African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason

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Reason was confident of victory on every level. I put all the parts

back together. But I had to change my tune. That victory played

cat and mouse; it made a fool of me. As the other put it, when I

was present, it was not; when it was there, I was no longer.

——Frantz Fanon

African-American philosophy has been one of the most recently developed areas of theoretical reflection in African-American Studies. Its emergence is in many ways marked by the realization of many scholars that philosophy offered much to the enterprise of studying the African diaspora, and the unique categories of thought endemic to that diaspora offers many challenges to modern and contemporary philosophy. Central in this development has been the importance of philosophical anthropology in the study of race and the challenges posed by race to our understanding of philosophical anthropology. Added to this insight is the anxiety that is a function of studying Africana communities and the ideas they stimulate.

African-American philosophy is an area of Africana philosophy. By Africana philosophy, I mean the set of philosophical problems and their critical discussion raised by the historical political situation of the African diaspora. African-American philosophy focuses on the New World aspect of that diaspora.

Although Africans in America preceded the introduction of Europeans, and even the

conception of "America," "Europe," and "Africa," the convergence of the three is, for the most part, a modern affair. The peculiarity of that convergence has the form of what Michel Foucault, in *Society Must Be Defended*, calls "subjugated knowledge." It is a form of thought that relates to modernity as does the "unconscious" in Freudian psychoanalysis—that is, as a repressed reality. But as Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out in his discussion of bad faith in the first part of *Being and Nothingness*, the "unconscious" seems to have a rather clear point of view.   The African-American experience of repression has been both psychoanalytical and political. The psychoanalytical pertains to psychosocial invisibility. The political and historical are the set of repressive practices that mark the modern world's relation to black communities, relations of colonization and racism. The consequence is one not only of social and political invisibility but also of historical amnesia.   That people have been settling in the southern hemisphere of the New World for more than 40,000 years suggests that the question of African America poses a double movement of people to the New World, whom *we*, people of today, could recognize as what we call *black people*, and then subsequently more recent black people from Africa, whom we could call *modern black people*.[1] The tendency to locate blackness as a fundamentally modern phenomenon means, however, that those premodern, morphologically dark people who lived in the Americas for so many millennia before Columbus's 1492 expedition there should not properly be designated as black people but simply as early or premodern Americans. We may ask, as well, how we should place premodern Scandinavians such as Leif Erikson and his crew of Vikings, who made it to the northern New World as early as 1001 A.C.E.   By the same stroke of reasoning that would make it ridiculous for us to say that Erikson was not "white" because of the absence of the epistemic framework for such an identity until the nineteenth century, we should be able to admit, at least, that those settlers in ancient South America nearly 40,000 years

ago were black simply because the only morphologically white people around at that time were

the Neanderthals in Europe and Western Asia. Black American history in this sense, then, has a

large premodern set of chapters to be written.

Complicating the matter, however, is that not all people who are designated African in

the contemporary world are also considered black anywhere.   And similarly, not all people who

are considered in most places to be black are considered African anywhere. There are non-black

Africans who are descended from more than a millennia of people living on the African

continent, and there are indigenous Pacific peoples and peoples of India whose consciousness

and life are marked by a black identity. One could claim that in the context of North, Central,

and South America, "black" and "African" are sufficiently identical to warrant their functioning

as synonyms. A problem, however, is that such a view would beg important questions of what it

means to study blacks and to study Africans and to study their convergence in African America.

For example, black studies, although including much of Africa, extends beyond its reach. For

the extension of Africa, one needs to add the term *diasporic*, and with that addition, one would

expect some isomorphism with the term black. But even that does not work since, as we have

just seen, the *modern* African diaspora is very different from its premodern notion. The

premodern or, better, *primordial* African diaspora are, after all, *humanity* itself since they are

the initial groups of people who spread across the earth from Africa during those times. Unless

it is simply by fiat, we thus cannot avoid struggling with the distinctiveness of the categories

black and *African*.

Let us, then, simply use the term "African American" to refer specifically to the

convergence of African and black in the New World continents and regions of the modern world.

And by African-American philosophy, let us then mean the modern philosophical discourse that

emerges from that diasporic community, including its Francophone, Hispanophone, and Lusophone creolization. To articulate the central features and themes of the thought from that intellectual heritage, I would like to begin by outlining some of the thought of the two greatest influences on many (if not most) of us in the field—namely, W.E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon.

I

The importance of W.E.B. Du Bois to the study of blacks and the development of black thought in the New World is that he outlined most of the important themes of this area of inquiry. If there is any doubt, a consultation of nearly every text in the field would reveal his influence. Although there are many concepts generated by the work of the great Dr. Du Bois, I should like here simply to focus on two since, in many ways, they have proven to be the most persistent in the thought of subsequent generations of Africana thinkers.

Du Bois and the Theodicean Problematic

Du Bois recognized that the *question* of black people was of philosophical importance. He formulated it hermeneutically, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, as *the meaning* of Negro/black. He understood, from his earlier empirical work on blacks in Philadelphia, that studying black people was not like studying other peoples. In his essay, "The Study of the Negro Problems," he made this clear in terms of the challenges it posed to positivistic science. In the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, he posed it thus: "What does it mean to be a problem?" I have provided a detailed discussion of the implications of this question in the fourth chapter of my book

Existentia Africana. For our purposes here, I should like simply to point out that the question

has an implicit methodological position: People should be studied as human beings, but what do

we do when the humanity of some groups is challenged? We need, in other words, to find a

way to study black people without black people becoming problems-in-themselves.

The question of problem-people also raises a theodicean question. From the conjunction

of the Greek words *Zdeus* (which became *deus*, *theus*, and then *theo*) and *dikē*—the term

"theodicy" refers to God's justice or the justice of God. It is an area of inquiry in which one

attempts to find an account of the compatibility of an all-good and all-powerful God in a world

marked by injustice and evil. Theodicean problems emerge, as the works of John Hick in *Evil*

and the God of Love and Kwame Gyekye in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* have

shown, from any system of thought in which God or a perfect set of gods are the source both of

being and value. Most theodicean arguments defend God's goodness as compatible with God's

omniscience and omnipotence through an appeal either to our ignorance of God's ultimate plan

for us all or through an appreciation of the freedom endowed on us by God. In the first instance,

the conclusion is that things only *appear* bad because serving God's purpose is ultimately good.

In the second, injustice and evil are our fault because they are consequences of our free will,

which is, in the end, a good thing. In either formulation, God is without culpability for evil and

injustice. In the Modern Age, theodicy has paradoxically been *secularized*. Whereas God once

functioned as the object, the rationalization, and the legitimation of an argument, other systems

come into play, such as systems of knowledge and political systems, and they have taken up the

void left by God. The clear system of knowledge is modern science and the modes of

rationalization it offers. Political systemic rationalization avers an intrinsic goodness and justice

of the given political system. Thus, unlike the Foucauldian model in *Discipline and Punish* that

queries the phantom head of the king in nondiscursive practices, we face here the persistent grammar of theodicy even in an avowed-secular age. In the context of modern attitudes toward and political treatment of black folks, a special kind of theodicean grammar has asserted itself. The appeal to blacks as problem-people is an assertion of their ultimate location *outside* the systems of order and rationality.[2] The logic is straightforward: A perfect system cannot have imperfections. Since blacks claim to be contradictions of a perfect system, the imperfection must either be an error in reasoning (mere "appearance") or lie in black folk themselves. Blacks become rationalized as the extraneous *evil* of a *just system*.

The formation of such systems and their theodicean rationalizations lead to the generations of new forms of life, namely, those in the system and those outside the system. The "outside" is an invisible reality generated, in its invisibility, as nonexistent. The effect, then, is that a new link with theodicy emerges and the result is *theobiodicean*—that is, the rationalization of forms of life that are inherently justified versus those that could never be justified under the principles of the systems that form both. The result is, as Du Bois famously observed, the splitting of worlds and consciousness itself into the normative and its contradictions.

Du Bois then outlines the relationship of blacks to the political and epistemic order of the modern world in *The Souls of Black Folk* and in the section on white folks in *Darkwater* through the lived-reality of double consciousness. Discussion of this concept is vast in the secondary literature on Du Bois, which I will not outline here.[3] Instead, I should like simply to focus on my reading of the concept as fundamentally coextensive. It manifests itself, in other words, in several organizing motifs. The first, negative formulation is of the psychological constitution of the self. There, one is yoked to a self-image that is entirely a function of how one is seen by others. To be black, in that sense, means to be so in exclusively white terms. Another version

of double consciousness emerges from the double standards of citizenship, where one is, say, born an American but discovers that one is not fully a citizen by virtue of being racially designated black. Why, one asks, is being black treated as antipathetic to being an American? This leads to the notion of irreconcilable doubleness, where being black does not equal being an American yet much of what is original about being an American, as Ralph Ellison showed in *Going to the Territory*, comes from blacks in America.   This insight is crucial because the mainstream (that is, white) American self image is one of supposedly being an original site from which blacks play only the role of imitation. Think of Toni Morrison's brilliant exploration of this thesis in *Bluest Eye*, in which, as Gary Schwartz (1997) showed, blackness suffered the plight of being a mere imitation of life. To be an imitation is to stand as secondary to another standard, namely, the original or the prototype.   We see this view of blacks in popular culture, where the adjective "black" is added to things white to suggest imitation: black Jesus; black Mozart; Ms. Black America; etc.   Blacks are even treated as imitations of their own artifacts. Hardly any one today realize, for instance, that rock n' roll is a form of black music, and that most of the people following the Jewish and Christian faiths imagine them to be European in their origins, instead of East African and from the *colored* Middle East, is another instance.

There is also an epistemological dimension of double consciousness. The correlate of normative knowledge is the set of mainstream disciplines and their approaches to the study of black folk. The standard view is that things white represent universality and things black are locked in the web of particularity.   The problem with this view from the perspective of double consciousness is that it relies on denying the contradictions of the system.   Thus, only the false, self-deceiving image of a pristine, all-encompassing (white) America is offered. Blacks in America exemplify the contradictions of the political and epistemological system; they are the

nation's dirty laundry. The exposure of contradictions means that whereas whiteness relies on a narcissistic self-deceptive notion of the American social and political system's completeness, blackness relies on pointing out the incompleteness of the system, its imperfections and contradictions. This is the insight behind the black folk adage: "One mind for the white man/ to see, / Another that I now is me." This means that the black world is more linked to truth than the white world because the black world realizes that the domain over which truth claims can appeal is much larger than the white world in general is willing to admit. The black world and the white world in this formulation does not refer to every individual black or white person but to those who live by the value systems of these worlds. Whites, for instance, who study America through the lens of Black Studies often develop the same outrage that blacks and other people of color share. Unlike the popular claim that the purpose of Black Studies is to offer the narcissism of images of the self in the form of instructor, a view totally compatible with white-centric studies but in black face, the more awkward reality is that it offers something sufficiently lacking in the (white) dominant disciplines to stimulate such ire on the part of students—namely, *truth*. It is not that there is *no* truth in most areas of the humanities and the social sciences, as well as the life sciences, it is simply that there is *limited* truth there precisely because of the imposition of white normativity as a subtextual mode of legitimation. One could argue that pursuing truth in the way demanded by Black Studies might be too much to demand of instructors from other disciplines, but such an excuse could hardly be accepted by Black Studies scholars all of whom have to work through the tenets of a minimum of two disciplinary perspectives—the white normative one and the contradictions they see from the standpoint of the world of color. What they take the time to learn is exactly what students expect scholars and teachers committed to knowledge and learning should do: Explore the full domain of their

subject matter, which includes taking its contradictions seriously. This is not to say that they will be perfect in such an endeavor but that the spirit of such an approach offers a set of obligations responding to which would constitute a more rigorous pursuit of truth.

Epistemological doubling leads to axiological questions emerging from white normativity. Here the problem of value can be examined through, ironically, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Will to Power* on one hand and Anna Julia Cooper's "What Are We Worth?" from *A Voice from the South* on the other hand. According to Nietzsche, values suffer the symptomatic fate of nihilism when undergoing the social process of decay. When healthy, the response to the adversities of life take the form of bringing about life affirming values. The unhealthy response is to seek the elimination of adversity instead of issuing a constructive response to it. From a white normative perspective, white people are healthier than black people because of the absence of social pathologies associated with black people. Yet, an immediate black response is that most white people could not live in the shoes of black folk. Think, for instance, of the statistics on suicide—that a mere one or two percent rise in unemployment, as Alvin Poussaint and Alexander showed in *Lay My Burden Down*, leads to suicide among whites, while many blacks, particularly black men, live with consistent figures of unemployment rates that double their white counter parts. The travails faced by blacks in the modern age stimulated the leitmotif of modernity, namely, the blues. Although whites, too, suffer the blues, the fact of the matter is that the blues came out of black not white America. The litany of contributions, from George Washington Carver's discoveries of hundreds of things to do with a peanut to African Americans' development of unique religious institutions and innovations in mathematics and physics, all in the face of lynchings, American Apartheid, and systematic policies of underdevelopment, suggests, from the Nietzschean perspective, a greater degree of health in

black America than might be expected. Added to this observation is Cooper's efficiency thesis

of health, that a system and a group within it are healthy if they are able to contribute much more

to society than what is invested in them. The upshot of the matter is that while American public

discourse protests against investing in black America, the amount expended on white America,

especially as one climbs the economic ladder, far exceeds what those individuals are able to

contribute. Many blacks with less simply produce more than many whites with more. This is

not to say that the argument must be so race specific. After all, there are affluent blacks in whom

much has been invested without much social returns. But the numbers of such blacks are so

small that the point becomes inconsequential. At the systemic level, the question must be asked

whether the social and economic investment in white supremacy produces a healthy or sick value

system. That it is increasingly very expensive to live white offers a negative answer.

Finally, but not exclusively so, there is the phenomenological consequence of all this.

That double consciousness is a form of *consciousness* already locates it as a subject rich with

phenomenological significance. Phenomenology, after all, examines meaningful reality as

constituted by consciousness wherein consciousness is understood in its intentional form as

always having to be *of* something.   The consciousnesses that manifest themselves in double

consciousness are (1) consciousness of how mainstream America sees itself (dominant "reality")

and (2) consciousness of its contradictions (black reality).   Since to see both is to see the

dialectical relationship constitutive of truth, then the first by itself must manifest a form of

consciousness that hides itself. The first, by itself, stands as a form of bad faith. Of course, there

could be a third form: Consciousness of both while denying itself in a reaffirmed unity of the

first. That, too, is a form of bad faith, but, as Ralph Ellison showed in the Golden Day episode in

Invisible Man, where the protagonist encounters a group of educated blacks on a day out from

the local asylum, such flight opens the door to madness. As Fanon later observed in his resignation letter from Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algiers, published in *Toward the African Revolution*: "Madness is one of the means man has of losing his freedom" (p. 53).

Although there is much more that can be said about Du Bois's thought, our main point is established in these two governing themes: Domination and oppression underlie American discursive practices of knowledge and power. Du Bois places the philosophical anthropological problem at the forefront with the normative one: We must ask what it means *not* to be a problem, and we need also to ask what it means to be so in a world in which not being so would not be tantamount to being sick.

Fanon's sociogenic analysis

An added feature of a phenomenological turn is not only its foundations in an intentional theory of consciousness but also the phenomenological injunction against notions of disembodied consciousness. Du Bois's reflections bring to the fore the lived reality of a problematic consciousness. Such a consciousness finds itself embroiled in a dialectic of constantly encountering an alien reflection of the self in the social world. Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks*, presents a powerful portrait of what it means to live ensnared by the search for the self in an antipathetic other's eyes or *the dialectics of recognition*. He shows that colonialism created a form of phobogenic imposition that infected intersubjective relations and the methods of their understanding and evaluation. Put concretely: Reason had a tendency to exit whatever room he entered. Fanon's critique, even of methodologies offered by colonial disciplinary practices, can be characterized as the identification of *epistemological colonialism*—colonization at the level of

knowledge.[4]

The alien black self is one of the products of such colonial practice. Yet, knowledge of the constructed aspects of a self fails to transform that self where the standpoint of appearance is always a colonial one. In effect, the search for recognition, of being valued as a self, of appearing to others, suffers from a psychopathalogical factor: Modern colonialism leaves no room for a normal black body. The basis of so-called recognition is stratified abnormality. The black is either flawed by virtue of not being white or flawed by virtue of appearing "too white," which is abnormal for a black. Further, since the Self–Other dialectic constitutes ethical relationships premised upon a hidden equality (each self is another's other and vice versa), and since antiblack racism depends on a fundamental inequality (a human–below-human relation from the standpoint of the white, a human–other-human relation from the standpoint of the black), a system of unilateral ethical relations results, wherein blacks experience ethical responsibility in relation to whites, but whites do not exemplify such reciprocity. The consequence is that racism destroys the Self–Other dialectic and collapses into the doubled world identified by double consciousness: A Self–Other *and* Non-Self–Non-Other structure. It is, in other words, the denial of the humanity of the black as *another human being* before the white. In effect, then, the struggle against at least the antiblack racism manifested by modern colonialism entails an effort to change what Fanon calls the *sociogenic* consequences of that world, to transform the society into both formal and substantive instances of reciprocal Self–Other dialectics of ethical relations between whites and blacks. Fanon's later, well-known call, that we should change our material conditions and our *concepts* to set afoot a new humanity that manifests healthier social relations, is a consequence of this argument.

The relevance of Fanon's thought to African-American philosophy pertains to the

understanding of black identity, the internal dynamics of liberation that are hallmarks of black

thought, and the metacritical reflections on how one goes about such discourses. There is, as

well, the question of thought itself. How much can one expect from a discursive practice when

one also aspires for liberation? Fanon's thought on Nègritude is instructive here. The term itself

was coined by Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire, Fanon's *lycée* teacher and future foe. Fanon saw

an exemplification of black resistance in Nègritude poetry, whose content extolled the virtues of

the night against the blinding rays of the sun. Africa, and indeed the black self, were valorized

by Nègritude poets such as Césaire and Léopold Senghor, the future first president of

independent Senegal. Although he was woken from his poetically induced dialectical slumber

by Jean-Paul Sartre, who pointed out in his essay "Black Orpheus" that Nègritude could at best

be a negative moment in a revolutionary dialectic that called for a universal struggle, Fanon

found solace in his later observation, in *A Dying Colonialism*, that it was *blacks* who created

Nègritude. What this means is that Nègritude should not be entirely rejected as a potential

revolutionary force because it brought to the fore a central theme in Fanon's fight against

stratified abnormality—the importance of agency or, in his terms, becoming *actional*. One must,

in Fanon's view, fight for and seize one's freedom. In Fanon's writings, it is far more

humiliating to have our freedom handed to us than to have had it taken away in the first place.

We must be responsible for our freedom.

       Fanon thus responds to the dialectics of recognition not by asking to be seen but by

seeking to go beyond

the dialectic itself.

Focusing on

dismantling the

master's home will still leave the problem of being homeless, but focusing on building another home could achieve the important task of rendering the master's home irrelevant without which his mastery loses its force. We could read this as a case for an important role for thought.

African-American Philosophies

Du Bois and Fanon have influenced the problematics of contemporary African-American philosophical thought.   These include African-American analytical philosophy, prophetic pragmatism, Afrocentrism, Afro-postmodernism, Afro-poststructuralism, African-American existentialism and phenomenology.

African-American analytical philosophy is, basically, the application of Anglo-analytical

philosophy to black problems. Major proponents of this approach are Anthony K. Appiah,

Bernard Boxill, Howard McGary, Bill Lawson, Adrian Piper, John Pittman, Laurence Thomas,

and Naomi Zack.   Although very fruitful in the analysis of the terms such as "race," "black,"

"respect," and "social justice," used in debates over these issues, this approach suffers from

several criticisms already advanced by Du Bois and Fanon, the most crucial of which is the

presumption of the validity of interpretation *within* the system as presently constituted. Thinking

is, however, greater than the application of a precluded method. It requires dealing with the

idiosyncracies of reflection that enable method and thought itself to be subject to evaluation.

This is Du Bois's and Fanon's insight into the study of what it means to be problems and the

importance of taking seriously the illustrative potential of contradictions and failures. But even

more damaging is the critique of continued theodicean practices. The radicality of critique

demanded by thinking black in a world that treats thinking conjoined with blackness in black

thought as an oxymoron means that the legitimating aspects of analytical philosophy must also

be interrogated.   The critique, then, is that although useful, as the important work of the

aforementioned list of philosophers attest, analytical African-American philosophy is not

sufficiently radical. There is, of course, some irony here, for there are black analytical

philosophers who address black themes with all the resources available to them *as analytical*

philosophers. To their surprise, and often chagrin, however, they discover that doing so has led

to the charge that many of them are no longer doing analytical philosophy. Fanon's rejection of

the dialectics of recognition would be instructive here. Analytical philosophers of African-

American thought should simply not seek a recognition that has analytically defined them as

standing outside its purview of what it means to be normal.

Prophetic pragmatism raises similar concerns. Developed by Cornel West, who argued,

following Richard Rorty, that philosophy is a special kind of writing and American philosophy is the set of pragmatist writings that supposedly constitute the indigenous philosophy of the United States. In *Prophesy, Deliverance!*, West advocated his own brand of what he at that time called a revolutionary Afro-Christianity or prophetic pragmatism. This form of thought is a conjunction of pragmatism, Marxism, and prophetic Christianity. The argument for pragmatism is twofold. First, since African Americans are Americans, it follows that they must engage America's indigenous philosophy. Second, since the problems faced by African Americans are social and historical, then the critical, socially engaged and historical work of Deweyan pragmatism will be useful to African Americans. With regard to Marxism, its egalitarianism and fight against poverty and capitalist exploitation are relevant to disenfranchised black populations. Prophetic Christianity brings the critical engagement with power that marked the lives of ancient Hebrew prophets with a shared concern for egalitarian politics and the plight of the poor. Although West appealed to three influences, his thought easily reveals a fourth and a fifth addition—namely, existentialism and black radical humanism. The existential element comes to the fore in his persistent discussions of dread, despair, and disease. It is also explicitly made through West's appeal to the thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Anton Chekhov. A wonderful section from *Prophesy, Deliverance!* is West's discussion, in the third chapter, of traditional black responses to racism. What that chapter reveals, especially in West's defense of the African-American humanist tradition, which he sees in jazz music and in such authors as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, is that there is an independent black tradition of thought on which to make his argument.

Prophetic pragmatism has been very influential on what could be called the "Princeton School" of African-American thought, which produced Michael Eric Dyson, Victor Anderson,

William Hart, and Eddie Glaude, Jr. Central in their work are historically-informed social

criticism of black religious and popular culture. Along with prophetic pragmatism, there are

also pragmatist philosophers, such as Leonard Harris, Judith Green, and Johnny Washington,

who build their work on the thought of Alain Locke.[5] There are several criticisms that should be

considered primarily of the prophetic pragmatist project. The first is that it is simply incorrect

that pragmatism is the indigenous philosophy of the United States, and it is even more incorrect

to take the position that pragmatism is the earliest American philosophy. One could argue that

the problems of existence and struggles over racism and philosophical anthropology began from

the moment of colonization and continued through the work of abolitionists and, unfortunately,

apologists for slavery and racism. But more, and this is ironically so given West's appeal to

Christianity, the tendency to focus on pragmatism is connected more to the prejudices of treating

philosophy as antipathetic to religious thought. Josiah Royce, a contemporary of the classical

pragmatists C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, handled this question well in his

Religious Aspects of Philosophy, but we could go back little more than a century earlier and ask,

as George Cotkin has in *Existential America*, about the significance of Jonathan Edward's

thought for our understanding of American philosophy. And along with Edwards, we could ask

about the thought of black and brown religious thinkers on subjects ranging from metaphysics to

ethics. Further, we could ask about the centering of Christianity and the model of the prophet.

That approximately thirty percent of slaves brought from Africa to the New World were Muslim,

that there are Afro-Jewish communities, and that large numbers of African-Americans were

mixed with Native Americans, whom they knew not only as biological kin but also culturally,

raises serious questions about the Christian model.[6] This question of the identity of African

Americans makes it all the more crucial to ask why the *African* in African American is

suppressed by the triumvirate of pragmatism, Marxism, and prophetic Christianity. And more,

since New World black people are, in the end, a creolized population of many groups, where

even the black groups are comprised by a constant flow back and forth through the Caribbean

and South America and Africa as well as by a constant infusion of different linguistic groups,

how could a model such as West's, which is generally the one presumed by most African

American Studies programs, work without begging the question of a conception of African

America that is no longer dominant and may never have actually been accurate?   Oddly enough,

black seems to encompass this diasporic group more than would the term "Afro-American" or

"African American." But finally, the major feature of prophetic pragmatism that is perhaps its

most limiting is its preference for criticism over theory.   Prophetic pragmatism draws much

from postmodern poststructural thought, in which theory is rejected as a master narrative but

criticism is preferred as a proverbial speaking of truth to power. Such a turn consigns prophetic

pragmatism to the fate of most postmodernist discourses: criticizing the present and the past,

important though it may be to do so, *left by itself* is not necessarily the best way to build the

future.   This conclusion, by the way, is one with which classical pragmatists would agree,

especially since they did not only do social criticism but also constructed theories of nearly

everything from experience to the process of thinking.

     Afro-postmodernism and Afro-postmodern poststructuralism face many of the objections

just raised against prophetic pragmatism. Important though the developments in both may be,

they have also had the negative consequence of standing in the way of imaginative thought. In

many ways, this is a function of the antifoundationalism they share. How can one build new

ideas when such activities are ruled against in advance as imperial, master narratives?   The turn

to postmodern criticism has produced a body of literature, which meets the condition of texts in

the debate with which to constitute a philosophy. But there are times when it is difficult to go on

without some coherence. For instance, postmodernism is marked by strong antihumanist

sentiments. But nearly all black postmodernists advance some kind of humanism, and rightfully

so since there would be something strange about people whose oppression is marked by

dehumanization to then reject being human beings. The fight against racism is for the humanity

of people whose humanity has been denied. The impact of postmodern criticism, wedded to at

least the language of textual (the undecidability of signification) and genealogical (the discursive

unfolding of power and knowledge) poststructuralism, has been such, however, that certain

themes have come to dominate discussions of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class in such

a way as to close off thinking. These tropes have become sedimented tools the effect of which is

to shut down discussion and thinking rather than to stimulate engagement. Examples here

include ascriptions if "binary analysis," "essentialism," and the noncontextual presumption of

symmetry. Binaries are rejected *as binaries* in this discourse, which means, paradoxically, that

there must be something *essentially* wrong with binaries and this is asserted by a critical

perspective that is against making essential claims. Why *must* binaries be outlawed in an

analysis? Binaries persist in many settings where they are not only accurate ascriptions but also

productive. The computers on which most of us write our criticisms wouldn't function without

binary operations, and even more, thought itself could not function without the ability to make

distinctions at any moment of which constitutes a structure of is and is-not. But more, an *is* and

is-not structure is not necessarily a binary structure, as Aristotle pointed out more than two

millennia ago in his *Metaphysics*, since the possibilities that constitute is-not are infinite. That

which is-not is not necessarily in opposition to what-is without an added value to what it means

for something to be. Here we have the classic problem of the ontological argument where God

supposedly must exist because of having the essential quality of being perfect. Not-to-exist

means to lack perfection, which would make nonexistence supposedly an impossible attribute of

God.

Anti-essentialism carries a similar fate. In most postmodern discussions, there is a slide

from essence to essentialism, where it becomes the case that to appeal to essence is to be

essentialist. This is, however, an error in reasoning, since one could easily articulate a theory of

essence without making that theory of essence an imposed necessity on all of reality. The

correlates, whether types or totalizations, could function in ways that do not eliminate

contingency from the world. The conflation is a function of not distinguishing between areas of

knowledge in which *generality* rules over *exactitude*. One could have the latter in mathematics

and in the natural and theoretical sciences, but in the social sciences and the humanities,

identification of phenomena requires working by rules whose underlying subject matter always

asserts an exception. The error is to make the exception the rule and the rule the exception.

There are, as a matter of empirical fact, many aspects of social life over which we make fairly

accurate predictions and assessment but it would be irresponsible to claim that we make

foolproof claims. Those general moments are not ones of collapsing into essential*ism* but simply

descriptions that are communicable because thematic. Although many postmodernists, in the

wake of Jacques Derrida's discussion of *différance*, went on the path for the incommunicable

term, the true logic of such a turn is that in principle incommunicability should pertain as well to

the self posing the concept to the self. The structure of such a proposal should be such that the

moment it is posed to another it is not communicated, which applies, as well, to the self posed to

the self as other. In every moment of posing of the self as other is an implicit appeal to others

through which and with which to communicate.

There is thus a problem at the heart of postmodern discourses, which is that they fold in on themselves. Here is an added paradox. To work, the arguments must not assert an *a priori* commitment for or against asymmetry or symmetry. Either must be examined as *ex post facto* descriptions in an argument. If an asymmetry is asserted prior to its concrete manifestation, the appeal would collapse into a necessary asymmetry. One could claim that it is not a necessary asymmetry but an arbitrary one, but if that is so, the modal question of whether that is a necessary arbitrariness or not would emerge. The case of symmetry is very similar.   Although there is an injunction against binaries, symmetrical assertions abound in places where there is a claim of difference. This assertion usually takes the form of appealing to the social constructivity of the asymmetry to begin with. If, however, the social construction of asymmetry is to be identified in the service of delegitimating the asymmetry, does it not lead, then, to an underlying symmetry at the level of negation? That is to say, if asymmetry is only a social creation, what, then, is symmetry? If we assert, as well, the social constructivity of symmetry, then a prior neither-nor must be the case. The trade off, then, is to make us all the same by virtue of what we are not. This reciprocal relativism of not-being functions like the empty set in formal logic: It generates validity for everything that flows from it.

The main problem with all this, in the end, is best exemplified by an insight from Karl Jaspers in *Philosophy of Existence* (p. 61): Philosophy can help no one suffering from a lack of reality. The problem with postmodernist criticism is that it has generated nothing more than a body of critical literature.   Compare the consequences of that literature with those of the body of literature that constituted modern science.   The defenders of modern science need simply remind us that much of reality is on their side. Equations do add up; rockets do fly; antibiotics kill most bacteria; X-rays reveal the outline of bones; computers compute; living things have micro-

sequential structures that combine and adapt; and on and on. In short, the bodies of literature

that constitute modern science extend in their impact beyond self-reference. They appeal

ultimately to criteria under which and through which they can be affirmed or rejected.   A similar

conclusion can be ascribed to historical literature as well, including the poststructural

genealogical ones, although they lack the exactness of the theoretical and natural sciences.[7]

Wedded to archaeology and a variety of other sciences, history offers itself to confirmation and

rejection in ways that *a priori* rejections of binaries and essentialism do not. For how can one

reject a charge of essentialism when the basis of the charge is that one has made an essential

claim?   If one denies having made an essential claim, that is not necessarily the affirmation of

anti-essentialism. If one admits having made an essential claim, that does not amount to an

affirmation or rejection of essentialism. In short, for the criticism to have an impact, it must

displace the accused from the tenets that ground his or her inquiry in the first place, including

that of grounding it at all.

The question that comes to the fore in all this for African-American and indeed all

Africana and black thought is this: Can its proponents afford to sacrifice reality?

It strikes me that the people who can most afford giving up reality are those who are

already supported by a system that would make such a turn an inconsequential one.   How can a

case for social emancipation work, however, if, in the end, reality is not on the side of the

population who seek liberation? As even the ancient Stoics knew: Delusional freedom is not

freedom at all but another kind of bondage.

This is not to say that there is no insight in understanding the social constitutionality of

meanings, as many postmodernists and postmodern poststructuralists aver, but we should bear in

mind the dangers of reducing the social world into an ontology of all reality.   Try as we may,

none of us could precede in our well-formed conceptual frameworks in the broad nothingness

out of which we have come and the haunting realization that that nothingness *for us* is a mere

relative moment of a vast, preceding reality and an even more tremendous succeeding one.

These reflections on postmodernism are akin to some of the problems raised by and

addressed in the existential phenomenological approach to African-American and Africana

philosophy, an approach that is sometimes called *postcolonial phenomenology*.   It is a form of

Africana phenomenology that comes out of the convergence of black existential thought and

creolized forms of phenomenology.   Let me first outline black existential thought.

Black existential thought builds upon problems of existence generated by the complex

history of black peoples. The word *existence* comes from the Latin expression *ex sistere*, which

means to stand out. When one "exists," one literally "emerges" from indistinction or

insignificance. The word today is associated with simply *being*, but its etymology suggests *to

live* and *to be*. To exist in this sense is to become fully aware of being alive and what that

signifies. Although human beings evolved, as we have already outlined, in Africa and then

spread across the globe and eventually adapted in ways that transformed us into groups from

dark to light, the notion of *black people* is uniquely a function of constructions that have been

premised upon how lighter-skinned peoples have looked at darker-skinned ones over, at least,

the past 2000 years. Black existential thought emerges from the lived reality of such people.

In pre-colonial Africa, problems of existence were struggled with, as Paget Henry has

argued in "African and Afro-Caribbean Existential Philosophies" (1997), primarily over the self

that emerged from theologies, ontology, and ethics premised upon a cosmological paradox of

predestination and an unfolding future.   Appeals to predestination required individuals to seek

out their unique "calling" in life, a view which located much agency or responsibility in

individuals linked to a broad community of elders, ancestors, deities, and an ultimate being. A

form of humanism resulted in which there was always something people could do about their

situation, as Kwame Gyekye argued in his discussion of African humanism in *An Essay on*

African Philosophy. In most African systems, the past has greater ontological weight than the

present, and the future has none since it has not yet occurred.   The philosophy of history that

emerges is existential since it relies on individuals to invent or make the future, but they had to

do so in the context of a calling that was paradoxically uniquely suited for them. It would be

incorrect to call this an essentialism since such necessity would have to be imposed on the

ontological status of the future, which has already been rejected by the cosmological and

ontological assumptions of the argument.   Added to these traditional existential beliefs were the

developments of Judaism and Christianity in antiquity in the Eastern regions of Africa and the

Middle East, the subsequent development of Islam in the Middle Ages, and the many mixtures of

those religions and other African religions as various empires under their rubric spread across

Africa. By the time of the Arabic, East Indian, and Atlantic slave trades, the questions of

existence faced by African individuals and non-Africans concerned about the lives of black

people also included their relationship to the rationalizations of slavery advanced by the religions

of those who enslaved them and their contrast from traditional, African views of enslavement.

Since the focus of this chapter has been on New World blacks, let us devote the rest of this

discussion to their thought on existence.

The problems of existence that emerged for black peoples in the New World are

primarily but not exclusively racialized slavery and antiblack racism. Together they posed the

problem of black suffering and the sustained black concern with freedom/liberation and what it

means to be human. Such responses emerged not only in the many struggles fought by black

people in the modern world, but also through their thought, literature, and music.

All existentialisms negotiate the relationship of thought to experience. Experience is lived and precedes thought, but thought is what brings meaning and understanding to experience. The first, most influential wave of black existential reflection was in music and then literature. The quintessential black existential response in music is the blues. The blues focuses on life's difficulties and brings reality to the world of *feeling* or black suffering and joy. As an art form, the blues defies predictability and human closure. It welcomes improvisation, which makes it and its offsprings—jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, reggae, samba, salsa, and hip hop— exemplars of the existential credo of existence preceding essence and its connection to the question of freedom. What's more, the unique ways in which the blues brings to life the reality of and paradoxically joyful insight into suffering—to face it instead of avoiding it—points to an anthropology of black adulthood as a struggle against despair. This makes the blues an important adversary of antiblack racism. Racism attempts to force black people to the developmental level of animals at worst and children at best, freeze them there, and denigrate black self-value. The blues, by contrast, encourages maturation, growth, and is life affirming.

The impact of the blues is that it permeates nearly all black aesthetic productions. It can be found in paintings and sculptures, dramas and dance. I should, however, like to focus here on literary production since texts and their context have been the guiding themes of our discussion. Black existential literature constitutes a classic body of fiction and prose. Although one could find existential insights in the eighteenth-century poetry of Phyllis Wheatley and the various early narratives and novels by former slaves and freed blacks in the nineteenth century, the first explicitly existential set of literary writings are those of Richard Wright from the 1930s to the late 1950s. Wright articulates black experience at the level of what existentialists call a

situation, where human beings' encounters with each other create meanings that they do not necessarily intend. In *Native Son*, the protagonist Bigger Thomas finds himself "in a situation," when he helps his employer's drunken white daughter to her bedroom after chauffeuring her and her boyfriend round town and realizes that they were at risk of being "discovered." Wright provides reflections on the relationship between choice and options for "the marginalized" of the modern world, who find themselves constantly thrown into "situations" they would prefer to have avoided, and he outlines many of the classic existential problems of freedom and responsibility that follow. Why is it, he asks us, that on the one hand U.S. society "makes" Bigger Thomases, people who, in attempting to assert their humanity, become its troublemakers to be forced back "into their place" while being held responsible for their actions? Like all existentialists, Wright is able both to criticize a system for what it does to people while recognizing the importance of responsibility, even under grave, systemic injustice, as necessary conditions for human dignity and maturation. In his last novel, *The Outsider*, he expands this question from North America to the Modern World, which, he argues, makes demonic those who live on its underside. Wright's outsider, Cross Damon, finds himself incapable of experiencing responsibility because he lives in a world that inhibits his development into a man. The paradox of the novel is that Damon's greatest fear is realized when he dies feeling "innocent" after killing several people.

Other literary examples of black existential thought can be found in the writings of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, both of whom explored problems of black invisibility as a function of hypervisibility. I have already mentioned how Ellison laments the madness faced by educated blacks, whose achievements they naively expected to entail their inclusion (visibility) instead of heightened exclusion (invisibility) in U.S. society, for they live in a social world in which they

exemplify the "impossible." Baldwin brings such questions to interracial and bisexual settings, as seen, for example, in *Another Country*, and he looks at the question of suffering as a struggle to defend the possibility of genuine human relationships. He also explores the question of theodicy through the lived reality of what it means to be a black child struggling to love a God that seems not to like, much less love, black people. The question of invisibility and theodicy takes on a unique form, as well, in the novels of Toni Morrison, as we have already suggested, particularly her inaugurating work, *Bluest Eye*. There, Morrison brings out the peculiarity of notions such as "ugliness" and "beauty" that dominate women's lives in general but black women's in a profound way through expectations of mimesis. The expectation that black women copy the appearance of white females subordinates their lives since all imitations are ultimately inauthentic. They live by a standard that they can never meet. This theme of inauthenticity is taken to another level when she writes of bad "mixture" in a world that blurs the lines between adults and children the consequence of which is molestation and incest, mixtures that, in stream with Ellison, produce madness. More recently, in *Freedom in the Dismal*, Monifa Love brings many of these existential themes together through a provocative exploration of the meaning of freedom in the midst of very limited options. In the Caribbean, the most influential existential novel is George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, where the characters fight against the torrents of history and the congealing force of slime that leeches upon projects of humanistic struggle.

Black theoretical reflections on existence can be found as early as the writings of Frederick Douglass, most of which constitute a constant meditation on freedom and the meaning of being human. The four most influential black existential texts are perhaps, however, W.E.B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater*, and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and

The Wretched of the Earth. Du Bois, as we have seen, advanced the question of what it means to be a problem and the double experience of being forced to live publicly by what the white world believe is true while knowing the truth, simultaneously lived by blacks, as contradictions of white society.   He raised the existential and theodicean problem of the meaning of black suffering, and we could also add here that he outlined the importance of black music as a life-affirming music.

Douglass and Du Bois converge in the reflections of Frantz Fanon. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon advanced, as we have seen, a sociogenetic approach to the study of antiblack racism while defending human agency. He echoes Du Bois by pointing out that truly critical investigation requires identifying racism even at the level of method, which requires, paradoxically, a methodology of not presuming a method.   In existential language, a given method would be a presumed essence before the emerging existent. He then shows how every effort to escape blackness fails because "escape" is in itself a form of failure. For instance, although we articulate meaning and identity through language, the black condition is such that change of language does not entail change of being. Choosing a lover to help one deny one's blackness has the same consequence; denial is, in the end, a false reality, and its result would be, presaging Toni Morrison, an affirmation of whites as the standard of value.

Although in most of his writings Fanon attacks the blues in favor of written poetry, his reflections in *Black Skin, White Masks* ironically have an unmistakable blues structure. He goes through processes of repetition that lead to tears through which he is able to face the pathologies of "reality," and the truth here is that Eurocentric society cannot see black *adults* and do not know what it means for black people to be "normal." Blacks seek to become men and women, but they find themselves locked at a level below that status in the white world. In his final work,

The Wretched of the Earth, he explores what it means to be "the damned" (*les damnés*), for every generation to find its mission, and for us to be responsible for humanity's future.

More recently, black existential thought has taken a turn to pragmatism and existential phenomenology. Although most known as the leading proponent of prophetic pragmatism, Cornel West is also without question the leading exemplar of existential pragmatism. His focus on dread, despair, death, disease, and, in his most popular work, nihilism in black communities reveal, as I have earlier argued, a profoundly existential dimension of his thought.

All this brings us now to the phenomenological approaches to black existential thought. The most known black existential phenomenologists are William R. Jones, Lucius T. Outlaw, Paget Henry, and the author of this chapter, although there is now a new multiracial generation of scholars, which include James Bryant, David Ross Fryer, Jane Anna Gordon, Stephen Haymes, Patricia Huntington, Kenneth Knies, Renee Eugenia McKenzie, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, engaging this area of thought in productive ways. In *Is God a White Racist?*, Jones argues that black suffering cannot be addressed theologically without collapsing into a theodicy (thought on God's ultimate justness) that rationalizes antiblack racism. He advances a humanistic appeal in which people are responsible for history. The influence of Jones's thought can be attested to not only by the continued fruitful critique of theodicy by my work but also those of other authors in the present collection of essays. In *On Race and Philosophy*, as well as in his lectures on Alfred Schutz's phenomenology, Outlaw focuses on struggles against racism, the need for black-affirming environments, and the development of an antiracist philosophy. Paget Henry, in his book *Caliban's Reason*, looks at consciousness of the Afro-Caribbean self and the poetic and historical responses developed for its emancipation.

My own work is perhaps the most explicitly phenomenological of the wave of black

existential writings over the past decade, and along with Lucius T. Outlaw and Paget Henry, I have defended the value of Africana thought as an antidote to epistemological colonialism where blacks are expected to depend exclusively on white thinkers for philosophical reflection on black experience. Africana phenomenological work examines the relationship between consciousness and the world of meaning, and, following Fanon, argues that colonizing processes must be fought against also at the level of method. The result is an Africana postcolonial existential phenomenology linked to the lived-experience of black folk in the modern age. This existential philosophy leads to a variety of explorations of the contemporary human condition, such as oppression as an attempt to eliminate a genuinely human world; the need for values premised upon ancestral obligation as a fight against nihilism, as fighting against human denigration through understanding how the ancestors struggled against worse odds.

Other themes are the importance of black existential thought in the effort to articulate the humanity of dominated people, especially in race theory and theories of oppression; the importance of developing a livable mode of everyday existence; the power of black music as a life-affirming music; the articulation of rigorous ways of studying and understanding black people; the symbiotic relationship of identity and liberation; and crises of knowledge and their impact on the formation of people in each epoch. Like Cornel West, I see nihilism as a fundamental problem of our time, but, I should like to add, I argue that it is symptomatic of a process of social decay. It strikes me as incorrect that many blacks are nihilists because they lack faith in the United States. It is, after all, healthier to suspend serious attachment to a decaying society and transcend it through what I call "teleological suspensions," where liberation requires a constant commitment to freedom and humanity and the virtues required for such devotion.[8]

Today there is a rich array of intellectuals who can be called black existentialists. One set consist of some of the contributors to my edited volume *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (1997), and others, such as the philosopher of education Stephen Haymes, who has built upon black existential phenomenology in his study of the pedagogical practices of slaves (an example of which appears in the present volume), the philosopher Clevis Headley, who has produced an impressive array of essays on black aesthetics and race theory, and the Eritrean philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan, who is perhaps the chief proponent of black hermeneutical existential philosophy, are developing new areas of existential reflection.

Returning, then, to the problems outlined by Du Bois and Fanon, Africana existential phenomenology addressed the problematic of problem-people and the demand of a decolonized methodology in several ways. First, for such an approach to function as properly phenomenological, it must commit an act of ontological suspension or suspension of the natural attitude. This means, then, that it is able to look at what it *means* to be a problem instead of simply what it *is* to be a problem. The separation of meaning from being here enables one to suspend the seriousness of the value-category of blackness and in that stroke take seriously the distinction of having problems versus being them. But more salient is the immediate connection to the *consciousness* aspect of double consciousness. The concept is already phenomenological in its structure and content. Next, the question of decolonizing method comes to the fore in our understanding of the redundance of the term *postcolonial phenomenology*. For phenomenology requires not only suspension of ontological commitments, but also those commitments connected to the evaluation and means of going about making commitments. Such a move pushes the inquirer up against whatever limits it may exemplify, which means that the movement was not presumed but encountered in the moment of investigation. In short, even the method is being

subject to a suspension which outlaws the movement of a colonizing episteme as a legitimating process. The point is perhaps most stark in the case of logic. A proper self-critical phenomenological investigation requires suspending the legitimating and ontological force of logic itself because even logic must be subjected to a process of legitimation if it is to be accepted; the very notion of "evidence," in other words, must be made *evidential*. Ironically, this means taking reality seriously without placing a false domain or circle around it. The Fanonian demand of not assuming one's method is, then, in this sense, also a phenomenological one.

Perhaps the most fruitful aspect of Africana phenomenology is that it supports examining the lived-reality of black folk and the imaginative interplay of engagements with the social world. What this means is that there is both room for recognizing the impositions of reality and the creative potentials of thought. Since an underlying theme of the present engagement with African-American Studies is the question of thought itself as a tool of building alternative houses, I should like to turn to one of the most claustrophobic yet paradoxically generative rooms of the master's house, namely, race.

II

Although African-American Studies need not be race studies, the peculiar anxiety over African America is the *African* element in the equation in terms of its genealogical link with blackness. Much was to be done in Black Studies, but dominant America does not really want *black* studies because, as we have seen in our discussion of Du Boisian double consciousness, neither America in the north nor America in the south really wants to look into the mirror and find a truthful

reflection of itself. Evasion is thus the primary *modus operandi* of this terrain of thought, and

we find it in many forms. Think, for instance, of the ongoing discussions of the relationship

between race and class. The error here is the failure to appreciate what Oliver Cox called the

proletarianization of blacks.[9] Why must they be seen as over and against each other as

categories? Although not all such blacks were slaves (Pedro Alonso Ni o, for example, was a

navigator on Columbus's first voyage), the reality of slavery in the economies and political

institutions that followed has been so pervasive that all New World blacks are yoked to it. Thus,

much of the understanding of blacks in the Americas is the constant problem and problematic of

labor, dehumanization, and resistance to exploitation. These considerations have a profound

impact on the study of such blacks. Fanon's quip from *Black Skin, White Masks* is illuminating

in this regard:

> One day St. Peter saw three men arrive at the gate of heaven: a white man, a
>
> mulatto, and a Negro.
>
> "What do you want most?" he asked the white man.
>
> "Money."
>
> "And you?" He asked the mulatto.
>
> "Fame."
>
> St. Peter turned then to the Negro, who said with a wide smile: "I'm just carrying
>
> these gentlemen's bags" (p. 49).

One could easily add the gender dimension to labor along with this point. The existence of

middle-classed black men and women don't negate the modern history that has not only linked

blacks to labor but also to *slave labor*. The distinction between labor and slave labor is located at the point of entitlement. Slave labor is denied *any* entitlement whatsoever, and as such, it makes any effort toward recompense appear as crossing sacred borderlines. The slave and slave descendants who seek more for their labor—in fact, seek *anything* for their labor—encounters a world that treats him or her as a transgressor.[10] Thus, calling, say, the Irish "the blacks of Europe" in the European context fails to address the fact that there were blacks in Europe and in Ireland who turn out to be black in North America, South America, Asia, and Australia, and those blacks, often designated by the term (not mixed) *Negroes*, carry the weight of a history of being expected to carry bags for the whites and the many shades beyond which blacks represent the nether zone. The modern world hates to see black folks resting.

Black reality is not faring well in the third millennium of the common era. To understand the situation, we could go back to W.E.B. Du Bois's much criticized speech, "The Conservation of the Races," which he presented in front of the Negro Academy in 1897. Beyond its many famous insights ranging from the observation of twoness and double consciousness to the sloppiness of race discourses is its peculiar policy query. It can be summarized thus: What should the world look like at the end of the twentieth century? After having seen what European conquest and colonization did to the indigenous people of North America, Du Bois was in fact imploring his fellow black intellectuals to take seriously what the European nations were doing to Africa. If the American project were effected in Africa, then the indigenous population faced the possibility of being reduced, as in the case of the indigenous Americans, to four percent of their original numbers. Du Bois and his fellow Pan-Africanists, in spite of their arrogance and at times racism (many considered indigenous Africans "savages"), managed to fight an important war against genocide. Although Du Bois argued, for instance, that race was social and historical,

he also had to find a way to link black culture to black bodies to avoid genocide in a world that enjoyed, perhaps even loved, black culture but hated black people. He thus advanced the contradictory argument that race was contingent but that its cultural markers were necessarily linked to the bodies with which we associate it. Black people, from that point of view, were thus both contingently and necessarily black.

We today face the mixed assessment of the efforts of Du Bois and his fellow Pan-Africanists at the dawn of the twentieth century. The African continent is now the habitat of only eight percent of the human species, and the neoliberal and global policies of Europe and North America have placed upon contemporary generations of humanistic intellectuals a similar obligation as those more than a century ago: How do we respond to policies whose consequence is a new form of colonization of Africa and an expedited demise of its indigenous peoples?

The question of the relation of blacks, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to the rest of the human species brings the human question to the fore. For blacks in Africa are not like indigenous peoples elsewhere.   Some indigenous peoples in Africa represent, in many ways, the indigeneity of the human species itself. They are, literally, in their extraordinary diverse combinations of genetic material, all of "us." And the same applies to the mythic life that embedded in the ancient archaeological and paleolithic remains scattered about the continent of Africa.

The rest of this discussion will take place in three parts: First, an exploration of the problem of reductionistic experience; second, an advancement and critique of disciplinary decadence and race; and third, an outline of theoretical themes offered by what I call a teleological suspension of western thought or shifting the geography of reason.

Experiencing experience

Let us now go further into the problem of experience only summarized earlier. Experience is something uniquely offered by the members of cultural groups under study here. Acting under the dictates of standpoint epistemological approaches, one could take the position that one has limited knowledge of any group of which one is not a member. This leads to two approaches. The first is the undesirable approach, given our anticolonial concerns: use informants (members of the group) and acknowledge one's limitations as an outsider. The second, often desirable approach: Be the informant and the theorist by studying one's own group. On both counts, experience is a key factor.

Experience is, however, a sacred cow. Everyone, for instance, has had the experience of trying to figure out his or her experience. When this happens, the self becomes untrustworthy. One seeks a trusted confident for assistance. What this tells us is that the figuring out of experience brings something to experience that goes beyond the self as the source of legitimation. The interpretation of experience is not, that is, a private affair. It is part of the complex world of communication and sociality. This dimension of experience raises some problems of its own. First, it is very important what both the one who experiences and those who interpret the experience draw on for the development of their interpretation. If the one with experience plays no role in the interpretation of the experience, then a form of epistemic colonization emerges, as we have seen, where there is dependence on the interpretations from another's or others' experience as *the* condition of interpreting experience.[11] The more concrete manifestation of this relationship is familiar to many black intellectuals. In most academic institutions, including, unfortunately, many regions dominated by people of color, the following

formula holds: Colored folks offer experience that white folks interpret. In other words, formulating theory is a white affair: Paraphrasing Arthur de Gobineau, theory is white as experience is black. We see this from even colored theorists who prefer to examine the world of color through Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, or Michel Foucault instead of through the resources of thought offered by Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, V.Y. Mudimbe, James Cone, Sylvia Wynter, George Lamming, Elsa Goveia, Angela Y. Davis, Paget Henry, to name but several, in addition to the resources of thought offered by the full spectrum of the human species.

This is not to say that experience should be rejected in the theoretical work of people of color. The impetus behind the appeal to experience is after all the terrible history of the human sciences, in which European theorists acted as though people of color had no inner or subjective life. To appeal to colored experience was also an effort at asserting the reality of one's inner life. This is why Du Bois wrote of "souls" and "consciousness" and Fanon wrote of "lived-experience."

The task, then, is to avoid *reductionistic* experience—that is, to avoid reducing people of color *only* to their experiences and, worse, to the epitome of experience itself. There is, by the way, an ironic, performative contradiction to such efforts beyond the reality of epistemic colonization: To lock oneself at the level of experience is a theoretical move *beyond* experience. In effect, then, the abrogation of theory to whites is a form of *bad* theory. This form of bad appeal leads to a peculiarly existential failure—the failure to appreciate ourselves as *thinking* beings. Such a lack of appreciation blinds us to a precious dimension of the human condition. No one incapable of thinking can be expected to be taken seriously as a human being.

Disciplinary Decadence, Race, and Racism

Any African-American thought that does not address race and racism would be severely limited. It is not that every instance must address these issues, but the overall project must have such an encounter as part of its program. All discussions of race and racism rest on their discussant's conception of human studies. Human studies has been, and in many instances continues to be, dominated by two kinds of disciplinary fallacies. The first is methodological with two dimensions of its own. The first dimension was pointed out by W.E.B. Du Bois a century ago. It is, as we have seen, the social scientific tendency to make colored people into problems themselves instead of studying them as people who face problems. We have already devoted much of this chapter to discussing that fallacy. The second dimension emerges in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he declares: "It is good form to introduce a work in psychology with a statement of its methodological point of view. I shall be derelict. I leave methods to the botanists and the mathematicians. There is a point at which methods devour themselves" (p. 12). We have already offered some discussion of this claim. Let us here elaborate what Fanon means by this assessment. It is easier to study what does not think and cannot return the look and study *you*. It is like looking at a pointing finger instead of that at which the finger points. As signifying beings, the action by human beings always points beyond the human. The human being is always involved in future-oriented activity that always tests the scope of law-like generalizations.[12] This is why human studies at best derives principles and is an interpretive affair. The best "laws" of human nature we could find or develop are simply those that we share with animals but which, by virtue of speech and culture, we have already gone beyond. As Fanon put it in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

. . . The only possibility of regaining one's balance is to face the whole problem,

for all these discoveries, all these inquiries lead only in one direction: to make

man admit that he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and that he must put an end to

the narcissism on which he relies in order to imagine that he is different from the

other "animals."

This amounts to nothing more nor less than *man's surrender* (p. 22).

The second disciplinary fallacy is what I call *disciplinary decadence*.[13] This phenomenon is the

error of disciplinary reductionism. It involves ontologizing one's discipline—literally,

collapsing "the world" into one's disciplinary perspective. Many scholars have witnessed its

various incarnations: Literary scholars who attack social scientists for not being literary; social

scientists who attack literary scholars for no being social scientific; natural scientists who reject

the humanities on the basis of their lack of "scientific rigor"; historians who reject everyone else

for not being historical; and philosophers who reject everyone for not being philosophical—and

especially historians for being historical. The specifics, according to each discipline, take on a

variety of "isms."

In race theory, for instance, there is *biologism*, where the biologist presumes the meaning

of concepts to be embedded in the organism without an account of the social processes that make

those meanings normative. There is *psychologism*, which presumes, for example, that race and

racism are dimensions of an individual perspective. There is social psychology, true, but in the

end, psychologism is about the dispositions or cognitive states of individuals. Thus, a radical

relativism is difficult to avoid in psychologistic appeals. Worse, a form of metaphysical

nominalism emerges in which institutions and language structures become fictional. Here, sociology could serve as a corrective, except in cases where it collapses into *sociologism*, which presumes (1) either the quantitative or demographic character of race and racism or (2) the reduction of all race and racist phenomena to the social world. Here, there is a failure to address the natural *and* psychological dimensions of the human condition: We are simply not only social beings. The *literary textualist* approach commits the fallacy of presuming that the answers to race questions are intratextual and intertextual. In effect, it is as if the answers are already there and we need only decode them. In the cases where the texts are literally published or unpublished written manuscripts, there are so-called "race theorists," for example, who think that specializing in race theory is a matter of simply figuring out the position of a particular race theorist. It collapses theoretical work simply into at best the function of an interpretive critic. And finally, though not exhaustively, there is *historicism*, which treats race as a function of the historical determination of social forces. Here, we have a mixture of sociologism and textualism, for in the end, the answers are embedded in forces that simply have to be tabulated or decoded. There are other philosophical problems with this approach. For one thing, there are clear trans-historical dimensions of human differentiation, which even an appeal to the "epoch" cannot ignore. In the U.S., for instance, there is a debate about the moral turpitude of the "founding fathers," a group of white propertied individuals who, in effect, hijacked the ideals of the American Revolution. In their defense, some scholars have argued that we should not judge people of the past by values of the present.[14] The reply, however, is that such critics want to eat their cake and have it too. For, how radically different are values over a period of ten generations of people in the same country? Do not both the eighteenth century bourgeoisie and "we" share the same valuative epoch? Is not calling us members of "western civilization" a way

of articulating that shared value? Since the argument requires shared values, and since such critics already take the position that western civilization is "our" value base, there is something contradictory at work in their objection. If the response requires a greater gap in time, how great should it be? A thousand? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand years? Finally, there is nearly no historic moment in which there is unanimity over values. There are always dissenters; in the case of the U.S., there were blacks, Indigenous people, white women, and many others who protested as their revolution was literally sold out under their feet.[15]

A viable response to disciplinary decadence is what I call *teleological suspensions of disciplinarity*. The concept of teleological suspension first emerged in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* as a critique of Hegel's system. Hegel had advanced his system of the dialectical unfolding of Absolute knowledge, of the domestication of all reality by the historically marching force of Reason understood as an isomorphism of rationality and reality.[16] Such an unfolding culminates in a theology or systematizing of God. Kierkegaard's objections were on many levels. He agreed that morality, rules, and systems, are located at the level of what he called "the universal" but pointed out that faith transcends the universal. In other words, God cannot be domesticated by universal categories, even of morality, but is instead the teleological foundations of them. God is, in other words, "right" even when God goes beyond the universal. A paradox thus emerges. The individual of faith suspends the universal in the spirit of God, a teleological pursuit, which requires the emergence of an ethics, religious ethics, which is itself always subject to its own suspension by virtue of its teleological source of valuation.[17] I have argued in "The Call in Africana Religion and Philosophy" (2001a) that this approach need not be limited to discussions of ethics. It can serve as a metatheoretical assessment of theory and disciplinarity as well. In philosophy, for instance, professionalism has

created a near deontological conception of philosophical work as the quest for intrasystemic

consistency.[18] Most "great" philosophers, however, emerged from either the periphery of the

discipline or through a commitment to questions that, in their time, appeared beyond the scope of

the discipline itself. In effect, then, "great" philosophy emerged from thinkers who were not

worried about whether they were philosophers. Such suspension could be performed in many

other disciplines; it involves taking the risk of suspending the ontological priority of one's field

or discipline for the sake of a greater purpose or cause. For black peoples in the modern world,

this cause or purpose has often taken two forms: survival and freedom.

The concerns of survival and freedom stimulated two correlative, philosophical concerns

of being and liberation. The former pertains to questions of who or what we are, of identity and

its ontological dimensions. The latter emerges through the historical reality of colonialism and

racism. Beyond the question of the meaning of liberation, the struggle against colonialism and

racism is primarily a matter of the relation of theory to practice. The identity question, however,

takes concrete form in the social identities of race and ethnicity. Today, such matters of identity

and liberation are complicated by two extremes that dominate academic theoretical reflection:

neopositivism and postmodern hermeneuticism. In philosophical terms, neopositivism, as in

earlier instances of positivism, aims for a form of exactness, as in the exact sciences, that renders

"meaning" and "interpretation" suspect. Postmodern hermeneutics has the advantage of looking

at the world of interpretation, but it does so at the expense, as we saw in the previous section, of

truth and objectivity—in fact, of reality itself. In many ways, both converge in that they collapse

into obsession over methodology at the expense of truth. The neopositivist believes that all truth

beyond what is gained by the methods of the exact sciences is trivial and therefore

inconsequentially dropped. The postmodern hermeneuticist takes the position that truth can

never meet tests of permanence and exactitude, which means that it should be subordinated to processes of interpretation. A question that is raised in response to both, however, is that of the dynamism of truth. Why can't truth be dynamic?

The neopositive and postmodern hermeneutical limitations play themselves out in contemporary race theory (perhaps the most recurring focus of the identity question). These limitations are guided by several of the postmodern cliches of binarism, anti-essentialism, and presumed symmetry discussed earlier. In race theory, they are advanced against race by the antirace wing as follows. Natural scientists reject race; therefore, so should the rest of us. This position is held by such theorists as K. Anthony Appiah and Naomi Zack. Natural science is treated as the proper ontology with which to deal with reality, and all that is not grounded in such is often referred to, by these theorists, as "fictions." These theorists also argue that the best way to get rid of racism is to get rid of race. Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* brings him into this camp. And then there is a third wing: The concept of race lacks rigor when dealing with racial mixture. There are several camps here.[19] Some, like Naomi Zack, argue that "mixed race" is a nonracial category, literally "racelessness." Others, especially those in Latin-American cultural studies and philosophical thought, argue, through such notions as *mestizo* identity, that mixtures are *unique* racial categories.

In response to the claim of the scientific invalidity of race, we may wonder why the natural sciences should be treated as the *final* arbiter of everything. Wouldn't that be a case of disciplinary decadence? When I defended natural science against postmodern discourses in the previous section, my point was that natural science stays attuned to the governing force of reality, but it does not follow that the only form of systematic inquiry in which to do so is natural science. Why, then, couldn't the following argument hold: Race proves the limitations of the

natural sciences, if by natural sciences are meant such disciplines as physics, chemistry, and

biology. There are many things that cannot be explained in terms of these disciplines. Take, for

example, the concept of "meaning." Or, for that matter, these disciplines themselves—the

concepts of "physics," "chemistry," and "biology." There are many concepts the treatment of

which exemplifies the limitations of science. Karl Jaspers, in *Philosophy of Existence*, and the

Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, in *Religion and Nothingness*, have shown, for instance,

that *Religion* is a limit not only for science, but also for philosophy. This limit means that the

areas of inquiry under discussion must be attuned to the uniqueness of their domain of thought.

The argument against race on the basis of the natural sciences suffers, then, also from the

fallacy of authority. Why are natural scientists more authoritative than scholars in other areas of

inquiry? The appeal to researchers in the natural sciences as final arbiters on race begs the

question of the type of phenomenon race must be. But worse, even internal to the natural and

life sciences, there are scientists who believe in races—researchers for whom a difference of

.0002 and .0001 is as wide as the Grand Canyon—and not all of them are nutty eugenicists such

as those at the Charles Darwin Institute in Ontario, Canada, or the Straussians from the

University of Chicago who have set the tone for contemporary neoconservative racist appeals to

the impact of climate on intelligence.[20] One encounters race in typical consultations with

physicians worldwide, and in the field of obstetrics, pediatrics, and hematology, failure to take

race seriously can have severe consequences. In such cases, there is a familiar Anglo-Caribbean

expression known as *breeding*. In truth, the term "race," whose etymology extends to the Italian

raza, was originally used in the early modern (circa sixteenth century A.C.E.) to refer to the

reproduction of selected traits in plants and animals. Today, science, namely, genetics, is in fact

showing that we are all variations of a small group of dark-skinned peoples from the

Southeastern region of Africa, in spite of popular artistic efforts to present these people as very hairy and very dirty white men. Put differently, everyone of us on the earth today is simply a variation of what we now call "black people." If we look at race as a manifestation of the selection of traits to be carried on—selection, in the case of human beings, mediated by culture—then it should be clear that what much of humanity has been aiming for is to split off into different *species* of hominids, or new species of people. This is a biological aim that is socially mediated.

The aim for a separate species of hominids raises a question that challenges the argument that advances the rejection of race as the basis of rejecting racism. There are existential and material responses. The existential response is that one could be committed to antiracism while believing in race. In other words, even if different species of hominids were to emerge, we would still face similar existential, ethical, and political questions of how to act on such difference. This was *in fact* the reality of people in Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century, since they *believed* in such difference. For them, a black and a white might as well have been a donkey and a horse, the combination of which would be a sterile mule from which they acquired the term "mulatto." In many ways, every fertile mulatto challenges racial ideology, so, in a way, Naomi Zack is right that mixed-race people offer a special challenge.[21] The problem, however, is whether anyone really takes seriously that such reproduction is not possible. The term "mulatto" also alludes to another process of race and racism: naming.

The argument that racism depends on race raises the question of whether a phenomenon must have a "name" or a "conceptual" apparatus for its existence. That there are many instances of us responding to things whose names we do not know or that stand outside of our understanding or range of familiar objects is the counter argument to required-naming provided

we reject linguistic idealism. By linguistic idealism, I mean the view that nothing can exist

without a name. I doubt, in the end, that most neopositivists and postmodern hermeneuticists

would like to maintain this position. There is, however, an insight raised by the question of

naming if we ground it in the process of language as a communicated reality. Communication,

at least at the level of *human communication*, requires social and cultural dimensions. These

dimensions, as Frantz Fanon has argued in *Black Skin, White Masks*, are reservoirs of creativity,

and the things they create are, in his words, *sociogenic*, that is, social in their origins. What this

means is that the social world can create and eliminate *kinds* of people. Once created, the claim

that their identities themselves are the problems is a failure to address the social dynamics of

their creation; it makes them the problems instead of the society that created them. But more,

although society creates identities, popularly known, redundantly, as "social constructions,"

there is an error in condemning such constructions as fictions. Social walls function as impasses

just as well as those made of bricks and stones. The mechanisms of dismantling them and

building new structures are what is different. The social ones are entirely dependent on human

reality for every moment of their maintenance but not the entirety of their being. What is

understood, for example, if another species one day decodes our world will be the world we have

created, a world that might outlive us, albeit fragmented, as do ancient ruins across the

contemporary landscape.

There is much more that I can say on race—for instance, on the asymmetry inherent in

semiotic relations from black to brown to white; on genealogical dynamics of how

power/knowledge relate to the social world of race; on the complexity of creolization and racial

thought—but I should like to move toward concluding here since those discussions are available

elsewhere.[22]

Power, Choice, and Shifting the Geography of Reason

I see African-American thought as a species of, although not exclusive to, Africana thought. By this, I mean African-influenced thought. It is not exclusively so because the New World is a convergence of many cultures, but a problem with many of those other cultures, save many of the Native American ones, is often their resistance to mixture. The European elements see themselves as properly European the extent to which they exclude the others. It undergirds the racial notion of whiteness as "pure." A similar reality applies to Asian elements, although there are, in fact, many mixtures internal to Asian communities *in Asia*. The African and the Native American elements are, however, those that most seem to accommodate mixture. Not only were there creolization of African languages in pre-colonial Africa and the same creolization processes among Native New World populations, but one finds that those are the communities that most manifest creolization in the New World, and they do so for obvious reasons: They have the least resources with which to dictate the limits of their identities. For them, survival requires mediation that leads to creolization. The political reality, which in turn has epistemological consequences, is that European ordering of these populations under the category of "primitive" over the past five hundred years has led to a negative zone with regard to studying what they offer the world of *ideas*. That the African-descended and the Native-descended comprise a large combined population in North America, the African-descended now comprise the majority of people in the Caribbean, and the African- and Native American-descended comprise the majority in Central and South America means, as Paget Henry has shown in *Caliban's Reason*, that a vast reservoir of epistemic contributions have been left at the wayside.

If these elements of the creolized societies of the New World were taken into account, a vast array of research will open up. It would be necessary to revisit and address, for instance, questions of myth. Myths are more complicated than simply the Greco-Roman and Mesopotamian ones that dominate our Western education and psychic life, as expressed in orthodox and semiotic-psychoanalysis. Asian myths are older, and we often forget that since we are all descended from a species that evolved in Africa, then so, too, did the prototypes for all our myths. These African myths undergird our understanding of basic reality. For example, much is discussed today about how the lives of women are changing without an analysis of the organizing myths that situate our understanding of women and men, females and males, and feminine and masculine and the other possible organizations of sex and gender related ways of living. Women did not always live as the subordinates of men, and in the past, there were peculiar conditions under which men emerged in leadership over women and vice versa. Nomadic, pastoral, and hunting societies lived differently than settler societies, and societies with a mixture of these elements faced complex questions on the distribution of labor. The Mediterranean, for example, is a place where northern hunters and southern agrarian communities met, and their organizing myths reveal much anxiety over the relation of the feminine to the masculine. Our world is structured by bureaucratic and market forces that provide new outlets for such myths. Today, one "hunts" for a job, and if successful, gains tools of "currency." Those tools are used to "gather" needs or amusements for the family or other basic unit. All of this is familiar to anthropologists and students of antiquity and paleolithic periods. That most of the world today functions according to the rules of settler societies renders the maintenance of patriarchy absurd, and it is no wonder that there is heightened gender conflict worldwide as some societies attempt to hold on to the permanence of values that were a

function of a particular period of, say, masculine ascent.

What all this means is that theories that simply attempt to subordinate one category to another—for example, gender over all others, race over all others, class over all others, sexual orientation over all others—suffer from the fallacy of treating social realities as deontological or absolute, duty-bound values and meanings.[23] Shifts occur in societies that affect, among other things, power dynamics, and power dynamics affect social meaning. "Power" is a term that is not often clarified these days in the academy, and since the most influential kind of American political thought—namely, liberal political theory—seems to have earned its bread and butter while completely ignoring power, the decline of reflection on power in the academic mainstream appears to be a function of a conviction of its seeming irrelevance. Most often, in other corridors of the academy, it is Foucault's use of the term that is presumed, as if his formulations were the end-all and be-all of discourses on power. We should, however, remember that power emerges in the thought of such thinkers as Hegel as a function of dialectical opposition of consciousness and recognition; in Marx, as ownership over the means of production; in Gramsci, as hegemony; in Hannah Arendt, as uncoerced exchange in a public sphere the emergence of which are deeds worthy of glory; in Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt as legitimate force, which is issued only by the sovereign or the state; and in Elias Canetti, as the godlike range of actions that transcend those locked under its grip as mere mortals, and these are but a few instances. The way in which I am using "power" is a phenomenological revision of Canetti's view with some compatibility with Foucault's and Fanon's. Power, from this perspective, begins where force ends. Think of the game of cat and mouse. When the cat catches the mouse, force is the reality of tooth and claw. But cats sometimes let their prey go, and the mouse attempts to run away. The problem is that the cat's reach extends to the area over which it can move faster than the mouse; thus, run

though the mouse may try with all its might, the cat will seem to pop up everywhere as if out of

thin air. That "everywhere" is the sphere of influence. Everyone has a sphere of influence over

his or her body and what he or she can immediately hold. That sphere is "force." Other people,

however, have a sphere of influence that go well beyond their immediate spatial-temporal

coordinates. Thus, they could be at one point of the world while influencing the activities of

people at another point. They could have died many years ago, while conditioning many people

in the present and the future. And, as Foucault showed in *Discipline and Punish*, they could

even be inside one's head. This is power. In government jurisdiction terms, a mayor's power

has range over a city; a governor, over a state or island; a president or prime minister over a

country; and the president or prime minister of an imperial nation has power over its colonies.

Since today the U.S.A. is the main empire (China not withstanding and Britain delusionally so),

one sees this point on the level of countries. But it holds on levels of institutions such as

corporations and nonprofit organizations, and groups of people, such as Europeans and Africans,

or women and men. Whether they admit it or not, rich people are more powerful by virtue of the

range of their influence always transcending their immediate selves or bodies. They could be on

one point of the world vacationing while making money through someone else's labor on

another part of the world. Shifts in recognition under the laws and decline in interests for certain

types of activities traditionally attributed to men have led to a restructuring of the range of

women's influence. What women can *do* in many contemporary societies, albeit not ideal for

many women, transcends the immediacy of force. As these forces are transcended, the

organizing power of different myths should come into play.[24]

All this said, here are some considerations to consider by way of concluding.

First, thought must address its epoch, which paradoxically requires being a little bit ahead

of itself, as I pointed out earlier with the argument about teleological suspensions. Genuine

twentieth-century thinkers posed problems, for instance, that genuine twenty-first–century

thinkers must both engage and go beyond. Late nineteenth and twentieth-century examples of

such thinkers include Max Weber (with his treatment of bureaucracies and secularization),

W.E.B. Du Bois (with his treatment of problematic people and double consciousness), Anna

Julia Cooper (with her efficiency theory of human contribution and worth), Antonio Gramsci

(with his theories of cultural capital, hegemony, and critique of common sense), along with

twentieth-century luminaries such as C.L.R. James (with his theory of state capitalism and

creative universality); Hannah Arendt (with her discussion of the relation of power to labor,

work, and action, and the negative effects consumption has on the political), Frantz Fanon (with

his argument for the semiotic and material transformation of social reality in the constitution of

human reality), and Sylvia Wynter (with her persistent inquiries into what she calls the "science

of the word" and her quest for what she calls "the human after man"). We could add in this list,

the tasks outlined, as well, by Nelson Maldonado Torres of post-continental thinking and by

Kenneth Knies of constructing post-European sciences.[25]

Such thinking means that we should not avoid "grand theory." Opposing grand theory is

a level of caution reminiscent of traps set by Zeno in Greek antiquity. Zeno demonstrated that

motion isn't possible because one would have to traverse an infinitesimal number of half-steps

before completing a first step. The same argument was placed upon time: An infinitesimal

number of halves to each unit of time. Or, for that matter, one could think of the old story of

bumble bees. Bumble bees should not be able to fly. But they do. In similar kind, one's best

response to Zeno is simply to go take a step and check the change of time. There are many

things that we should not be able to do *in theory*. It is a fool who clings to any validity that

defies existence or, for that matter, reality. It has been a mission of thinking that humanity tries

to reach beyond the limits imposed upon us. The failure of grand theories carries the paradox of

their success: They enabled, even in their failure, a transformation of the human condition.

African-American thought should take seriously the critique of the rural–urban divide in

Africana thought. We should recognize that thought is affected by the exigencies of space. For

example, much political thought is prejudiced by its etymological foundations—namely, in the

Greek *Polîs* or Greek city-state. Barbarians stood outside such walls. Cities, however, required

ways of organizing people that increasingly created distances between them. For matters of

exigency, numbers and measurement facilitated such organization, and because of how many

people occupied cities, representation proved more efficient in their administration. Moreover,

the walls of ancient cities enclosed the people in a way that placed the necessity of their

interaction an *externally imposed* condition instead of an internal one. That meant that they were

bound without necessarily an *internal identity of membership*. The implication here is that we

should not presume a symmetric understanding of political life when we move from urban to

rural, because the values of politics is more conducive to the former than the latter. The historic

relation of the world outside the city to those inside was one of war. The rural aim is the

elimination of politics. This doesn't mean that the political cannot emerge outside the city walls,

but it often does so through self- or group encirclement to create an internal dialectic of

oppositional claims—in short, the duplication of the city structure. I bring this up because of the

ongoing problem in black politics of black nationhood. In many ways, white supremacy and

antiblack racism function as those encircling walls that necessitate an internal political

relationship to those inside the city. What this means, then, is that the search for an *internal*

necessity in black politics and black life is a mistaken understanding of what such relationships

are. The internal opposition is a fundamentally *political one* because of that external necessity, which means, then, that dissent and opposition versus unanimity is, in the end, a primary feature of black life.

The earlier discussion of power returns in the form of the question of oppression. For it should be clear that the sphere of influence, the social reach of an individual by virtue of his or her social role or social identity, affects the life opportunities of people in each region. It affects them not only on the level of the rural to the urban but also countries in relation to other countries. The political reach of each community is not equal, and none of them is equal to the political reach of the dominating groups of North American, European, and Northern Asian nations. On the level of groups, there are groups that face oppression by virtue of the reach of their actions that transcend force. When people lack power, their sphere of influence move inward to the self to the point of *implosion*. Thus, oppression is a function of the range of "normal" actions available before the process of implosion begins. An oppressing people have more options available to them to avoid implosion; oppressed people do not. That is why oppressed people are always trying to "fix" themselves. They live in a world where, as Foucault observed, their bodies are forced to become prisoners of their soul. It is the only sphere over which they have effective reach. One could readily see that this observation suggests that notions such as "victim" and "innocense" have nothing to do with oppression. Oppression is about imposed limitations; victimization is about being both innocent and harmed. An oppressed person needn't be innocent. What is crucial is that the options in a society be such that the sphere of normative action is accessible. Normative action is the set of activities expected for a human being to live with dignity among his or her fellow human beings.

This point about dignity and living among one's fellow human beings raises the question

of freedom. Freedom, as opposed to mere liberty, is a meaning-constituting activity. Oppression is experienced in a situation of limited liberty because one's freedom is always faced as a possibility of action. Because one can live through oppression in many ways—albeit not the most desirable way to live—poses freedom as a constant demand on human existence.

The question of freedom also raises the question of the philosophical anthropology that it demands. The complexity of the human being as both the impediment to and the source of freedom is a case in point. Human beings both create the world we live in and are conditioned by that world. To take on such a complex dynamic, we must, then, take on the question of "reality" in our thought. That question pertains to the relationship between our embodiment and the social world, and it relates to the question of the ontology necessitated by the emergence of social *reality*.

Looking into the reality of the social world means, as well, challenging the sacred-secular divide. Consider Edward Blyden's observation in *African Life and Customs* (1908) that it is much easier to change the theology of a people than their religion. The normative underpinnings are the religious reality. Returning to Cornel West, although there are many black Christians in the new World, it is incorrect to say that that is all they are. One learns a lot about people's beliefs during times of birth, puberty, marriage, and death. A mere glance at many New World black people's rituals around these phenomena reveal the continued normative force of Yoruba, Akan, and other African religious influences. In addition, the East African and Middle Eastern influences are not limited to Christianity. The Islamic and Judaic dimensions of New World black normative life should be taken seriously, especially among such groups as Rastafarians, and, given the increased influence of Asia in the New World, Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists. In the end, New World *thought* requires an engagement with these resources for the understanding

of the self and community in an increasingly global context.

The counsel on religion applies as well to aesthetic productions. What is New World black thought without its variety of music, dances, plastic arts; foods and drinks; clothing? And in all this are varieties of expression that contribute to the discourse on New World black ideas. Many New World black people use song lyrics as they do proverbs, and while they may not be the end-all and be-all of thought (which they need not and shouldn't be), they are at least a contribution. An insight from such production is the call to be epistemologically imaginative. By resisting in-advance rejections of such terms as "binaries" and "dualism," New World black thought can work through such categories when they are most relevant.   We should bear in mind, as we think through subverting Shakespeare's *Tempest*, that whereas Prospero Studies dominated the "modern world," Caliban Studies might be the future so long as we continue to fight for our freedom, so long as both such studies are teleologically suspended for the sake of freedom.

All this brings us finally to the transformation of the geography of reason. We must ask whether the Reason that runs out the room that the Black walks into is being reasonable at all. We may also wonder whether that house itself may be one that stands on foundations that may be too shaky for our occupation. Perhaps what we are asking for requires building a new house on different foundations, which amounts to a shift or expansion in the scope of reason. The geography of reason has been yoked to the path of European and American advancement. This advancement has been a familiar trope in different periods of history. Egyptians, for instance, expanded to the limits of their environment, and in their wake emerged Greece and subsequently Rome in the north. In Rome's wake stood its aqueducts and highways that netted an entire area into the Holy Roman Empire. And in that empire's fall emerged a series of consolidations that

became Europe in the north and the Islamic world in the South and East, and in their fall came

Europe's offspring, America, and its two rivals—first the former Soviet Union (the East) and an

unbalanced Islamic world (the Middle East) conditioned by reactions to American policies. But

no empire exists forever. The resources required to maintain them are often more than the rest of

humanity can bear. In the emergence of the American and lesser eastern empires were the

various slave trades, Atlantic and East Indian and Mediterranean (Arabic). These trades, and

many of their fallen empires, have left tracks that have stood as highways across oceans and sky,

through which the geography of reason can be renegotiated. The question of thought as we face

the nihilistic forces of the twilight of rapacious imperialism is whether to step toward this new

possibility of reason, which, in the end, is the beginning of an effort toward a genuinely *new*

world.

Note

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1.   Paleoarchaeologist Walter Neves of the University of São Paolo has uncovered 50,000
        year-old human artifacts and 9000–12,000 year-old skulls in Brazil that, after forensic
        reconstruction, reveal that those people were "negroid" in appearance. Neves and his
        colleagues argue that these people were part of the Australian Aboriginal groups who
        migrated to Australia 60,000 years ago. They further argue that their descendants were
        conquered by northern groups of Asiatic peoples between 9000 and 7,000 years ago,
        during which they suffered near extinction save for the few hybrid descendants of them
        that have survived over the millennia in such places as Terra del Fuego of the Southern
        coast of South America. This research suggests a challenging consideration for the
        question of African-American Studies. Although the notion of "America" or "the
        Americas" is meaningless during those paleolithic times, it raises questions about the
        impact of early African and African-descended cultures on the geographical terrain that
        has come to be known as such. Whether they came to South America by way of the
        Pacific Ocean or directly from the Southern regions of Africa into the Atlantic Ocean, the
        reality of the matter is that the people who remained on the African continent went
        through nearly 40,000 years of transformation and their own processes of subsequent

creolization with changed human populations who returned to Africa before they met up with their ancestors in South America in the fifteenth century. The story of ancient peoples from Africa inhabiting South America also raises profound questions about the subsequent histories of conquest in the Americas, making the tragedies of the New World more old than new.   See Neves and his colleagues' groundbreaking work in the following articles, "The Zhoukoudian Upper Cave Skull 101 as Seen from the Americas" (Neves and Pucciarelli: 1998), "Modern Human Origins as Seen from the Peripheries" (Neves, Powell, and Ozolins: 1999), and "Early Holocene Human Skeletal Remains from Santa do Riacho, Brazil: Implications for the Settlement of the New World" (Neves, Prous, Gonzàlez-José, Kipnis, Powell: 2003).

2.   Jane Anna Gordon offers development of this insight in her book *Why They Couldn't Wait* (2001) and chapter three of her dissertation "The General Will and Political Legitimacy: Secularization, Double Consciousness, and Force in Modern Democratic Theory" (2005). See also her essay in Part II of this volume, below.

3.   For a survey of some of these discussions, see Ernest Allen's "On the Reading of Riddles: Rethinking Du Boisian 'Double Consciousness'" (1997), Sandra Adell's *Double Consciousness/Double Bind* (1994), and Tukufu Zuberi and Elijah Anderson's commemoration issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science* (2000).

4.   The ideas that my colleagues Paget Henry, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Claudia Milian Arias, Rowan Ricardo Phillips, Kenneth Knies, Jane Anna Gordon, and I have been working on over the past decade come out of Du Bois's and F anon's insight on the colonization of knowledge and the need to construct new kinds of human study. See the bibliography for some of our relevant work.

5.   A variety of scholars working on and through the thought of Alain Locke appears in *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke* (1999), edited by Leonard Harris.

6.   See Allan Austin's *African Muslims in Antebellum America* (1997) for demographics on antebellum black Muslims in America; for discussion of African-American Jews and the diversity of American Jews, see Diane Kaufman Tobin et al, *In Every Tongue* (2005); and for Afro-Native Americans, see William Katz, *Black Indians* (1986).

7.   Let me take the opportunity to note here the difference between postmodern poststructuralism and poststructuralism.   The former deploys poststructural analysis in the service of an ideological framework against certain narratives. The latter has no preconceived position regarding narratives. Thus, there can be poststructuralists who are not postmodernists. For such scholars could conclude, for example, that postmodernism is peculiarly Eurocentric and that their work simply attempts to unveil the structural process or unfolding of power and its relationship to knowledge in given moments, or perhaps they are interested in the relationship between knowledge and the constitution of different forms of life.   Poststructuralism has been particularly useful, for instance, in the

body of literature on the concept of "invention" in much of contemporary African philosophy.   For a discussion of the impact of V.Y. Mudimbe, K. Anthony Appiah, Kwame Gyekye, Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, Elias Bongmba, Kwasi Wiredu, and Nkiru Nzegwu, and Tsenay Serequeberhan, see the fourth chapter of my book *Disciplinary Decadence* (2006). Sylvia Wynter's work is also an example of a poststructuralism that would be mischaracterized as postmodernism. See, for example, her essay in this volume. For discussion of her work, see Paget Henry's chapter on her thought in *Caliban's Reason* (2000) and *After Man, The Human: Critical Essays on the Thought of Sylvia Wynter* (2005), ed. by Anthony Bogues et al.

8.	These themes of decay I explore in more detail in *Disciplinary Decadence.*

9..	See Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (2000). For recent discussion of the proletarianization of blacks, see Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America* (2000).

10..	Studies abound. For examples, see Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1965), *Historiography of the British West Indies* (1980); Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1998); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed* (2004); *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World : A Student Reader*, revised and expanded edition, ed. by Verene A. Shepherd, and Hilary Beckles (2000); and, of course, C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd Edition, revised (New York: Vintage, 1989). In the North American context, see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (1997), Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom (1850–1925)* (1976), Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (1983), and Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1963).

11..	For more discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentia Africana* (2000: chapter 2).

12..	For discussion, see, e.g., the fourth chapter of *Existentia Africana*, and Peter Caws, *Ethics from Experience* (1996). Some earlier efforts by Caws include *The Philosophy of Science* and *Science and the Theory of Value* (1967). See also his recent *Yorick's World: Science and the Knowing Subject* (1993).

13..	See Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (1995b: chapter 5).

14..	See, e.g., Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character* (1990) and John McWhorter, *Losing the Race* (2001).

15..	See the following two excellent studies, Rogers Smith, *Our Civic Ideals* and Joe Feagin, *Racist America*.

16..	This dialectic of an unfolding Absolute is in most of Hegel's writings, but see especially his *Science of Logic* (1989).

17.. For discussion of there not being the elimination of ethics but its paradoxically ethical suspension, see Calvin O. Schrag, *Betwixt and Between* (1994: 27–32).

18.. See also John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch* (2001), for an account of the political dynamics of such professionalization and Nelson Maldonado-Torres's discussion below.

19.. All of these emerge in Naomi Zack *American Mixed Race* (1995). Another recent effort is *Rethinking Mixed Race* (2001). And, more recently, Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe's *The Mixed Race Reader* (2004).

20. The work of J.P. Rushton represents the Charles Darwin Institute. For a critique and discussion of the Straussian neoconservatives, see Anne Norton's *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Empire* (2004).

21.. Yet here we find problems with the mixed-race theorists who argue for the uniqueness of biraciality. In effect, this construction functions like the "mule" construction since they cannot reproduce their identity. Two "biracial" partners would not produce a "biracial" child. They would have to find a white partner with whom to produce a "biracial" offspring. Oddly, the logic doesn't follow with finding a black partner. At most, one would say that the offspring has some mixture. For more discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children* (1997: chapter 3). See also Helena Jia Hershel, "Therapeutic Perspectives on Biracial Identity Formation and Internalized Oppression" (1995:169–181).

22. I have written on these matters in my books *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (1995a/1999), *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (1995b), and *Her Majesty's Other Children* (1997b).

23.. For a similar critique, see John L. And Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 2 (1997: 18).

24.. In American popular culture, this has been happening on the level of animal totems. The male lion and bulls with flaring nostrils have been replaced by lionesses and cows. The popularity of the cow should not be underestimated. Think of how many Hollywood films with cow totems that have popped up over the past decade (e.g., *Brother Where Art Thou* [2000] and *Me, Myself, and Irene* [2000]), and in Chicago, Illinois, there was a cow exhibit throughout the city in the mid 1990s. Cow iconography has popped up everywhere: cow pillows, stuffed cows, and so forth.

25. Maldonado-Torres and Knies offer discussions of their positions in essays included in this volume, see table of contents.