ontological suspension. To reintroduce an ontological commitment to a stage of our reflection would mean to presume its validity, which means that the objection requires the necessity of the suspension that it is advanced against. Such a realization is an epistemic move forward.

In many ways, the term "postcolonial phenomenology" is redundant in this context, for the act of ontological suspension means that no moment of inquiry is epistemologically closed. As a rejection of epistemic closure, this form of phenomenology is pitted against colonialism precisely because such a phenomenon requires such closure, which, in more than a metaphorical sense, is the construction of epistemological "settlements." Such settlements lead to forms of crises.

There are crises everywhere in the modern world, and their increase is near exponential. An odd feature of crises, however, is that they are sociogenic. Their solutions should, then, also be a function of the social world. Yet crises are lived as though they have emerged either from the heavens or out of the mechanisms of nature. Crises seem "to happen" to us. The word itself emerges from the Greek term *krinein*, which means "to decide." We paradoxically decide or choose our crises by choosing not to choose, by hiding from ourselves as choosing agents. We lead ourselves into believing what we do not believe, into bad faith. Social crises are just this: Institutional forms of bad faith. They are instances in which the social world is saturated with a closure on its own agency. How is this possible?

On one account, it is that the social world itself is a generative concept, by which is meant that it is part of a complex web of knowledge claims or meanings on which certain forms of subjectivity are produced. The historical

imposition of such an order of things makes it nearly impossible to live outside of such an organization of reality while, ironically, enacting and maintaining it. From this point of view, which we shall call the archaeological, poststructural one, the phenomenological account is wanting because its foundation, namely, consciousness, is also an effect of such an order which could very well change as new, future constellation of things emerge. Yet this claim faces its own contradiction at the level of lived reality: Its completeness is presupposed when, as posited as an object of investigation, its limits are transcended. It is, in other words, a particular advanced as a universal while presuming its own changeability. The error, then, in dismissing consciousness at simply the conceptual level is that the question of positing a concept is presupposed in the very grammar and semantics of its rejection. The phenomenological insight, in this sense of suspending ontological commitments, is that the concept emerges as an object of investigation without having a presumed method for its positing. In other words, the very posing of investigation presupposes the validity of consciousness' *form*. And since even that form transcends its own domestication or subordination, it cannot function as a subcategory of an order of things. In other words, the archaeological, poststructural critique only pertains to a particular *form* of consciousness, namely, one that is already yoked to a particular order of things.

What, however, about a genealogical critique? What are the power interests in the assertion of a phenomenological approach? The response is that it is no more so than a genealogical one. Genealogical accounts regard disciplines and methodological approaches as "tools," as Foucault (2003: 6) avows, as useful but not absolute resources in processes of reflection. Since a postcolonial phenomenology begins with an act of ontological suspension, then each stage of reflection, including its own metacritical assessments, cannot be asserted as ontological without contradiction.

The continued impact of identifying contradictions at moments of ontological assertion suggests that there are limits to what can be permitted even in acts of ontological suspension. Take, for instance, the problem of evidence. A criticism that could be made of these reflections is how self-centered they are, as if an individual consciousness could simply suspend and construct thought itself. That would be a fair criticism so long as the process was *psychological*. This is the point about a particular form of consciousness itself. But the kind of consciousness is not here classified nor presumed within the framework of natural phenomena; it is not, in other words, consciousness subordinated by the relativism of naturalistic frameworks or, to make it plain, modern science. It cannot be presumed, then, to be an act of a single individual. Instead, it is the articulation of a process through which even the individual who is reflecting upon the process is not located as its subject but an any-

mous participant in an effort of understanding; it is not the fish in the water but the realization by a fish that it is in water and potentially many other layers or frames of and through which it is located as somewhere. The problem of evidence emerges, however, precisely because it is a concept that requires more than one standpoint. For something to be evident, it must potentially appear to others. Thus even when one sees something as evident, it is from the standpoint of oneself as an Other. There is, in other words, an inherent sociality to evidence. And since an intellectual reflection makes no sense without making its claims evident, the importance of this insight for *thought* itself is also evident.

So the question of sociality emerges, and it does so in the form of making itself evident. The task is made difficult, however, by having to continue these reflections without an act of ontological commitment. The social world will have to be *understood* through being made evident. In many ways, as I have argued in *Existential Africana* (pp. 74–80), we already have a transcendental argument at work here since sociality is a precondition of evidentiality, and we have already established the necessity of evidence in our reflections. What makes the project more complicated is that it is one thing to presuppose others, it is another thing to articulate the reality presumed by a world of others. After all, genuine others often do what they wish, and when it comes to our shared world of things and meanings, there is the complicated question of whether they are willing to admit what they see, feel, hear, smell, or taste. But we have already revealed much in this admission, for how else could others and their independent variations of senses be meaningful without the individuating addition of their being embodied?

That others are embodied raises the question of how the social world emerges. For, given the metaphysics that dominate most discussions of living bodies, there is the Cartesian problem of how one consciousness could reach another beyond the mere appearance of her or his body. There is something wrong with the Cartesian model could be our response, but that would involve explaining in exactly which way is it misguided. The first is the notion of “mind and body.” In her introduction and first chapter of *The Invention of Women*, Oyèrónké Oyewùmí offers an Africana postcolonial, poststructural critique of this problem by challenging knowledge claims and the subsequent biological science that centers the physical body over social relations in the first place. The Africana postcolonial dimension of this critique is that Cartesianism offered an epistemological model of the self that demanded the colonization of body by mind through having to create a problem of the body. The history of colonialism as one in which colonizing groups constructed themselves as minds that control the colonized and the enslaved, beings whose sole mode of being is the body itself brings the colonial dimension of this

dichotomy to the fore. Yet this critique, powerful though it may be, does not account for the reality of how we live as extended beings in the world. In other words, it really is a criticism of an *over-emphasis* on the body or on the mind, especially as separate, but not on how we live them as creatures that move through the world. Even social activities such as trading or enjoying the company of others require an interplay of what it means to be “here” versus “there,” and of communicating welcome or rejection through shaking hands, hugging, or simply standing back, all activities expressed not “through” the body but, literally, in that sense as singular—that is, *embodied*. Further, drawing upon similar premises that render colonizers mind and the colonized body, Fanon noted in the 1950s in his discussion of negrophobia, phobogenesis, and the black athlete in *Black Skin, White Masks* in his chapter, “The Negro and Psychopathology,” that such reductionism leads, ultimately, to a fear of the biological in which the black male, for example, is eclipsed by his penis in the eyes of the negrophobe. This argument suggests that rejecting engagement with the biological may not be the right direction for a postcolonial critique to take. To capture this dimension of social embodiment, which we might wish to call its “lived” reality, while addressing the limits of Cartesianism would require some additional considerations.

Cartesianism advances the human being as a meeting of two substances, but in truth, many of the problems we face emerge from the first substance, so we needn't even go to the second one. How, in other words, does mind reach mind? But now we see the difficulty where body is denied; mind cannot “reach” mind, in other words, where neither mind exists anywhere. To be somewhere means to occupy a space in a particular time, which means to be embodied.<sup>7</sup> A similar argument could be made about brain-body distinctions; but the difference here is that the borders are successions of physical bodies. Consider, however, the following thought experiment. What would be required for a consciousness or a mind to be embodied? It will have to be extended in the world, which means that it will have to be able to stand on or be oriented by something. As well, it could not be active without being able to extend beyond its initial grounding, which means it would require limbs, and as it reaches out to its environment in ways that involve detecting electromagnetic radiation to discerning the chemicals and gases with which it has contact, we will see the unfolding of a body that has a front and a back and sides as well as an up and a down. In short, “the body” is another way of saying “an extended brain” or “a living, conscious thing.” And though the Cartesian might point out that limbs can be cut off without the self being destroyed, a surgeon could point out that bits of brain can be taken away without the same effect. The contingency of parts of an organism does not mean that those parts are not extended expressions of that organism. Mind, in other

words, is from toe to finger tip to forehead. What all this amounts to is that consciousness/mind *appears* in the world, is evident to other minds, and is read and interacted with precisely because it is evident, it appears.

The social world is, then, a complex one of intersubjectivity, but that does not mean a mysterious spiritual world behind physical reality. It is in and through that reality and is evident in the multitude of signifiers that constitute the expression of reality from the social world, which is what Fanon, in his introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, means by *sociogeny*.<sup>8</sup> That is why it would be correct to say that we learn to read our world and inscribe and constitute our relationship to it. And more, we can also see that this relationship is one in which we play the active role of making meanings while encountering a world of meanings already available to us. It is in this sense that the social world and its plethora of meanings are an achievement. Among these meanings is the subject that is the focus of decolonizing struggles to begin with, namely, the human being.<sup>9</sup>

The act of ontological suspension and the necessity of embodied consciousness raise the question of philosophical anthropology. Unlike empirical anthropology, which focuses on empirical phenomena and the application of methods designed for such study, philosophical anthropology explores the concepts by and through which any understanding of the human being is both possible and makes sense.<sup>10</sup> It also involves the implications of these ideas *as ideas*, as they are, that is, when freed as much as possible from the grip of colonizing epistemic forces. In one sense, the postcolonial phenomenological move requires understanding the human being as a subject over whom laws find their limits. In effect, the human question, from this point of view, becomes one of studying a being that lacks a nature and yet is a consequence of natural phenomena—although these reasons have already been outlined in phenomenological terms, which is that another human being relates to one as part of a world that transcends the self. What this means is that the other's contingency entails the other's freedom, and given that freedom, the philosophical anthropology that follows is one of an open instead of a closed subject. In another sense, the openness of human subjectivity is already presupposed in the project of liberation and social change. A human being must, in other words, be able to live otherwise for his or her liberation to make sense. And at the level of groups, the sociogenic argument here returns: What is created by human beings can be changed by human beings. The human being is, in other words, the introduction of the artificial into the world. Thus, to impose the maxim of nature on the human being is to set the human element on a path toward its own destruction. And third, the argument recognizes the relationship between knowledge and being, that new forms of life are also a consequence of the production of knowledge. This outcome, too, is another natural development of an unnatural reality.

The openness of philosophical anthropology also emerges from the contingency of human subjectivity. Human beings bring new concepts into the world and, in doing so, face the anxiety of unpredictability. In the human world, things do not often work out, and part of the intellectual struggle has been about facing that dimension of living in a human world, a world of others. Theoretical models that appeal to human necessity often face the danger of requiring a neatness of human behavior and human institutions that collapses them into clear-cut notions as, for example, the distinction between black and white. Yet, as most human adults know, the world is not simple, and the consequences of life are not always fair. They face, then, the problem of living in a world that is without neat, theodicean dictates in which evil and injustice stand outside. Such phenomena are aspects of life through which we must live, and they do not always emerge in grandiose forms but, instead, at the level of everyday life. What such reflection brings to discourses on social change is the rather awkward question: Will such efforts create a world in which human beings could actually live? To live requires, from the complex set of interrelations that constitute the social world, mundane life, and the challenge posed by decolonization of such a life is a function of what is involved in each group of people achieving what could be called “the ordinary.”<sup>11</sup>

The options available for an everyday existence are not the same across groups in a colonial world. In such a world, an absence of spectacular efforts facilitates the everyday life of the dominating group. We could call this simply ordinary existence. For the dominated group, the achievement of the ordinary requires extraordinary efforts. Here we see another one of those subverted categories through the lens of Du Boisian double consciousness, for the averageness of everyday life for the dominant group conceals the institutions that support such ordinariness. This reality reveals, for instance, a major problem in recent appeals to “cosmopolitanism” in Africana liberal thought as found in the work of K. Anthony Appiah or the feminist, cosmopolitan position of Martha Nussbaum.<sup>12</sup> While it is laudable that they defend the inter-connectedness of the human species and, in Appiah’s case, stand critical of “strong universalism,” they pose a value system premised upon an individual who, as in the elites of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, can afford it.<sup>13</sup> One can believe that one is a citizen of the world when most global institutions are already designed for one’s benefit (as opposed to others). The folly of this position comes to the fore when one imagines how ridiculous it would be to deride a poor person for failing to be cosmopolitan. It is as ridiculous as applauding a rich person or a person of fair means for globetrotting. What is cosmopolitanism, then, in its concrete practice but the assertion of the values of the affluent as the standards for everyone—including the poor? After all, cosmopolitanism is advanced by cosmopolitanists as their claim to a

universal logic, or at least a near-universal one. How could such a value-system be consistent without simply erasing those who contradict it or simply rendering them irrelevant?<sup>14</sup> Such forms of political theorizing treat individuals and their values as though they do not stand on social infrastructures. Where institutions are against a particular group, that group faces a constant problem of insufficiency. How can a group ever be good enough when its members' actions cannot qualify their membership by virtue of never serving as the standard of membership?

A radical philosophical anthropology would point out the contradiction of a system governed by such a logic of membership since such a system would require presenting some groups of people as epistemologically closed while making other groups of people the standard by which humanity is forged, which, ironically, would also be a form of epistemic closure, but it would be so at the level of an ideal. In effect, it would eliminate some human beings from the human community through the creation of a nonhuman standard of being human. The question of lived-reality would then disintegrate since each set of human beings would "be" a surface existent instead of the complex dynamic of an expressed inner life *in the world*. Lacking such a dimension, the human world would simply become an ossification of values, and the avowed goal of setting humanity free would collapse into its opposite.

Why such a focus on the human in a postcolonial phenomenology? On one hand, the answer is historical. Colonialism, slavery, and racism have degraded humankind. The reassertion of humankind requires the assertion of the humanity of the degraded. But such an assertion is, as we have been seeing, not as simple as it appears, for there was not, and continues not to be, a coherent notion of the human subject on which emancipation can be supported. It is much easier to assert a humanity that supports oppression than it is to construct one that carries, paradoxically, the burden of freedom. On the other hand, the answer is "purely" theoretical. A radically critical examination of epistemic colonizing practices must be metacritical, which means, as we have seen through Fanon, being radically self reflective. It would be bad faith to deny that this means questioning our own humanity.

## A GEOPOLITICAL CONCLUSION

Our explorations thus far have moved back and forth through two conceptions of theory that have not been made explicit. The word theory has its origins in theological notions. From the ancient Greek word *theoria*, which means "view," or, in the infinitive, "to view" or "to see," a further etymological break down reveals the word *theo*, from which was *theus* or *Zdeus* (*Zeus*)



or, in contemporary terms, “God.” To do theoretical work meant, then, to attempt to see what God sees. And since God has the power of omniscience, it meant to see all, and what would such an achievement be other than truth itself? Yet implicit in such an effort is the reality that human beings could only make such an attempt *as an attempt*, because human beings are not gods, and although the gods do sometimes smile on an individual human being and thereby stimulate a glimpse of clarity, for the most part, most of us are kept in the proverbial dark, or at least twilight. In a godless world, the theory is in some ways like the continued grammar that supports a rationalization without the God that animated it. The “theorist” thus becomes an embarrassing figure, a searcher seeking an outcome that would be ashamed of its origins. What, in other words, does it mean to do theory in a godless universe?

One response would be to give up theory and focus simply on criticism, on showing where the continued effort to do theory leads to embarrassing and fruitless outcomes. Another response would be to approach ideas as objects in a dark room. Theoretical work then becomes at first the lighting of a match with which to light a candle with which to find one’s way to a light switch. At each stage, the contents of the room, including its walls, become clearer and offer a more coherent context in which to make decisions about how to live in the room. The process of increasing clarity continues well after the light switch in the form of thought itself, often captured by the term “illumination.” And then there is another model, where thought itself creates new relationships and things much like the Big Bang view of an expanding universe; as there is an expansion of matter, there is, as well, an expansion of thought. How these views of thought unfold in postcolonial thought can be seen through a very influential recent metaphor. In the 1980s, Audre Lorde, in her collection *Sister Outsider*, argued that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. The result of this insight has, however, been both positive and negative. On the one hand, it has been a rallying cry against Eurocentrism and colonizing concepts, against the dialectics of recognition in which dominating ideals reign. But on the other hand, it has also served the interest of the “criticisms only” groups, those who regard theory as ultimately imperial and, historically, western. This response emerges from the negative aspect of the metaphor, namely, tearing down the master’s house. It is odd that a metaphor that builds upon the struggles of slaves did not consider other aspects of the lived reality of slaves. Why, for instance, would people who are linked to production regard themselves in solely destructive terms? Yes, they want to end slavery. But they also want *to build freedom*. To do that, what they may wish to do with the master’s tools is to use them, *along with the tools they had brought with them and which facilitated their survival*, to build their own homes. How could the master’s house function as such in a world of so many

houses not premised upon mastery? Would not that render such a house, in the end, irrelevant and in effect drain its foundations of mastery?

Such a shift would be one both of space and place. Postcolonial thought cannot afford to be locked in the role of negative critique. An inauguration of a shift in the geography of reason needs to be effected wherein the productive dimensions of thought can flourish. In other words, thought needs a place in which to live. Ideas dwell across the ages in the concepts and institutions human beings have built, and the more livable those institutions are for human beings, the healthier, no doubt, this symbiotic relationship will be as it takes on the legacy of that resounding echo from which symbolic life was born so long ago.

## NOTES

1. For discussion of these themes of recognition and their limitations, see Lewis Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence* (2006, especially the final chapter) and Gordon and Gordon (eds.), *Not Only the Master's Tools* (2006).

2. This is not to say that theodicean problems are not raised in African and Africana thought. See, e.g., Kwame Gyekye's discussion of theodicy in the Akan in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (1995: 123–28).

3. This is one of the themes of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), where the black petit-bourgeoisie seek recognition in a world in which they are not, and in its very systems of values *could not be*, the standard. They, in effect, affirm their inferiority.

4. I also provide an exploration of how these themes have unfolded in Africana philosophy in Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (forthcoming).

5. On this theme, particularly on how it unfolded in debates over the Black Republic of Haiti, see Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed* (2004).

6. On this theme, there are many studies, but for Africa, see Fanon's classic *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) and for the Americas, Tzevan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* (1984). See also Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (1996) for a more recent discussion of politics and rule in a colonial context.

7. For a longer discussion of this argument, see my chapter "The Body in Bad Faith," in *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (1995).

8. For discussion, see Sylvia Wynter's "Towards the Sociogenic Principle" (2001) and Lewis Gordon, "Through the Zone of Nonbeing" (2005) and "Is the Human a Teleological Suspension of Man?" (2006).

9. Africana philosophy, and by implication Africana postcolonial thought, brings this question of the human being to the fore for the obvious reason, at least in its modern instantiation, of its being theory advanced through the world of subjects whose humanity has been denigrated or denied. See Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana* (2000, *passim*) and see, also, Bogues (ed.), *After Man, Towards the Human* (2006).

10. There are many roads to philosophical anthropology in the modern age and in postcolonial thought. The situating of the question is infamously raised in Immanuel Kant's practical philosophy, although it has been a leitmotif of modern thought as early as Hobbes's atomistic natural philosophy, which attempts a theory of human nature as the basis of his argument for legitimate political order. The Haitian humanist Anténor Firmin has shown, in *Equality of the Human Races* (2002; originally published in 1885), however, that Kant's, and also Hegel's claims to philosophical anthropology, were not properly anthropological at all but, in fact, *geographical*. The legacy of that geological political construction continues in contemporary constructions of intelligent, civilized people of the Nordic regions versus supposedly doltish, savage ones from tropical zones. In more recent times, the question took a marked turn in Sartrean existential Marxism, as found in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which placed him in conflict with structuralist anthropology, and one could see how the question of the human being as a limit to imposed structures took its return in Foucault's archaeology and genealogy, where the production of the human being as a subject of inquiry came about in the face of the subject's role as both producer and product. See Bogue's (2006) for a variety of Africana postcolonial writers on this subject. See also Paget Henry's essay on potentiated double consciousness (2005) and his essay in the Bogue's volume for a discussion of the limits of poststructural moves and questions of agency addressed by the phenomenological turn, and Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (1995b) and *Existential Africana* (2000) for a similar argument.

11. For elaboration of the value of the ordinary, see Maurice Natanson, *Anonymity* (1986), and see chapter 3 of Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (1995b).

12. Appiah's argument would require his work not being identified as "Africana" liberal thought. That he advances anecdotes on Ghana and has built his ideas out of his work on race theory in Africana philosophy, however, brings out the question of what it means for an Africana philosopher to write as though the African world plays any serious role in forging the conditions of global access available to its members. That the degree to which that African can be materially dissociated from blackness plays a significant role, as compared to the access available to a European who strongly identifies with whiteness, renders the notion of Africana cosmopolitanism in the terrain of self-deception. We may pose the same point to Nussbaum on the distinction between the women who are part of the communities of women who share governance of the world versus, basically, the rest.

13. F. Scott Fitzgerald was, however, a lot less naive on these matters as evidenced by his portrayal of the callous attitude of these ruling cosmopolitans, whose globe-trotting depends on constantly meeting each other everywhere. Contemporary cosmopolitans continue to work under the assumption that ruling elites actually give a damn about the suffering of people in the rest of the world and the social systems that support the inequalities on which such suffering is built. How do we judge such recognition and kindness to "strangers" when the subject in question controls all the conditions of the exchange?

14. This is not to say that globalism and cosmopolitanism are identical. Buying access to the world is global in consequence, but since only few people can afford that,

it becomes a clear case of confusing their global access with universal access. Such individuals could only become universal if, and only if, they are the only individuals under consideration. In effect, although unintentionally so, we find ourselves here on theodicean terrain. Those who cannot afford global access are simply rendered outside of the system of cosmopolitan values or simply presumed to be so, if they could afford it, which means that the whole point is not really about the values at all but the access. In effect, Fanon's critique of modern colonial values returns, where the political economy of social transformation trumps the ethics that was presumed independent of social infrastructures.

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