Whiteness and the Return of the "Black Body"

George Yancy

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Immediate Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact phillipsg@duq.edu.
Whiteness and the Return of the “Black Body”

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty

of the Department of Philosophy

McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

George Yancy

October 10, 2005
©

2005 by
Yancy, George
All rights reserved.
Dedication

To my grandparents
Lillian, Matt, George, and Beatrice
and my parents
Ruth and George, El
whose enduring Black Bodies have made this dissertation possible
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my dissertation committee, philosophers Fred Evans, Eleanore Holveck, and John H. McClendon, III, for providing the necessary latitude needed for expressing my intellectual and scholarly independence. Fred is to be thanked for providing not only significant feedback in terms of pertinent philosophical direction at just the right moments, but his own philosophically rich work overlaps with my own, particularly in terms of philosophical explorations that take seriously the relationship between theory and practice. As my director, I thank him for immediately seeing the importance of this project, his genuine respect for my philosophical insights, and for his wealth of scholarly output. I would like to thank Eleanore for her support and encouragement that I continue my graduate studies at Duquesne University. She is to be thanked for being instrumental in securing for me the McAnulty Fellowship, which was the first of its kind. I would also like to thank her for her intellectual honesty and for suggesting stimulating ways for me to rethink my dissertation project. Of course, both she and Fred are thanked for valuing my philosophical work, and for believing in the importance of my work on race to the intellectual life of Duquesne University. John is to be thanked for his incredible fund of knowledge concerning not only Africana thought generally, but African-American philosophical thought in particular. John’s philosophical work is not only conceptually rigorous, but historically rich. John and I share both the vision of doing original work on Black philosophers, and the importance of conceptualizing the dynamic role of the historical and material context within which these philosophers did their thinking and their living. John is a philosopher who, with great integrity, is not swayed by philosophical fads. He is a rare philosopher whose
philosophical acumen is sharp and whose historical breadth of knowledge is enviable. I would also like to thank the former dean of the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, Constance Ramirez, for her continued interest in and support of my work.

The last five months have been incredibly exhausting and rewarding. However, philosophers like myself, that is, those who find unspeakable delight in giving birth not only to ideas but to families as well, know how difficult it is to be productive philosophically, while asking of those whom we love to give us the privacy that we need. Hence, it is within this context that I sincerely offer my thanks and my love to Adrian, Gabriel, and Elijah. Of course, there are rewards. For example, I think that I have the only five year old who uses the term “dissertation” in a full sentence. This desire for privacy becomes all the more difficult when one’s significant other is also working to create her own scholarly identity and striving to make significant contributions to her own area of intellectual love. As for Susan, my wife, my gratitude is immeasurable. I am under no illusions regarding the importance of everyday necessities and comforts required to do philosophy. Many philosophers seem to forget that a comfortable space for philosophical thought presupposes a real world of stability, a world of the mundane, where things are ready-to-hand not by accident but through the sustained efforts of others. Susan provided me with such a context, and at no point do I want her to forget that I am thankful to her for having provided me with a context of love and reliability that made this dissertation possible.
## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments  

Chapter I  
**Why Whiteness Matters:**  
My Existential and Epistemological Standpoint  

Chapter II  
Whiteness: “Unseen” Things Seen  

Chapter III  
Whiteness’s Manichean Divide:  
Colonialist Gazing and “Seeing” Hottentot Venus  

Chapter IV  
Whiteness and the Phenomenological Return of the Black Body:  
Frantz Fanon, Ralph Ellison, Malcolm X, and W.E.B. Du Bois  

Chapter V  
The Agential Black Body:  
Resisting the Black Imago in the White Imaginary  

Chapter VI  
The *Serious* World of Whiteness:  
Frederick Douglass’s Autobiographical Incursions  

Chapter VII  
Desiring *Bluest Eyes*, Desiring Whiteness:  
The Internalization of the White Gaze and Being Double  

Chapter VIII  
Existential Conversion and *Non-whitely* White Bodies  

Conclusion  

Bibliography
Chapter I

Why Whiteness Matters: My Existential and Epistemological Standpoint

“White” is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain. It affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours. It wields power yet endures as a largely unarticulated position.

—Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek

Whiteness is everywhere in American culture, but it is very hard to see . . . . As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.

—George Lipsitz

Whiteness and the Distortion of the Black Body: My Existential Standpoint

The Black body has been confiscated. My Black body has been confiscated.¹ When followed by white security personnel as I walk through department stores, when a white sales person avoids touching my hand, when a white woman looks with suspicion as I enter the elevator, I feel that I have become this indistinguishable, amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a rapist, a criminal, a burden, a rapacious animal incapable of delayed gratification. Within the space of these social encounters, I become other to myself. I feel alienated from my own body.

Unlike the form of alienation described by the young Karl Marx, where workers are alienated from their labor, philosopher Charles Mills states that “under white supremacy, one has an alienation far more fundamental; since while one can always come home from work, one cannot get out of one’s skin.”² While I agree with Mills, I realize that class standing and its role in alienation can also follow one home. Think here of real
situations where low expectations constitute part of the lived normative framework of a lower-class white family. Within such families, it may not even occur to parents to imagine their children attending college or doing any other work than that characteristic of their lower-class standing. Indeed, lower class whites (particularly, non-Anglo-Saxon Protestant whites) in North America have also been characterologically described as shiftless, lazy, and worthless, and have even been victims of systematic sterilization during the American Eugenics Movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, despite this deplorable crime against poor white women and men, immigrants, and the physically and mentally disabled, such “innate” character traits attributed to poor whites were not conceptualized as resulting from a specifically “Black essence.”

My understanding of my own body undergoes a process of slippage when the white imaginary, which has been historically structured and shaped through years of white hegemony, ruminates over my dark flesh and vomits me out in a form not recognizable by me. Phenomenologically, I feel “external,” as it were, to my body, delivered and sealed in white lies. The reality is that I find myself within a normative space, a historically structured and structuring space, through which I am “seen” and judged guilty a priori. This suggests the sense in which each person finds him/herself within a context of shared intelligibility. I find myself within the context of North America where the discourse of race and racism constitutes a context of shared intelligibility, not only within which I actively negotiate my course of action, but it is also a space within which I am part of an interpretive stream that has configured my identity and shaped my course of action. On this score, I am said to bear the pernicious mark of
dark skin, but not as a natural phenomenon. My darkness is a signifier of negative values grounded within racist social practices that predate my existential emergence. The meaning of my Blackness is not intrinsic to my natural pigment, but has become a value-laden “given,” an object presumed untouched and unmediated by various discursive practices, history, time, and context. My Blackness functions metaphorically as a stipulatory axiom: “Blackness is evil, not to be trusted, and guilty as such.” From this, conclusions can be drawn. This “stipulatory axiom” forms part of a white racist distal narrative that congeals narrative coherence and intelligibility, providing a framework according to which the Black body is rendered “meaningful.” Whites “see” the Black body through the medium of historically structured forms of “knowledge” that regard it as an object of suspicion. This understanding of the white gaze vis-à-vis tacit forms of “knowledge” has a family resemblance to Michel Foucault’s use of the term “positive unconscious.”

In other words, whiteness comes replete with its epistemic criteria for what to expect of a Black body (or non-white body), how dangerous and unruly it is, how unlawful, criminal, and hypersexual it is. The discourse and comportment of whites are shaped through tacit racist scripts that enable them to sustain and perpetuate their whitely-being-in-the-world.

Frantz Fanon observes that “not only must the black man [woman] be black; he [she] must be black in relation to the white man [woman].” It is this relational dimension that is incredibly significant. Hence, the meaning of my Blackness gets constituted and configured (relationally) within a semiotic field of axiological difference, one that is structured vis-à-vis the construction of whiteness as the transcendental signified. To say that whiteness is deemed the transcendental signified is to say that whiteness takes itself
to be that which remains the same across a field of difference. Indeed, it determines what is deemed different without itself being defined by that system of difference. In other words, whiteness might be said to stand “external” to such differences as the determinate of such differences. Whiteness is said to be that which is universal and functions to fix the meanings of those things that are not white. Whiteness is that center according to which that which is non-white is rendered Other, marginal, ersatz, strange, native, inferior, uncivilized, ugly.

Unlike Black bodies physically confiscated from Africa, my body is confiscated within social spaces of meaning construction and social spaces of transversal interaction that are buttressed by a value-laden episteme. It is a peculiar experience to have one’s body confiscated without physically being placed in chains, or imprisoned without one’s consent. Well-dressed, I enter an elevator where an old white woman waits to reach her floor. She “sees” my Black body, though not the same one I have seen reflected back to me from the mirror on any number of occasions. She sees a Black body “supersaturated with meaning, as they [Black bodies] have been relentlessly subjected to [negative] characterization by newspapers, newscasters, popular film, television programming, public officials, policy pundits and other agents of representation.” Her body language signifies, “Look, the Black!” On this score, though short of a performative locution, her body language functions as an insult. Over and above how my body is clothed, regardless of the fact that I wear a suit and tie, she “sees” a criminal, a brute. Indeed, she does not really “see” me. Rather, phenomenologically, she might be said to “see” a black, fleeting expanse, a peripherally glimpsed vague presence of something dark, forbidden, and dreadful. Despite what I think about myself, how I am for-myself, her perspective, her
third-person account, trumps my efforts to maintain a sense of selfhood and humanity. After all, from the perspective of white hegemony, hers is deemed the only real point of view. One might say that the white woman’s consciousness of the meaning of my Black body coincides with the meaning of the Black body as such, and that from her perspective there is no meaning that the Black body possesses that is foreign to her, that is, a meaning that is capable of enlarging her field of consciousness/“seeing.” When she “sees” me, the symbolic order of “Blackness as evil” is collapsed: I am evil. My Blackness is the stimulus that triggers her response. “The Negro,” as Fanon notes, “is a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety.”

In the everyday world of encountering Black bodies, the meaning of my Black body is deemed immediate (not mediate) to her consciousness. One might refer to this as the “natural attitude” of her consciousness vis-à-vis my Black body. The meaning of my body is reduced to a trans-historical signification, an essence with a fixed teleology. Her perspective, however, is far from “direct” and veridical. Her consciousness is far from transparent. Her gaze is “not a simple seeing, an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to ‘see.’” As Black, I am the “looked at.” As white, she is the bearer of the “white look.” But note that I have not given my consent to have my body transformed, to have it reshaped, and thrown back to me as something I am supposed to own, as a meaning I am supposed to accept. She clutches her purse, eagerly anticipating the arrival of her floor, “knowing” that this Black predator will soon strike. As she clutches her purse, I am reminded of the sounds of whites locking their car doors as they catch a glimpse of my Black body as I walk by.
The tragedy of young Black Emmit Till flashes before my mind. Only fourteen years old, Till was murdered in 1955 by two white men for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Beaten beyond recognition, and shot in the head, his body was tied to a heavy metal fan and thrown into the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi. Given the long history of white racism in North America, it is not at all unusual to have specific memories that fail to fade, memories that associate the experience of whiteness with instances of lynching, castration, and terror, memories that justifiably push Black people to the precipice of existential fear and trembling. “Black men,” as Ann DuCille notes, “have been lynched because someone said they looked at, spoke to, or thought about a white woman.”

Created from the mire of the white imaginary, representations of Black males as “lusting murderously after innocent white women,” as buffoons, or inferior animals, have been played out in the anti-Reconstruction filmic narratives and novels such as D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden* (1902). Like the spots on a leopard, Black males are believed unable to change their lusting ways and inferior constitution. And Blacks, more generally, are unable to eradicate the “curse” of their darkness. Through the mouth of one of his characters, Dixon asks, “Can you change the color of his [the Ethiopian/the Black] skin, the kink of his hair, the bulge of his lips, the spread of his nose, or the beat of his heart with a spelling book?” The character answers, “The Negro is the human donkey. You can train him, but you can't make him a horse.” Of course, such racial representations of Black males helped to create and sustain the rationalization to “protect” white women through the creation of such “law-abiding” groups as the Ku Klux Klan.
Describing himself as part of the Emmit Till generation, philosopher Lucius Outlaw notes that the egregious “racist murder of Emmit Till…solidified firmly in my mind (and soul) certain notions regarding relationships with white females…notions that conditioned my approach to white women for many, many years, even today.” The multiple messages sent to Till and other Black males were to remind them of their place within the world, to indelibly mark their bodies as trouble, bereft of full citizenship, expendable, existentially insignificant, and vulnerable to white male authority and brutality. To speak “inappropriately” to a white woman (to wink at, whistle at) was to commit the error of thinking that you were a man (read: white man) and not a beast. On this score, only white men can be “appropriately inappropriate” toward white women.

Returning to the old white woman in the elevator, she desires to look, but feels uncomfortable doing so. She fears that a direct look might incite the anger of the Black predator. She feels a strange combination of attraction, disgust, and trepidation. She fakes a smile in order to soothe what she “knows” to be moving through my savage breast. By her smile she hopes to elicit a spark of humanity from the dark savage. But I don’t return the smile. I fear that it might be interpreted as a gesture of sexual advance. After all, within the social space of the elevator, which has become, to use Judith Butler’s turn of phrase, “a racially saturated field of visibility,” a hermeneutic transactional space within which all of my intended meanings get falsified, it is as if I am no longer in charge of what I mean/intend. What she “sees” or “hears” is governed by a racist epistemology of certitude that places me under erasure. It is only through not seeing me that I am visible; it is only through not hearing me that I am audible. Within this space, she controls the “truth” of my intentions. Her alleged literacy regarding the semiotics of my Black body,
however, is actually an instance of profound illiteracy. Her gaze upon my Black body might be said to function like a camera obscura. Her gaze consists of a racist socio-epistemic aperture, as it were, through which the (white) light of “truth” casts an inverted/distorted image of me upon the back walls, so to speak, of her mind. My meaning, in short, is flipped on its head.

I place particular emphasis upon this notion of the racist socio-epistemic aperture. Consider this brief excursus. Take the well-known Plessy v. Ferguson case (1896), which resulted in the United States Supreme Court’s establishment of the separate but equal doctrine. Homer Plessy was 7/8 white and 1/8 Black. He argued that because of this he should be allowed to sit in the whites only railroad car. This was a calculated effort on the part of Plessy and the “Citizens Committee to Test the Constitutionality of the Separate Car Law” to call into question the Louisiana statute (1890) that made it mandatory for Blacks and whites to ride in separate railroad cars. However, Plessy lost the case and was forced to pay a fine of $25. Apparently, just having 1/8 of “Black blood” was sufficient to make him Black. Consider the following hypothetical scenario. Plessy enters the elevator. It is my assumption that the old white women would not automatically begin her ritual performance of anti-Black racist suspicion. On the contrary, she would probably perform her whiteness in ways that signify that she feels comfortable and safe around this “white” male. However, let’s further assume that the Plessy v. Ferguson case was televised and that she had just watched the news, seeing pictures of Plessy. According to my argument, despite his phenotypic whiteness, she would react to him in ways that she would react to my dark body. The point here is that the white gaze as a racist socio-epistemic aperture will “see” a threatening Black body in white. Again, this points to the conceptualization
of the white gaze as operating at the level of the symbolic.\textsuperscript{21} Her “physical eyes” may “see” white skin, but her gaze overrides what is visual.\textsuperscript{22} Made accessible through those myths and tropes that constitute the socio-epistemic aperture of the white gaze, she “sees” a Black in whiteface, she discerns the “stained” Black body in white. Citing (though critical of) the racist assumptions propagated in R. W. Shufeldt’s \textit{The Negro, A Menace to American Civilization}, Charles Johnson notes:

\begin{quote}
One drop of black blood, for example, will cause a white family to revert to Negroid characteristics even after a full century; the mulatto, though possessing white blood, is depicted as dangerous because his surface “outside,” not being stained, betrays the criminality and animality of his interior.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

On this score, her gaze comes replete with an essentialist ontological perspective on Blackness, no matter the abundance of “white blood” or the miniscule amount of “Black blood.”

Again, returning to my experience with the white woman on the elevator, it is through her gaze that I become hyper-vigilant of my own embodied spatiality. On previous occasions, particularly when alone, I have moved my body within the space of the elevator in a non-calculative fashion, paying no particular attention to my bodily comportment, the movement of my hands, my eyes, the position of my feet. I did not calculate the distance between my arm, hand, and my fingers in relationship to the buttons indicating the various floors. On such occasions, my “being-in” the space of the
elevator is familiar; my bodily movements, my stance, are indicative of what it means to *inhabit* a space of familiarity. In short, it is a space within which I am meaningfully absorbed in the habitual everydayness of riding on elevators. Of course, the elevator could break down, in which case I might experience the space within the elevator as too confining; I might panic as I perhaps only now, all of a sudden, begin to experience how stuffy the elevator is, how tiny it is, and how it does not have a phone that is operational. Under these circumstances, I become calculative. The elevator is perceived as an object that represents a challenge to me, as something standing over and against me. What was previously a familiar space in the elevator, which I inhabited as an uncomplicated modality of my meaningful bodily comportment, has all of a sudden become “a something” that is threatening; my everyday mode of “being-in” has become a mode of *being-trapped-in*.

The movement from the familiar is what is also effected vis-à-vis the old white woman’s gaze. My movements become and remain stilted. I dare not move suddenly. The apparent racial neutrality of the space within the elevator (when I am standing alone) has become an axiological plenum, one filled with white normativity. As philosopher Shannon Sullivan would say, I no longer inhabit the space of the elevator “as a corporeal entitlement to spatiality.”⁴ I feel trapped. I no longer feel bodily expansiveness within the elevator, but corporeally constrained, limited. I now begin to calculate, paying almost neurotic attention to my body movements, making sure that this “Black object,” what now feels like an appendage, a weight, is not too close, not too tall, not too threatening. So, I genuflect, but only slightly, a movement that feels like an act of worship. My lived-body comes back to me like the elevator, as something to be dealt with, as a challenge, an
unfortunate yet troubling occurrence. Indeed, my lived-body begins to feel like
something ontologically *occurent*, something merely *there* in its facticity. Notice that she
need not speak a word (speech-acts are not necessary) to render my Black body
“captive.” She need not scream “Rape!” She need not call me “Nigger!” to my face.
Indeed, although how she reacts to me is certainly not without its deeper moral
implications, and must be called into question, it is not a necessary requirement that she
hates me, possesses ill will toward me or is morally vicious in order for her to script my
body in the negative way that she does. Her non-verbal movements construct me,
possessing their own socio-ontological effects on my body. Her Negrophobia depicts me
in a shockingly monstrous fashion. White America has bombarded me and other Black
males with the “reality” of our duel hyper-sexualization: “you are a sexual trophy and a
certain rapist.”

Fanon, aware of the horrible narrative myths used to depict Black bodies, notes
that the Negro *is* the genital and *is* the incarnation of evil, being that which is to be
avoided and yet desired. Face to face, the white woman “feels the need to recall the times
of cannibalism.” Ritualistically enacting her racialized and racist consciousness, she
reveals her racist narrative competence, a putative self-evident script vis-à-vis the
“savage” Black body. After all, my Black body is reduced to the biological. And though
“one cannot decently ‘have a hard on’ everywhere,” within the white imaginary, I
apparently fit the bill. To put a slight interpretive inflection on Fanon here, as the
unquenchable Black phallus, a walking, talking, hard-on, I am believed eager to introduce
white women into a sexual universe for which the white male “does not have the key, the
weapons, or the attributes.” Within the *lived* and consequential semiotic space of the
elevator, the white woman has “taken” my body from me, sending its meaning back to me, forcing a cognitive dissonance, a lived or phenomenologically given disparity, that I must now struggle to overcome.

The space within the elevator has become a microcosm of some of the dynamic processes of a larger, systemic form of colonial invasion within which its undesired incursions, pernicious acts of usurpation, and its regulatory processes of white normativity are played out on the lived body of the colonized. Just as the colonial presence attempts to deplete the power of the colonized, I feel as if my power to script my own identity, my agency to disrupt the constellations of meaning imposed from without, has been/is being depleted. On this score, my agency to act-in-the-world, to assert how I understand/narrate my own identity, appears reduced to a form of knowledge regarding my actions of which I am restricted to having privileged, epistemic access only. In other words, I feel forced within an epistemic solipsistic position because her interpretive hegemony displaces my intended meanings with her own set of interpretations. Thus, she effectively erases my ability to press my meaning into service and thereby counter her interpretations.

What is left of agency once it is truncated and rendered impotent and devoid of expression within the sphere of the social? For once I act, my action enters into a hermeneutic traffic of semiotic distortion, my actions have undergone a process of transvaluation. The meaning that I intend through a given action, which is the embodied correlate of that intention, becomes a token extraneous to me. What then am I to do? Within this racially saturated field of visibility, I have somehow become this predator stereotype from which it appears hopeless to escape. It is as if with every attempt on my
part to resist this racially saturated field of visibility, for example, when I think about smiling, my good and harmless intentions return to me, interpreted, through the medium of this field of visibility, as “evidence” of my ulterior predatory or criminal motives. The old white woman thinks that her act of “seeing” me is an act of “knowing” what I am, of knowing what I will do next, that is, hers is believed to be simply a process of unmediated/uninterpreted perception. However, her coming to “see” me as she does is actually a cultural achievement, a racist socio-historical schematization, indeed, an act of epistemic violence.

Judith Butler provides an insightful analysis of the Rodney King beating and verdict that squares well with my interpretation of the interconnections between what is “seen,” what is “not seen,” racism, and the construction of the “Black body.” As she makes clear, “the video shows a man being beaten.” She asks, though, how is it that the jury in Simi Valley came to “see” King’s prone body as a dangerous and threatening object to be further subdued over and over again through the use of wielding batons? Like in the elevator, there emerges a contestation within the field of the visual, and a battle over the meaning of the Black body’s intentions. According to Butler, King’s Black body has been schematized through “the inverted projections of white paranoia.” In short, King’s “threatening” Black body is produced within a white meta-narrative that constitutes “the racial production of the visible.” She argues:

The kind of “seeing” that the police enacted, and the kind of “seeing” that the jury reenacted, is one in which a further violence is performed by the disavowal and projection of that violent beating. The actual blows against
Rodney King are understood to be fair recompense, indeed, defenses against, the dangers that are “seen” to emanate from his body. Here “seeing” and attributing are indissoluble. Attributing violence to the object of violence is part of the very mechanism that recapitulates violence, and that makes the jury’s “seeing” into a complicity with that police violence.\textsuperscript{32}

This process forms a racist hermeneutically constituted hermetic space that translates into a site of phantasmagoria. Butler:

\begin{quote}
In this sense, the circuit of violence attributed to Rodney King is itself the circuit of white racist violence which disavows itself only to brutalize the specter that embodies it own intention. This is the phantasm that it ritualistically produces at the site of the racialized other.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

Further theorizing this space of phantasmagoria, it is important to note that not only does the white woman in the elevator ontologically freeze my “dark” embodied identity, she becomes ontologically frozen in her own embodied (white) identity. For she only “sees” a criminal, a predator. She too is a prisoner of her own historically inherited imaginary. She “sees,” but she does not necessarily reflect upon, herself as normative, innocent, pure. Her performances reiterate the myth of the proverbial white victim at the hands of the Black predator. Butler argues that the reading of the video of the King beating is indeed a form of reenacting “the phantasmatic scene of the crime, reiterating
and re-occupying the endangered status of the white person on the street.”

Like Emmet Till, King’s body, the “Black body,” is the very embodiment of all that is antithetical to “civilization” (read: white).

Philosopher Robert Gooding-Williams speaks of interpreted images of Blacks that are racial representations, backed by racist rhetorical strategies, that are “constituted by assigning a particular function (e.g., the function or role of causing fear in white people) to Negroes when they appeared in the legends and stories we have inherited from the past.”

Regarding the manner in which King’s body was said to be a “self-evident threat” to the police officers, Gooding-Williams, like Butler, challenges the positivist myth of “brute facts” when it comes to the process of “seeing” Black bodies within a white racist context of constituted social reality. He argues:

After inviting the jurors to see events from the point of view of the police officers, the defense attorneys elicited testimony from King’s assailants that depicted King repeatedly as a bear, and as emitting bear-like groans. In the eyes of the police, and then again in the eyes of the jurors, King’s black body became that of a wild “Hulk-like” and “wounded” animal, whose every gesture threatened the existence of civilized society. Not surprisingly, the defense attorneys portrayed the white bodies which assailed King as guardians against the wild, and as embodying a “thin blue line” that separates civil society from the dangerous chaos which is the essence of the wild.
Regarding the woman in the elevator, however, she does not realize that she has come to see herself as pure, civilized, as innocent, as an easy victim vis-à-vis untamed Black males, through a socially constructed and historically manufactured normative framework that has become inter-subjectively and intra-subjectively “real” through systemic social practices of white hegemony. Her whiteness is deemed “non-threatening.” Of course, it is through the self-constructed centrality of whiteness’s ontology that these constructions appear at all. The Black body (in this case the Black male body) is by nature criminal, because the white body (in this case the white female body) is by nature innocent, pure, and good. Of course, there is nothing historically necessary about the fact that the Black body has been typified as criminal. “Yellow bodies” (Asian Americans) and “red bodies” (Native Americans) have also been criminalized and Othered within contexts involving white racist hegemonic practices. Think here of the fact that Asians are referred to as “Yellow Negroes” and Arab bodies are characterized as swarthy “Sand Niggers.”

In reference to what he refers to as the “average ordinary White Man,” Gilles Deleuze notes that “the first divergence-types, are racial: yellow man, black man . . . .” 37 Note how “divergence” is marked as racial. It is in diverging or deviating from whiteness (the “non-racial” center) that the yellow, the black, and the red are signifiers of inferior difference vis-à-vis whiteness as the same/transcendental signified. According to Deleuze, “racism never detects the particles of the other; it propagates waves of sameness . . . .” 38 While I agree with Deleuze that Blacks have been defined relative to their divergence from the historically constructed “standard” of whiteness, as a critical addendum to Deleuze’s position I would only add that within the European imaginary
Blacks have not only been conceptualized as divergent, but as a different kind. For example, let x stand for the standard against which y and z are judged divergences. In this case, x, y, and z might still be said to be of the same kind, where y and z are said to diverge more or less in some fashion. In instances involving the European imaginary vis-à-vis the “nature” of Blacks, however, Black people were not simply “divergent” from the standard (x), and hence were neither y nor z, but belonged to a fundamentally different type. On this score, then, not only does whiteness reserve the power to define others as “divergent” or “deviant,” but it also has the power to define “differences” entirely outside the standard-divergence dialectic. Addressing the self-Other dialectic in terms of the “Black Other,” Afro-Caribbean philosopher Lewis Gordon notes:

But what the Black is, is the not-Other and not-self. To put it differently, in the Western framework the only way the Other can emerge is if there were some notion that the Other can be a human being. Racism, properly understood, reduces Blacks below the human. Speaking of what was also conquest, Fanon says, in Les Damnés, that when the French took Algeria they saw themselves as taking nothing more than the land. And in a context like that it is the Hegelian thesis that there is no Geist there, there is no human being there – and consequently no “experience.” And literally if there is no Geist, then one cannot even get into the dialectics of recognition.” 39
Within the context of the long history of white racism in America, it is the Black that is deemed by nature the Untermenschen, because whites are by nature the Ubermenschen. Whiteness sets itself up as the thesis. Blackness, within the dialectical logic of whiteness, must be the antithesis. Within the space of the elevator, the white woman clings to her identity as white, effecting thereby the necessary distance/difference between the white self (her white self) and the Black Other (my Blackness as Otherness). The space of our “confrontation” is governed by a dialectical representational logic, which can be “understood as the representational form wherein two terms are positioned in a diametrically opposed and hierarchical structure.”

On the elevator, my Black body is ontologically mapped, its coordinates lead to that which is always immediately visible: The Black surface. Philosopher Merleau-Ponty writes, “But the thing is not really observable: there is always a skipping over in every observation, one is never at the thing itself.” Not so with the Black body. There is no transcendence that faces the visible (that is, the invisible). Of course, this is not to deny the spatially angular physicality of my back as opposed to my front or my side. The point here is that the Black body vis-à-vis the white gaze appears in the form of a sheer exteriority, implying that the Black body “shows up,” makes itself known in terms of its Black surface. There is only the visible, the concrete, the seen, all there, all at once: a single Black thing, un-individuated, threatening, ominous, Black. The old white woman thinks that she takes no part in this construction; she acts “in the name of the serious.” She apparently fails to see how her identity is shot through in terms of how she constructs me.
In the case of Rodney King’s showing of his palm, for example, which was turned away from his body, the construction of the “innocence” of the white police officers hinged upon a reversed interpretation of a show of the palm as an act of violence, and, hence, as further justification to subdue the “supernaturally” powerful Black male body. So, too, the woman in the elevator fails to see that her identity is constructed and shaped through her negation of my humanity. She takes her identity to be a pure self-presence. What is her “positive” whiteness apart from my “negative” Blackness? The point here is that the narrative intelligibility of her white identity is always already linked to the narrative exclusion of my Black identity. “To the extent that identity always contains the specter of non-identity within it, the subject is always divided and identity is always purchased at the price of the exclusion of the Other,” in this case the Black Other.

Like the white police officers of the LAPD in the King beating, the white woman on the elevator sees herself as on the side of the law. The “law” functions here as a metonymic term for what it means to be white. Within the framework of a binary economy of racial metonymic opposites, blackness is deemed “unlawful.” Since the Black body is deemed unlawful, the act of “seeing” King or “seeing” my Black body in the elevator is linked to the issue of what a white racist episteme in fact produces as the visible. My Blackness, for her, is a sufficient register used to substantiate/confirm the “veridicality” of her perception. My Blackness is sufficient evidence of my brutality. What is passed off as “seeing,” however, is really a form of reading. She does not realize the incredible amount of work that she performs to sustain the socially constructed nature of her gaze, and, hence, to continue to perpetuate the falsehood of my Black body as criminal. On this score, she is not simply influenced by racist practices, but she is the
vehicle through which such practices get performed and sustained. She is cognitively dysfunctional vis-à-vis the deep racist socio-epistemological forms of belief, and systemically racist institutional structures, of which she is partly a product. As a “product,” this does not mean that she is simply an epiphenomenon of social conditioning, although such conditioning is formative. And, yet, her performance of the white gaze is not reducible to an individual, isolated act. Moreover, she is not the “metaphysical originator,” as it were, of the first white gaze. There is no white Ur-gaze. Rather, the intelligibility and effectiveness of the performative white gaze is always already fueled by a larger social imaginary, an imaginary that is historically grounded in white institutional and brute power. More specifically, my sense is that against this institutional and socio-epistemological backdrop, she maintains the potential for resistance, for “sliding into,” as it were, an anti-racist discourse with its counter-racist practices.

What is interesting is that as she “takes up” this anti-racist discourse, the anti-racist discourse “takes over” her. There is something significant and true about the claim that this alternative, this non-racist way of understanding oneself-in-the-world, always already exists as a position to be taken up. She does not create the position that is counterposed to racism. Moreover, it is not as if she stands in the middle of two horizons, one racist and one not, saying to herself, “Which one should I choose?” In neither case does she determine “the selection of the inventory of culturally actionable thoughts.” Rather, both horizons, with their respective inventory of culturally actionable thoughts, and other multiple differential contending voices, constitute the discursive traffic through which she is defined and through which she attempts to define herself. After all, when she
“slides into” the counterposed racist horizon, she does not do so “involuntarily.” For the woman in the elevator, the white racist horizon has somehow come to have greater saliency for her. The objective is to get the counter-racist horizon to have greater saliency for the white woman. There is no Archimedean position from which to convince her to be attentive to the alternative non-racist horizon/voice. There are no epistemological foundations according to which I can appeal that would incontrovertibly convince her that it is immoral to be a racist. This does not mean, however, that arguments and counter-arguments cannot be advanced against a particular horizon like white racism. Powerful arguments can still be marshaled in the form of various rhetorical strategies, persuasive techniques, and through internal criticism. The assumption, of course, is that my interlocutor is reasonable, but there is always the stubborn racist.

The white woman’s gaze is reiterated within the context of power relations that not only help to sustain the larger social racist imaginary, but such power relations sanction her performance of the gaze in the first place, guaranteeing its performance with impunity, and ensures material effects on the gazed upon Black body. Nevertheless, she engages in a form of evasion. It is through the process of an epistemology of ignorance that she makes sense of the “racial order of things” and thereby consequently further cements her bad faith. More specifically, an epistemology of ignorance involves “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.” So, she inhabits a dysfunctional cognitive space; she suffers from a structured blindness, a socio-
psychologically reinforcing opacity, a refusal to “see” beyond falsehoods that continue to uphold white hegemony and mythos.

While performing this gaze, while performing an act of “reading the surface” of my Black body, which is really an act of constructing the surface of my Black body, I suffer. Within this context, “I [take] myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and [make] myself an object.” I become other to myself, alien, feeling my understanding of my own body slip away from me, pushing me ever closer toward the precipice of epistemic violence, ever closer to living in a state of self-hatred.

Phenomenologically, it is as if I become “Black” (read: evil, sexually rapacious) anew within the context of each encounter with the generative dimensions of the white gaze/imaginary. I am, as it were, a phantom, indeed, a “spook,” that lives between the interstices of my physical, phenotypically dark body and the white woman’s gesticulatory performances. She performs, ergo, I am. These gesticulatory performances, ways of being non-verbally toward me, provide evidence of the generative workings of the white imaginary. On this score, I become a racial hypostasis/Black essence, as it were. This process of racial hypostatization manifests itself to the white woman in the form of my dark body’s “intention” to do her harm. I become, for her, “the origin and potential instrument of all danger in the [elevator] scene.” Within the dynamic racialized space of the elevator, I have undergone a process of what might be termed “misplaced concretion.” From the abstract sphere of the white imaginary, my dark body is the concrete and particular instantiation of a racist abstraction: Blackness is dangerous. The copula congeals me in an undesirable and unwanted identity relationship. I have become the externalized figure, the fantasized object, of the white woman’s own white
Hence, her actions only further perpetuate the construction of racial boundaries that sustain her transactions with me on the elevator.

I think that it is important to note that the range of racist behaviors performed by whites in response to the presence of Black bodies in elevators, for example, is not reducible to a single explanatory model that postulates that such racist behaviors are due to *consciously* held prejudices/beliefs that might be further said to be capable of being ameliorated through the mere process of encouraging more rigorous epistemic attentiveness to how whites intellectually assent to a given proposition (for example, “Blacks are evil and not to be trusted”). For there are many whites who will reject being racists qua consciously assenting to a set of racist propositional beliefs about Blacks, and, yet, who might be said to perform “whitely” (that is, distancing themselves physically, looking with suspicious eyes, feeling themselves physically threatened or repulsed by Blackness) in the presence of Black bodies. My point is that acting whitely is not limited to possessing *occurrent* racist beliefs or feeling hatred for (or having that hatred *directed* toward) a particular Black person encountered on an elevator. Acting whitely might be described as a form of orientation that comes replete with a set of sensibilities that unconsciously/pre-reflectively position or configure the white self vis-à-vis the non-white self.

Of course, simply reducing whiteness qua racism to a set of false beliefs can lead to the consequence of not acknowledging or even rejecting the existence of larger *systemic* power relationships (that exist beyond the space of elevators) that form a *system* of white supremacist practices that are supported by white legal, material, socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and cultural power. The faulty reasoning might run something like this:
“White racist beliefs are agent-centered.\textsuperscript{54} Systems of power don’t denote persons qua agents. Hence, systems of power relationships don’t constitute white racism.” Moreover, to reduce whiteness to a set of false beliefs overlooks the fact that many whites, those who have very honorable intentions, those who might be described as “goodwill” whites, who deny holding racist beliefs, benefit from acting whitely-in-the-world in ways that they themselves may not consciously intend. On this score, benefiting from acting whitely-in-the-world can have negative implications for non-whites, even if whites are unaware of the consequences of their actions. I feel compelled to exclaim: But, he/she \textit{ought} to have been aware! And where he/she \textit{ought} to have been aware, he/she \textit{can} indeed be aware.

In a socio-political and cultural structure where whiteness is privileged and normative, it is neither necessary nor sufficient that people designated as white cling to racist beliefs in order to benefit from whiteness. Hence, even though there are white bodies that do not possess what might be referred to as a “white supremacist subjectivity,” they will still manage to reap benefits from being more highly valued within a larger white racist socio-political, cultural context. I am arguing that there is nothing intrinsically problematic about one’s white phenotypic constitution. White racist supremacy is not a natural property that inheres within the skin of those classified as white; it does not result from an innate, genotypic disposition. There is indeed a \textit{contingent} relationship between having “white skin” and being a white racist.\textsuperscript{55} Then why not use the term “white supremacy” as opposed to “whiteness,” so as to avoid giving the impression that the problem lies with phenotypic whiteness? The term “whiteness” not only points to the ways in which colorism (\textit{white as believed} to be supremely beautiful,
untainted, moral, good, intelligent, civilized, lawful) is the hallmark of racism practiced in North America and in Europe, but it also speaks to those who are phenotypically white who make every effort to guard against racist beliefs, but, as stated, because of the larger social positioning and valuing of certain bodies over others, still stand to unjustly benefit from being white in their phenotypic constitution⁵⁶ and still play a role in constituting the Black body as Other and sustaining white racism.

The elevator example is designed to illustrate a slice of my lived reality. Of course, the space within the elevator is only a pale reminder of how the Black body has been historically marked and inscribed in derogatory terms, how it has been subjected to inhuman brutality and pernicious acts of violence, and how it has been marginalized and derailed within the space of the white body politic. This history serves as an important reference point in terms of which I position and negotiate my identity. This history also partly positions me, constituting my identity and hence informing my lived standpoint. This history is the past and present threatening space within which I move and have my being. On any given late evening, I know that I might be killed by white police officers as I reach for identifying information. As with King when he showed his palms, any intentional movement toward my wallet - which I struggle to produce so as to identify myself, attempting to cut through the historical layers of white lies that have identified me - is interpreted as an act of violence. Such identifying information, though, is always relevant ex post facto. This is because what I am has been determined. I am the Black who is present in his absence, whose genuine intentions arrive too late. I am a “seen absence.” I am visible in my invisibility. What is seen is a stereotypical “object” that is devoid of nuance. I am “seen” and begin to appear to myself in the mode of anonymity.
After all, tautologously, “a Nigger is just a Nigger.” On this score, white racist practices construct an iterable conception of the Black body: All Blacks are the same. Within the space of racist logic, “A nigger has always done something.”

As the Black male body, I am Amadou Diallo (1999), who reached for his wallet and was shot at 41 times by the NYPD and hit with 19 bullets; I am Abner Louima (1997), who was sodomized with a plunger handle by white New York police officers; I am Garnett Paul Johnson (1997), who was burned alive and beheaded by two white men; I am James Byrd, Jr. (1998), who was dragged to death by three white men; and, I am Rodney King, who underwent a brutal beating by white police officers (1991). Each of us inhabits the same socially constructed space of being present in our absence, of being tokens of danger beyond our control. I am that pre-marked Black thing, that site of historical white discursive markings that precede my birth, leaving me typified and nameless. Hence, I arrive on the scene already “determined.” Before I am born, my body is not my own. It belongs to those historically embedded racist practices, discourses, and institutional forces that struggle to remain invisible. Even whites who do not profess to be racist, but who nevertheless benefit from being embodied as “white,” also have their bodies defined relative to certain racist practices, discourses, and institutional forces, though their bodies carry less immediate negative consequences.

Contrary to the existentialist credo, I am an essence (“Blackness”) that precedes my existence. Hence, my emergence upon the historical scene requires that I engage in battle, a battle to stay alive in white America. Indeed, the Black body, my Black body, is itself a battleground. The Black body has been historically marked, disciplined, scripted, materially, psychologically, and morally invested in to ensure both white supremacy and
the illusory construction of the white subject as a self-contained substance whose existence does not depend upon the construction of the Black qua inferior. This is my existential standpoint. This is my inheritance. This existential standpoint, this historical inheritance, informs my epistemological standpoint.

**Epistemological Standpoint or Doing Philosophy in Black**

My reading of standpoint theory is consistent with its original Marxist interpretation, though I do not limit its significance to a class analysis. My epistemological standpoint, my location, as a *Black* male allows for a kind of perspective, a range and depth of vision and knowledge that those in power (read: white) do not possess. Of course, one could argue that on a male *gendered* axis, my perspective may very well come with its own gendered blinkers and distortions. This is a significant critique advanced by feminist standpoint epistemology. Nevertheless, I do see the world through the lived experience of being Black, of being a particular “subaltern” Other within white racist America. I see the world through the underside of history. Feminist and educational theorists also use the term positionality to denote the fact “that since our understanding of the world and ourselves is socially constructed, we must devote special attention to the differing ways individuals from diverse social backgrounds construct knowledge and make meaning.”

Hence, for me, to do philosophy in Black skin is to engage in the process of conceptualizing the social world from an existential, historical, and raciated *here*. Many of my ideas must pass through a layer of historically codified, invisiblized and scarred flesh. I see the world and the world sees me through the historical narrative of my dark skin. It is as if many of my philosophical intuitions pass through a flesh and blood
structure; they are informed by, and speak to, the reality of aching backs, tired feet, broken bones, chained wrists, ankles, and necks, whipped and scarred backs, and violated wombs.

Much of the historical angst that I have inherited gets transmuted and articulated philosophically. Hence, I philosophize within a historically situated context, a context that is informed by the historical suffering of so many Black people. Just when I feel like I can practice philosophy in the privacy of my own heated room, to engage in Cartesian hyperbolic doubt, to doubt my own existence, to think about the metaphysical distinction between mind and body, I am reminded that to be a philosopher in Black skin in racist white America already places me on high alert, ever diligently watchful of those who would call my philosophical identity, my capacity to think, into question. After all, I too am being watched. Regardless of my philosophical acumen, one mistake will be my undoing. “No exception,” as Fanon writes, “was made for my refined manners, or my knowledge of literature, or my understanding of the quantum theory.”

I am indeed walled in; I am a prisoner not of an essence, but in terms of how I have been positioned by and within a white body politic.

Positioned by this white racist body politic, my identity as a Black philosopher is still perceived as an oxymoron. To inhabit the life of the mind, to cognize, to theorize, I am deemed a credit to my race, an exception. To inhabit the life of the mind-in-white is to do what is expected, to be normal. “Black intelligence,” as philosopher Cornel West notes, “is always guilty before proven innocent in the court of the life of the mind; The Bell Curve is just a manifestation of the cycle.” However, philosopher or not, I live my existence in Black as a target of white violence. West notes that he struggled with the
problem of evil by “grappling with the absurd in America and the absurd as America.”  
He also notes that it was not necessary to read the works of Jean-Paul Sartre or see a play  
by Samuel Beckett to come to a realization of what constituted the absurd. It was enough  
that he “had a black body in a civilization deeply shaped by white supremacist  
perceptions, sensibilities, and institutional practices.” In America, where the white body  
is the paragon of beauty, one pays for having the “wrong hips, lips, noses, skin texture,  
skin pigmentation. And hair texture.” On this score, those “nonwhites socialized into  
the acceptance of this somatic norm will then be alienated from their own bodies,”  
according to Mills, “in a sense estranged from their own physical being in the world.”  
Indeed, to live one’s existence in Black in white America is to live one’s humanity as  
problematized. To be Black in North America is to be a problem. The zone of  
Blackness, that lived existential region of Black embodiment that is set off as distinct  
from the surrounding regions of whiteness, is believed to be a zone of trouble. As  
demonized, as problematized, I existentially inhabit my lived space as “outside” the  
racialized space of whites. Within the interstitial social context of white racist power, I do  
not traverse what I take to be an objective neutral space (walking through a white  
neighborhood at night, for example). Rather, the space of the white neighborhood has  
already been polarized “into inside and outside” in such a way that “curtails black  
people’s inhabiting of [that] space.”  

Jane Lazarre, a white Jewish mother of Black sons, describes her fears around America’s demonizing of Blackness. Lazarre:
I look in the mirror and see skin that is tan to medium brown. I look at my children and see skin that is tan to medium brown. But the other night, I was told by one of our building guards that some cops came to the door after Khary [one of her Black sons] had walked out, on his way up to the video store. They asked about him, if he lived in the building, what kind of person he was. They were looking for someone who “looked like him.” For weeks I was frightened each time he went out in the street, night or day; that he might be arrested, “mistaken” for a criminal they were following. I wanted to follow him down the street, to his job, to his friends’ houses, hiding behind him, ready to protect at a mother’s notice, as I once did the first time he walked alone to school in the second grade. To deny the reality of Blackness can be literally psychotic or suicidal.70

Lazarre’s last point is well-taken. After all, how can one live in a country where “Blackness” signifies criminality, inferiority, danger, evil, predation, and hyper-sexuality, and lay claim to a liberal, colorless “I’m just me” status?71 However, I would add that it is only through the dialectics of mis-recognition (or non-recognition) by whites that Blackness as a problem emerges at all. Hence, it is to deny the reality of whiteness that can be literally psychotic or suicidal. It is not a question of denying the reality of one’s dark skin as such that is psychotic or suicidal, but denying the reality of how one’s “darkness” has been constructed vis-à-vis the construction of whiteness as purity, innocence. Lazarre:
The whiteness of whiteness is the blindness of willful innocence. It is being oblivious, out of ignorance or callousness or bigotry or fear, to the history and legacy of American slavery; to the generations of racial oppression continuing; to the repeated indignities experienced by Black Americans every single day.  

Whether one agrees with her or not, by “willful innocence” Lazarre wants to argue, or so it seems, that the whiteness of her whiteness is something for which she plays a “conscious” role. In other words, her innocence is “willful” to the extent that she exercises some form of agency over maintaining the appearance of innocence from her own white racism. In her case, she recognizes that she benefits from the whiteness of whiteness, and, yet, she suggests that it is through an act of “will” that she sustains the feeling of innocence. Her deeper point here, though, is that whites are “blind” to this act of willful innocence. Lazarre is also poignantly aware of the anxiety that her sons and her African-American husband feel when they enter into the social matrix of differentially and hierarchically raced bodies. But as she notes, “I forget, [I] am privileged to remain innocent.”

Cornel West provides two very powerful personal examples of what it was like to have his Black body typified as criminal while “driving Black.” He notes, however, that the incidents that he experienced “are dwarfed by those like Rodney King’s beating or the abuse of black targets of the FBI’s COINTELPRO efforts in the 1960s and 1970s.” He recalls that he was stopped three times in his “first ten days in Princeton for driving too slowly on a residential street with a speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour.” Also,
driving to teach at Williams College from New York, West describes having been stopped on concocted charges of trafficking cocaine. He tried to explain to the police officer that he was a professor of religion. The police officer replied, “Yeh, and I’m the flying Nun. Let’s go nigger!”76 Note the police officer’s sarcasm. *The Flying Nun* was a sitcom during the 1960s. Actress Sally Field played the character Sister Bertrille who could fly. The sitcom was a *fantasy*. Hence, the subtext of the officer’s caustic “wit” is designed to portray West as an *irony* (etymologically, a dissembler, one who simulates, puts on the appearance of). There is no way that this Black man can be who he says he is. In the police officer’s view, West’s description of himself as a professor of religion is only a fantasy, like the sitcom. It is during times like these that one’s other identities (as a professor of religion or philosophy, for example) are rendered invisible by white America’s negative valuation of Blackness. It is as if the figure of a Black philosopher who is a professor of religion becomes an obscene image, one that registers cognitive dissonance for many whites. After all, is not the very notion of a Black philosopher indicative, though unconscionable, of a public display of Auguste Rodin’s “The Thinker” fully equipped with an erection?77

Regarding the relationship between reflective thought and context, Gordon argues:

If the epistemic correlate of essence is conceptualization, then the theoretical or conceptual domain is always situated on what can be called the reflective level. The reflective dimension of situated life always brings in an element of concrete embodiment of relevance. What this means is
that theory, any theory, gains its sustenance from that which it offers for
and through the lived-reality of those who are expected to formulate it.\textsuperscript{78}

My philosophizing is fundamentally situated within a lived historical context of relevance, interests, purposes, normative aims, and so on. This bespeaks my philosophical alignment with certain aspects of the pragmatist tradition. It is within a lived context of concern, more generally, that philosophical thought evolves and takes shape. My philosophizing, and the knowledge that informs it, is a species of praxis. My philosophizing/theorizing informs and is informed by lived concrete experiences; it is an effective way of dealing with obstacles of my own creation or those created by others. One might say that there is a “dialogical” relationship between theory and action, moving in an ongoing mutual relationship of growth. I am reminded of Black theorist bell hooks where she says that she came to theory because she was hurting and because she wanted to comprehend what was happening within and around her.\textsuperscript{79} Of course, she knows that theory can assist our existential and political efforts only if we shape it toward that end.

There is always the danger of making a fetish of theory, rendering theory a fixated object of intellectual gratification that obstructs the need for and exercise of praxis regarding larger emancipatory aims. I see whiteness (again, not one’s white phenotypic constitution) as fundamentally an ethical and a human problem, not a philosophical problem, though, to be sure, second-order philosophical reflection on whiteness can bring clarity and greater complexity to bear upon the various facets of whiteness. In my reading of William Shakespeare’s \textit{The Tempest}, Caliban’s freedom does not hinge upon the mere mastery of Prospero’s language. After all, it is possible for Caliban to theorize in
Prospero’s language and yet remain subservient to him. Rather, Caliban must also act so as to disrupt Prospero’s colonial order of things, and create spaces within which to order and to sustain a de-Calibanized mode of identity/being. Hence, my philosophical project in this dissertation is the goal of knowledge production regarding whiteness. More specifically, I see my philosophizing about whiteness vis-à-vis the Black body as engaging in a shared process of employing and perpetuating “critical intelligence as a practice of life that has as its goal raising to consciousness the conditions of life, historical practices, and blocked alternatives [for whites and Blacks] that, if pursued, might lead to life experienced as qualitatively – progressively – different,” and, on my reading, better. As a practice of life, critical intelligence is not only brought to bear upon the process of de-Calibanization, but also to bear upon a new way in which Prospero might engage in “a continuously affirmed refusal to prolong the ontological and existential project of whiteness.”

Part of what forms the impetus of my theorizations is a hermeneutics of interrogation and overthrow vis-à-vis whiteness. It is from this perspective that whiteness, as a site of cultural, sociopolitical and material hegemony, has become an important site of interrogation for me, a site that implicates my very survival. Hence, one important way in which I understand the function of philosophical analysis (or second-order reflection) is in terms of how such an activity serves broader liberatory efforts. As with Toni Morrison, then, my “project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers.” Jean-Paul Sartre, although having a more specific endeavor to critique the
Negritude movement as being only a minor moment (or negative moment) of a larger dialectical progression, similarly comments upon *whiteness as seen*:

Here are black men [women] standing, looking at us, and I hope that you—like me—will feel the shock of being seen. For three thousand years, the white man has enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen; he was only a look—the light from the eyes drew each thing out of the shadow of its birth; the whiteness of his skin was another look, condensed light. The white man—white because he was man, white like daylight, white like truth, white like virtue—lighted up the creation like a torch and unveiled the secret white essence of beings.  

Morrison’s efforts to avert the critical gaze from the racial object are laudable. Her move points in the direction of uncovering the source of white hegemony as opposed to the effects of white hegemony. Morrison’s shifting of the critical gaze so as to unveil whiteness, which attempts to conceal itself by claiming a universal status, is precisely one of the important goals of critical whiteness studies. As noted, however, the “racial subject” is dialectically linked to the “racial object.” Whiteness is linked to “a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American,” though there does exist a “European Africanism,” as Morrison calls it, that gets performed as colonial white power. Hence, as I avert my critical gaze from the racial object, it is important that I remain cognizant of the impact of the raced subject upon the raced object. The very process of naming whiteness in terms of race is itself an important move as white
supremacy has attempted to avoid its racialized status by conceptualizing non-white
Others as raced. Thus, I explore the impact of the white gaze upon the raced Black body
as I critically expose the raced white gaze in tandem. Both are inextricably linked. The
historical construction of the Black body as “evil” emerges precisely within whiteness’s
Manichean divide, that is, a divide within which Blackness and whiteness constitute a
logical binary, where one is meaningless without the Other.

The title of this dissertation speaks to the core of its aims. The overall aim is to
map the epistemological and ontological dynamics and generative power of whiteness
vis-à-vis the distorted phenomenological return of the Black body. My use of the term
“return” does not mean that I hold that the “Black body” is sent back, or restored to its
“proper place.” This smacks of an essentialism that belies my understanding of the
semiotic and narrative structuration of the body. By “return,” I mean the sense in which
the Black body is experienced by me after it has been reconstructed (as opposed to
uncovering its essence) through the white racist gaze, how it comes back to me as that
which is deformed and distorted in its appearance. Moreover, even before my Black
body was “taken,” as it were, and sent back, it was not an un-interpreted given. The body
is always already an object of interpretive discourse.

Not only am I interested in critically exploring whiteness in terms of how it is
instantiated in the structure of the white gaze, a kind of synecdoche, so to speak, of
whiteness, I am also interested in how this gaze is structured through a larger white
episteme. Both the white gaze and this larger white episteme are mutually reinforcing.
Although I will revisit what I mean by the notion of a white episteme vis-à-vis the white
gaze, I understand it to be comparable to a discursive field or a paradigm that tacitly
shapes, informs, confirms, and supports a broad range of actions performed by whites. Across various contexts, these actions are designed to uphold the privileges and power of whites. The white gaze, given the power of the ocular metaphor in Western culture, is an important site of power and control, a site that is structured by the white episteme and in turn perpetuates the white episteme. As I will argue, the gaze cannot be confined to the physical eye. The gaze is literally a species of the ocular power of “looking” and “seeing,” being “looked at” and “being seen.” Hence, though taking its departure from a literal form of “seeing,” the gaze (and in this case the white gaze) manifests itself in other modalities such as socially constructing the Other as “Other,” that is, being the represented “Other,” being the manipulated “object” of a manipulating “subject,” being a discursive artifact of a certain discursive field, being a cultural production, and being fashioned through a generative episteme that implicates “cognitive agents within social practices.” I am reminded of Kant where he says that percepts without concepts are blind, and concepts without percepts are empty. The dark body is “seen,” but this “darkness” does not mean anything without the (generative) concepts through which that which is “seen as dark” gets mediated/constructed.

**Method**

My methodological approach will involve a form of ideology exposure. My use of ideology exposure vis-à-vis whiteness involves the following three integrally related aims: a) to expose whiteness as a practice that is invested in masking its historically contingent structure and presenting its “truths” as if they were completely unconditioned, universal, and dislocated from a historically limited, reactive-value creating hegemonic
site of power; b) to expose that whiteness involves the process of attributing a natural status (in the sense in which a physicalist would say “x exists”) to something that fundamentally has a socio-historical status. In other words, to expose the ways in which white racists objectify their own practices “to be something ‘foreign’ to them, especially if they take that activity to be a natural process outside their control”; and, c) to expose white racism as consisting of projective fantasies and to expose how these function. In other words, I will expose the fact that the regime of whiteness creates barriers that function to nullify the reality that such fantasies exist, that whites react to them, and that they are products created by whites themselves. Moreover, these fantasies, through various processes of denial (e.g., rationalization), are reconfigured in the form of “truths” and “facts” about the Black body. These so-called truths and facts about the Black body are buttressed by a racial realism that assumes that there is a direct referential correspondence between the language of racism (Blacks are inferior, child-like, hyper-sexed, lazy) and the Black body qua referent. These fantasies also function as barriers that prohibit the recognition of the humanity of (non-white) Others. Whites thereby refuse to see their own practices as fundamentally immoral and misanthropic. My use of ideology exposure is predicated upon a certain modality of suspicion regarding something (in this case, whiteness) that re-presents itself as “true”/“real” when in fact it is false/unreal. On this score, whiteness is understood as an idol, an imposter of universality, moral purity, and natural superiority, that demands demystification not only for non-whites, but for the sake of the existential integrity of whites. I understand the use of exposure to be a form of philosophical and political intervention into the structure of
whiteness. Each site of exposure points toward the hope of existential conversion regarding the values of whiteness.

This dissertation, then, involves the critical analysis of four themes, all of which are integrally related. First, I will explore the structure of whiteness as the transcendental signified and interrogate this structure and thereby expose whiteness as a historically constructed value-creating power that assumes the role of speaking as the oracle voice, as if it is the one and only universal voice. It is not enough to show that whiteness is a false universal that masquerades as a “true universal,” it is also important to expose how whiteness came to construct itself as universal. As stated, however, whiteness as the transcendental signified is inextricably linked, in this case, to the ways in which the Black body becomes “Othered” and is demonized. Hence, I will explore the emergence of white supremacy within the context of the emergence of European modernity and Europe’s expansionist hegemony. It is “European expansionism in its various forms – expropriation, slavery, colonialism, settlement – [that] brings race into existence as a global social reality, with the single most important conceptual division historically being that between ‘whites’ and ‘nonwhites.’”\textsuperscript{88} While Mills does not mention gender or class within this context, and it is not clear that he needs to given the historically pervasive Manichean (white-Black) divide resulting from European expansionism, it is still important to note their significance as powerful vectors of social ordering and oppression. Within the context of European expansionism, Mills notes:

Those termed white have generally had a civil, moral, and juridical standing that has lifted them above the other “races.” They have been the
expropriators; others have been the expropriated. They have been the slave
owners; others have been the slaves. They have been the colonizers; others
have been the colonized. They have been the settlers; others have been the
displaced. So one gets a formal ontological partitioning in the population
of the planet, signified by “race.”

Second, I will expose the structure of the white gaze in terms of how it is linked to
the raced structuration of the visual field and the raced codification of the visualized
Other. This requires exposing the dynamics of “seeing” the Other as “Othered,”
particularly in terms of how this form of “seeing” is structured through a white racist
episeme, one that has deep implications for the development of “sciences” that are laden
with xenophobic and misanthropic norms of categorization. In other words, I will expose
how the white gaze is constituted through the medium of white power and serves the
maintenance of white power, how the white gaze “sees” differences along a hierarchical
chain of Being, thus perpetuating the myth/idol of Western supremacy and further
cementing the illusion that whites are “superior” to nonwhites because whites possess a
trans-historical essence that grounds their “superiority.”

The third theme involves an examination of the phenomenological return of the
Black body. It is one thing to admit that the Black body has been oppressed, enslaved. It
is quite another to provide an analysis of the profoundly distorted phenomenological
effects upon the lived Black body. My objective is to expose how the Black body
undergoes a process of ontological calcification, as it were, into that which is deemed
inferior, ugly, savage, and lascivious. The Black body vis-à-vis the white gaze undergoes
a historical process of becoming, revealing itself through various transformations in the phenomenological mode of appearing perverse, uncivilized, and dirty. It is precisely this phenomenological return of the Black body, the fact that Blacks undergo a process of epistemic violence, not only in terms of how they become “known” by whites, but through the internalization of white myths and fictions, that helps to serve the function of white nation building and world-making.

The fact that the body, in this case, the Black body, is capable of undergoing a socio-historical process of “phenomenological return” vis-à-vis whiteness, speaks to how I understand and theorize the body. Moreover, how I conceptually anchor my understanding of the body demonstrates the reality that the Black body is capable of negating/opposing/resisting a distorted phenomenological return and reclaiming and re-performing its being-in-the-world in ways that re-signify its meaning, that places it within reach and within range of a counter-episteme that reads against the semiosis of whiteness. On this score, the meaning of the body is not that which is “given” trans-historically. As Foucault says, the body does not escape the sway of history, and hence there is the need to “expose a body [the Black body] imprinted by history….“

The body’s meaning, its ontology, its modalities of aesthetic performance, its comportment, is in constant contestation. The hermeneutics of the body, how it is understood, how it is “seen,” its “truth,” is partly the result of a profound historical, ideological construction. “The body” is positioned by historical practices and discourses. The body is codified as this or that in terms of meanings that are sanctioned, scripted, and constituted through processes of negotiation that are embedded within and serve various ideological interests that are grounded within further power-laden social processes. The
historical plasticity of the body, the fact that it is a site of contested meanings, and that it can undergo what I am referring to as a “phenomenological return,” speaks to the historicity of its “being” as lived and meant within the interstices of social semiotics. Hence: a) the body is less of a thing/a being than a shifting/changing historical meaning that is subject to cultural configuration/reconfiguration. The point here is to interrogate the “Black body” as a “fixed and material truth” which pre-exists “its relations with the world and with others”\(^{91}\); b) the body’s meaning is fundamentally symbolic.\(^{92}\) The body’s meaning is congealed through symbolic repetition and iteration that emits certain signs and presupposes certain norms; and, c) the body is, as stated, a battlefield, one that is fought over again and again across particular historical moments. “In other words, the concept of the body provides only the illusion of self-evidence, facticity, “thereness” for something fundamentally ephemeral, imaginary, something made in the image of particular social groups.”\(^{93}\) On this score, it is not only the “Black body” that defies the ontic fixity projected upon it through the white gaze, and, hence, through the episteme of whiteness, but the white body is also fundamentally symbolic, requiring demystification of its status as norm, the paragon of beauty, order, innocence, purity, restraint, and nobility. In other words, given the three suppositions above, both the “Black body” and the “white body” lend themselves to processes of interpretive fracture, and to strategies of interrogating and removing the veneer of their alleged objectivity.

Given the above, this dissertation would be incomplete without a consideration of how Black bodies have resisted the distorted ways in which they have undergone processes of phenomenological return vis-à-vis the systemic practices of whiteness prevalent within the context of an anti-Black world. It is here that one might ask,
“Resistance in the name of what?” Hence, the fourth theme is to theorize a conception of Black resistance that is linked to issues of counter-identity formation, ways in which Blacks have historically resisted white performances that help to generate the distorted phenomenological return of the Black body, a body which is actually the return of the white same. My aim is to explore ways of reclaiming the Black body along a philosophical route that avoids the specter of essentialism, and, yet, is able to lay claim to a conception of Black identity, and Black embodiedness. Of course, given the parasitic formation of white identity in terms its construction of Blackness, I will also suggest ways of reclaiming the “white body” that avoid certain strains within the area of critical whiteness studies, namely, the race traitor advocates.

This dissertation makes significant incursions into the abstract domain of philosophical practices. Undertaking this project in the field of philosophy precisely theorizes against the grain that the sine qua non of philosophical analysis is to “abstract away from history and social process to get at ostensibly necessary and universal truths about people qua people, the deep eternalities of the human condition.”94 This project does speak to/about the human condition, but it is grounded in critical inquiry, which, by its very nature, is fallible. There is no attempt to discern abstract truths or eternal verities regarding whiteness or the phenomenological return of the Black body. The philosophical examination of whiteness and the Black body places me squarely within the domain of social ontology, a form of ontology that does not move (or pretend to move) beyond the existential.

When dealing with the messiness of race, I imagine that many philosophers would rather relegate it to the confines of sociology, biology, anthropology, and history. After
all, Western philosophy concerns itself with the most general truths about the human condition, truths that transcend the murkiness of race, racism, and embodiment. I agree with Mills that abstraction is not in and of itself to be avoided. The point here is to avoid the idealizing of abstraction that abstracts itself from important determinants. So many times I have taken courses or sat in on courses in Western philosophy, with its usual cadre of white male representatives, and there is absolutely no mention by the professors of how race/racism (misogyny and class) structured the views of the so-called major philosophers. What is so difficult about saying, “Yes, Kant was a racist and that the various instantiations of his Categorical Imperative would have proven problematic in their application to Blacks, particularly given Kant’s understanding of Africans”? But even when the taboo of rendering philosophy concrete is momentarily lifted, revealing its bad faith regarding its racist history, this is done in such a way that Western philosophy’s racism is treated as an incidental, extrinsic feature that can be excised from what are otherwise brilliant philosophical insights that are untainted with such mundane and quotidian matters as race/racism. It is important that white philosophers radically critique their “uncomplicated” raced bodies and the raced corpus of Western philosophical discourse. Making important incursions into the whiteness of philosophy through the process of demanding important meta-philosophical questions, philosopher Anna Stubblefield notes:

Many [nonwhite philosophers] struggle with feeling that they, themselves—their bodies, their experiences, their worldviews—are at best ignored and at worst seriously and harmfully misrepresented in what they
have been taught as the philosophical tradition. They have had to invest
their time and energy and self-definition (what does it mean to be a
philosopher?) in an intellectual history that fundamentally denies them full
standing and relegates their experiences to the margins of “particularity”
in contrast to the center of white “universality.” White philosophers, on
the other hand, can easily avoid ever having to think about their racial
identity in relation to their work. A white person in philosophy can be
considered a well-educated philosopher and one who has made important
contributions to the field without having to think even once about race,
without having to think of himself [herself] as raced.”

It is also important to keep in mind that the concept of race evolves out of a socio-
historical and material set of conditions/forces that are inextricably linked to the West.

Mills:

Indeed, Westerners created race in the first place, by demarcating
themselves from other “races,” bringing into existence a world with two
poles, so it is doubly ironic that they should feign a hands-washing
ignorance of these realities. Once the sociality and historicity of the term
is recognized, the claim that philosophy, along with less lofty varieties of
intellectual labor, is going to be influenced by race should seem less
provocative and controversial. This claim does not imply any kind of
biological determinism; rather, it entails a pervasive social construction, a
set of positions in a global structure, for which race will be an assigned
category that influences the socialization one receives, the life-world in
which one moves, the experiences one has, the worldview one develops—
in short, in an eminently recognizable and philosophically respectable
phrase, one’s being and consciousness.”

Value and Unique Contribution of Project

In the 1990s, white scholars such as David Roediger, Ruth Frankenberg, Richard Dyer,
and Peggy McIntosh published seminal works that influenced the critical study of
whiteness, challenging other white scholars to examine ways in which whiteness remains
unmarked and silent, and, thereby, formative and powerful. The objective was to render
whiteness visible, a project that Black thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison,
James Baldwin, bell hooks, and Toni Morrison had already long begun. While many
white scholars have made remarkable and insightful contributions toward the end of
rendering whiteness visible, it is of great value that Black scholars, like myself, help keep
whiteness studies theorists honest through the process of revealing the existential cost of
whiteness to Black lives. It is very easy for whiteness studies theorists to occupy safe
spaces within the academy as sites for theoretical discourse regarding the socio-historical
problematicity of whiteness. On this reading, various disciplinary approaches to
whiteness might be said to seize upon critical whiteness discourse as a means to repress
collective guilt given their historical lack of concern and silence vis-à-vis white racism.
For many whites, critiquing whiteness at the level of the theoretical may result in
psychological and “moral” dividends, but fail to provide the necessary initiative and
courage (on the part of whites) needed to bring about substantial systemic socio-political change. Of course, in the end, a Black and white critical discourse regarding whiteness is necessary. In this way, a shared and honest critical discourse regarding whiteness may evolve, a critical discourse that is capable of prolongation in the face of moments of mutual misunderstanding, exaggeration, defensiveness, denial, and myopia.

Although I draw from the work of critical whiteness theorists, particularly in terms of rendering whiteness as *seen*, I remain focused dialectically upon the impact of whiteness on the Black body/existence in Black. Hence, within this project, by means of ideology exposure, not only do I expose some of the ways in which whiteness operates as a site of invisibility, but I also focus on what I term the “phenomenological return” of the Black body. It is one thing for critical whiteness theorists to become cognizant of their whiteness as norm; it is another for Blacks to do so. This speaks to the interplay between my standpoint approach and ideology exposure. As a Black male who has experienced the invisibility “tactics” of whites, indeed, experienced what it means to be a “victim” of such “tactics,” my standpoint epistemological framework provides a way of offsetting white ways of being normative.

The critical gaze that I cast upon whiteness does not dehumanize white people. As an embodied Black person, it is an assertion of my subjectivity, a form of subjectivity that has been historically denied by whites, not a form of subjectivity that deems itself absolute and normative or takes the form of a racist superimposition. Whites are the carriers of the norm. I am the victim of the norm. Whites “see” me through the norm; whereas, I see whites through the norm’s impact upon me. Think here of how many women experience having been sexually objectified by men. And then think of how many
men do not think of their sexual enactments as forms of “objectification,” but as normal ways of interacting with women. As “objects” of the norm, women are able to speak truth/knowledge to male normative power, to provide more complete accounts of the implications of such power in ways that many men, because of having been shaped by institutional male performative roles, are unaware. Males have very little reason to be motivated to understand the negative impact of their positions of power on women. Also, the majority of whites have very little reason to thematize and call into question the norms that privilege them and thereby marginalize non-whites. As whiteness theorist Ruth Frankenberg maintains, “Whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitely excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it.”

Hence, whites’ understanding of themselves will be significantly distorted; whereas, as a Black person, I am invested in exposing and critiquing whiteness, and disrupting the status quo of white normativity and power. Hence, the place from which I gaze upon whiteness, my standpoint, empowers my efforts and insights toward a more complete form of exposing and understanding whiteness.

The unique contribution of this dissertation is that the full range of the following themes as they relate to whiteness has not been undertaken within a single project. These themes are: a) exposing whiteness as the transcendental signified, b) exposing the white gaze vis-à-vis a white episteme, c) providing and extending, within the philosophical and psychological framework of Fanon, a descriptive account of the deformation of the Black body, d) examining Black resistance to whiteness and e) theorizing the process of
existential conversion as a means through which whites can re-narrate their identities in ways which belie whiteness as an absolute value/meta-narrative.

Many professional white philosophers have only relatively recently begun to explore whiteness, to name it, to critique it, to disrupt it. And out of these philosophers, the majority have been white feminist philosophers. Although Black philosophers have been incredibly forthright and diligent in carving out critical discursive spaces within philosophy and academia, more generally, regarding the importance of giving philosophical attention to the concept of race, my edited volume, What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question (2004), is the first anthology that contains a critical collection of philosophical essays on whiteness written by Black philosophers. Moreover, my recently published anthology, White on White/Black on Black (2005), is the first to call upon white and Black philosophers to explore what it means to be white/Black, respectively, within the same volume. This dissertation is consistent with my intellectual commitment to at least one major goal in the field of African-American philosophy or Africana thought, that is, to deploy theory in the service of struggle and liberation. Given the pervasiveness of white supremacy, the relevance of this dissertation reaches far beyond the disciplinary confines of philosophy. Whiteness matters because it speaks to how certain (white or nonwhite) bodies will generally undergo certain experiences, how they will be generally differentially positioned within the polity, and how one’s being and consciousness will be more or less predictably shaped.
Outline of Chapters

In chapter two, I draw from a number of critical whiteness theorists and from my use of ideology exposure to demystify whiteness. My aim is to delineate various quotidian examples of how the power of whiteness is predicated upon a normative structure and to demonstrate the instability of this normative structure. Part of the use of the term exposure has to do with showing the limitations of something that takes itself to be universal. This process of exposing/uncovering (showing the limits of) that which is passed off as universal/normative is a common link shared by ideology exposure and critical whiteness studies. Both are attendant to particular value-codes (whiteness within this context) that presume to detach themselves from their historicity and contingent character.

In chapter three, I will pull from the work of three significant theorists of colonial oppression—Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi—who have insightfully theorized white colonial spaces. It is my contention that white colonial spaces do indeed attempt to produce, sustain, and defend new forms of “knowledge” regarding what is normative, and, thereby, attempt to script the colonized as a “natural” category. The work of these theorists will explicate whiteness in terms of its generative and productive racial economy, an economy that is not only driven by whiteness as the transcendental signified, but an economy that has profound negative implications for both the colonized and the colonizer. In critical whiteness literature, there is a significant lacuna as few critical whiteness studies theorists draw from the work of Césaire, Fanon, and Memmi. However, these three theorists provide theoretical insights that can be marshaled both in the service of a descriptive account of whiteness qua colonial power and with regard to
the dismantlement of whiteness as a site of “universality” by exposing just how whiteness is predicated upon specific colonial interests and values (material, political, cultural) that are served through the dialectical reconfiguration of Blackness, the native, the colonized as animal-like, inferior, and bestial. My aim here is to fill this lacuna by drawing from their work to expose the socio-ontological construction of the colonizer/colonized. I will also note how non-white women were constructed within the white male colonial imaginary. Specifically, I give attention to the French male (white) colonial gaze vis-à-vis Sarah Bartmann, the so-called Hottentot Venus. The aim of this chapter is to expose colonialism as structured along a Manichean divide and how this divide juxtaposes the embodiment of the colonized vis-à-vis the colonizer. After all, it is this colonial, epistemological, and socio-ontological productive space within which the “raced” deformation of Sarah Bartmann’s body takes place. Again, central here is how the Black body gets returned.

In chapter four, I analyze the production of the Black body and its phenomenological return as this theme is either alluded to or explicitly examined in the work Frantz Fanon, Ralph Ellison, Malcolm X, and W.E.B. Du Bois. In exploring the phenomenological return of the Black body, I also show how Du Bois’ notion of double consciousness is a species of the existential and phenomenological instantiation of the negative return of the Black body. I will also provide an exploration of Du Bois’ understanding of the structure of whiteness as he develops this in his pivotal essay, “The Souls of White Folk” (1920). Although critical whiteness studies theorists draw from Du Bois’ use of the concept of double consciousness and his notion of whiteness as a psychological wage, his essay on whiteness has been overlooked. Du Bois’ essay
provides another critical hermeneutic lens through which to understand whiteness as the transcendental signified, and, hence, understand the powerful dynamics manifested within the phenomenon of double consciousness. Du Bois is aware of the devastating consequences (upon Blacks and whites) that result when whiteness as the apex of humanity is lived within the social space of human transaction. He notes, “This assumption that of all the hues of God whiteness alone is inherently and obviously better than brownness or tan leads to curious acts.”104 It is these “curious acts,” for example, where Blackness is constructed as evil and whiteness is constructed as good, which negatively impact the Black body/self. Indeed, Du Bois’ understanding of double consciousness, as a form of pathology, does not make sense outside of the “racial” performance of these “curious acts.”

In chapter five, I will explore how Black people have resisted the distorted and distorting projections of the white imaginary and re-narrated their body/selves through the embodiment of rich existential and cultural practices that they themselves have forged out of a larger matrix of historical struggle. My point here is that the white gaze, though undeniably pervasive in its pernicious and violent performative impact on Black people, is not immune to processes of critical intervention. Indeed, as argued above, it is precisely given how I conceptually anchor my understanding of the body that demonstrates the reality that the Black body is capable of resisting and transcending its distorted phenomenological return.

Chapters six and seven reflect the themes that structure the dissertation as a whole: a) exposing whiteness, b) exposing the white gaze, c) exposing the dynamics involved in the phenomenological return of the Black body, and d) exploring the theme
of Black resistance. My objective is to examine two texts, one non-fiction and the other fiction, treating them as case examples, as a means for illustrating the above four themes. The texts are very provocative forms of African-American literature that provide insights into the existential phenomenological dynamics of the white/Black Manichean divide. Hence, in chapter six, I draw from two of Frederick Douglass’s three socio-politically and existentially rich autobiographical narratives, gleaning insights regarding whiteness and the deformation of the Black body. Drawing from the work of Simone de Beauvoir, who was greatly influenced by the phenomenological and politico-praxic work of Black novelist Richard Wright, it is argued that Douglass disrupts the power/knowledge regime of white American slavery through the exercise of his existential reality in the form of agential transcendence. Within this chapter, I will delineate what Beauvoir terms in The Ethics of Ambiguity “the serious man.” Whiteness is fundamentally predicated upon the construction of a “serious world,” one that enables whiteness to sustain itself as an unconditioned state of being. On this score, acts of performing whiteness are interpreted as forms of flight from agency.

In chapter seven, I will explore and expound upon the exposure of the psychological deformation of the fictional character Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye. I argue that Du Bois’ use of double-consciousness is indispensable for understanding Pecola’s psychopathology. Pecola is one of the most tragic figures in African-American fictional literature. Pecola is the quintessential product of the white gaze and white hegemony. Indeed, her psyche, through the dynamic process of epistemic violence, will be shown to bear the devastating consequences that stem from the power/knowledge regime of whiteness. The Bluest Eye, however, does not restrict itself
to exposing Pecola Breedlove’s psychological fissure vis-à-vis the social and aesthetic performance of whiteness as the transcendental signified. Morrison is keenly aware of the complex relational reality of identity. Hence, the pathology of double consciousness from which Pecola suffers is also shown to be linked to her parents, both of whom not only bear the psychological scars of whiteness-induced self-hatred, but function as conduits through which the powerful norms of whiteness get performed. Pecola’s immediate community also forms a powerful social matrix within which to understand her fractured identity. Although in The Bluest Eye Morrison implicitly acknowledges the function of the blues as a mode of resistance, I will explicitly elaborate upon the character Claudia McTeer’s disruption of the impact of whiteness through the power of a blues ontology.

Given the dialectic between whiteness and Blackness, or the distorted Black body vis-à-vis the white gaze, and the distorted white body vis-à-vis the white gaze, in chapter eight I explore how whites might live their phenotypic white bodies in ways that are not structured through white racist hegemony. I will draw upon Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of existential conversion as an important approach for whites in their struggle toward anti-white racist forms of whitely being-in-the-world.

Notes

1 The following functions as a personal testimony. The testimony is actually a collapsed scene of a variety of experiences of how my Black body has been marked vis-à-vis the white gaze. As African sociologist Felly Nkweto Simmonds says, my aim is “to explore the relationship between my [Black] body as a social construct and my experience of it [or how it is lived]. I want to examine the relationship I have with my body and how I negotiate, daily,” with those social contexts within which my body is negatively marked. See Felly Nkweto Simmonds, “My Body, Myself: How Does A Black Woman Do Sociology?” in Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 52.
The white male student’s objective in the counter-reading is to use complexity so as to make the problem of complexity less obvious. Critical pedagogy theorist Audrey Thompson points out (in a personal correspondence) that racism is a problem, but this does not make racism less of a problem. What this says is that situations have layers within the small space of the elevator, and the fact that we are alone. So, she clutches her purse. I agree that she feels trepidation by my male presence, my physical proximity to her, and that she needs to defend herself more effectively, but she is also ambivalent about my presence. This counter-reading shows that one can provide a counter-reading of my scenario, that is, a counter-reading of how I read her grabbing her purse, the movement of her eyes, and her bodily posture. This counter-reading shows that it is possible for me to be incorrect in my interpretation of the situation. Indeed, I grant that one needs to clarify this point early on so as to preempt the objection that the problem with “Blackness” can or should be reduced to the level of dark skin qua dark skin.


Concerning the postulation of a “Jewish essence,” philosopher Bettina Bergo observes the following: “Within the ‘white’ paradigm of the European 19th century, alternate ‘essences’ are posited in ways that reinforce the ‘normality’ of the European Christian mind and body. Among the British, for example, Francis Galton photographed dozens of Jewish high school boys and proceeded to superimpose three to four photographs at a time, with a view to adumbrating the ‘essences’ of the ‘Jew’ through his composite images. Indeed, social and ‘scientific’ approaches to ‘Jews’ in 19th and 20th century Europe provide acute indicators of the impact of racist social imaginaries on what one perceives. For, Jews were alternately considered ‘white’ and not-white, degenerate or infantile yet intellectually gifted, according to the strategies and goals of a particular discourse. A similar binaristic ambivalence is found toward Asians; less ambivalence was evinced toward Africans.” See Bettina Bergo, “‘Circulez! Il n’y a rien à voir,’ or, ‘Seeing White’: From Phenomenology to Psychoanalysis and Back,” in George Yancy (ed.) White on White / Black on Black, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 126.

The reader will note that my attempt to grapple philosophically with “racial” embodiment, the dynamics of invisibility, alienation, and the phenomenological return of the Black body, is similar in spirit to the work of African-American philosopher Lewis Gordon and Latina philosopher Linda Alcoff. Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, translated by A. Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1970), xi.


Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 110.


Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 151.


The reader should note that this elevator example is far from uncontroversial. For example, one white male student pointed out to me that it might be argued that the white woman in the elevator had been raped by a man a few months ago. She sees me step onto the elevator and feels my eyes size her up in a “predatory” fashion. Although she has been in intensive psychotherapy, and has since learned how to defend herself more effectively, she feels trepidation by my male presence, my physical proximity to her within the small space of the elevator, and the fact that we are alone. So, she clutches her purse. I agree that this example shows that one can provide a counter-reading of my scenario, that is, a counter-reading of how I read her grabbing her purse, the movement of her eyes, and her bodily posture. This counter-reading shows that it is possible for me to be incorrect in my interpretation of the situation. Indeed, I grant that one of the difficulties with racism is that it is not always obvious. It can be difficult to tell within given situations whether someone is simply having a bad day, is generally obnoxious, is preoccupied, or is a racist. However, this does not make racism less of a problem. What this says is that situations have layers of complexity. Critical pedagogy theorist Audrey Thompson points out (in a personal correspondence) that if the white male student’s objective in the counter-reading is to use complexity so as to make the problem
of racism disappear, then this is an invalid use of complexity. She also notes, and I agree, that what is interesting is that whites may worry about whether someone is being obnoxious, having a bad day, etc., but they don’t worry about racism when it comes to how they are addressed. Moreover, within a systemically racist context as America, it is reasonable to suspect racism, even if one happens to be incorrect, though this can function as an easy way of not attending to greater layers of hermeneutic complexity that may point beyond racism in any given situation. Whiteness theorist Christine Sleeter (in a personal correspondence) notes that “what white students often find it more difficult to understand is that generally people of color know that they may over-interpret race, but can’t afford not to because most of the time the interpretation is correct.” I would only add that it could also prove fatal for people of color to respond to each situation as if it were sui generis. It would be great to respond to white women in elevators, white State police officers who pull Black males over, white realtors who show Black people property, bank lenders, and others, beyond the veil of anti-Black racism, but it would be a mistake born of an idealism that is belied by the reality of pervasive white racism in America.

15 Ann DuCille, Skin Trade, 144.
16 DuCille insightfully interprets O.J.Simpson’s trial against the backdrop of racist representations of him as dark and thereby criminal.
17 Thomas Dixon, The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1902), 463-64.
19 The reader will note that the white gaze in this example is a gendered female gaze. Given white supremacist myths around the sexual predatory nature of the Black male, it is not farfetched that the gendered white male would, in a similar situation, also feel fear and anxiety around being sexually assaulted by the Black male. On this reading, the white female and the white male body are said to be sexually vulnerable to Black sexual rapaciousness. As Jessie Daniels notes, “While not eliminating the image of white women as sexual victims of Black men (this is still a central feature of white supremacist discourse), contemporary constructions have amended white men onto this centuries-old racial iconography. Now, white men also see themselves as potential victims of sexual assault by brutish Black men. The extension of white supremacist ideology to include white men as potential victims illustrates the pervasive fear of Black sexuality which is fundamental to white supremacy.” See Jessie Daniels, White Lies: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 39.
21 See n.2
22 As African-American philosopher John H. McClendon notes: “The categories of octoroon, quadroon, mulatto and other such classificatory measures are applied to overcome the problems associated with strict phenotypic description. Genotypic classification or what is more popularly expressed as ‘the one-drop rule’ is ultimately an attempt to shore up the fragile instrument of phenotypic description.” See John H. McClendon’s “On the Nature of Whiteness and the Ontology of Race: Toward a Dialectical Materialist Analysis,” in What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 216-217.
26 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 180.
27 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 225.
28 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 165.
35 Gooding-Williams, “Look, a Negro!” 165.
36 Gooding-Williams, “Look, a Negro!” 166.
38 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 178.
48 My aim here is not to resolve the issue of the “who” in the case of the white woman who fails to realize that “she” sustains the socially constructed nature of the white gaze. I just wanted to show that I understand the complexity involved here. However, intuitively, I am attracted to a “middle position” that emphasizes both the influences of social “determinants” and dynamic processes of human agency. In other words, there is something to be said about the structure of institutional forces and the historical power of whiteness as enduring structures that position the white woman within the context of white power and privilege. Yet, there is something to be said about the fact that the institutional and historical power of whiteness do not continue to exist independently of human agency. On this score, the contingent nature and historicity of the category of whiteness are conceded. As such, the white woman has the potential of being able to recognize the extent to which she cooperates with (continues to choose on the side of) larger systemic processes of white ideologically constructed social formations that are discursively, institutionally, and materially grounded.
49 In the case of the stubborn racist, the use of “extra-discursive” means may prove necessary. While there is much to be said about the postmodern celebration of differences, multiple voices, and the rejection of meta-narratives, to remain agnostic in the face of all forms of life and language-games could lead to a dangerous form of extreme conservatism where “anything goes.” Moreover, the fact of the matter is that the KKK, for example, are not content to celebrate their anti-Black racism in the comfort of their own form of life. What happens when part of the grammar, so to speak, of the KKK’s language-game (or form of life) prescribes the beating, castrating or lynching of Black bodies? Are we simply to celebrate such prescriptions, sitting back and noting their differences? Personally, I answer with a resounding, “No!”
51 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 112.
54 For an interesting discussion of belief-centered and act-centered conceptions of racism, see Katherine D. Witzig’s “Philosophical Analyses of Individual Racism,” Radical Philosophy Review, 4 (1&2), 2001, 78–94.
56 On this score, it is possible to have a context where, for example, poor white office cleaners, though white in their phenotypic constitution, because they do not have the same educational and institutional power as, let us say, a Black male professor, may feel subservient. Of course, they may see the Black professor as an exception, as a credit to his “race.” One even wonders how the same poor white office cleaners see their fellow poor Black office cleaners. And though both the poor white cleaners and poor
Black cleaners may belong to the same class, it is more than likely that the Black cleaners, and the Black professor, though they occupy a different node on the rung of socio-economic class stratification, will be profiled as they walk around in a GAP department store or drive on the New Jersey Turn Pike. It is racism qua colorism (a form of pigmentocracy) that makes the difference, privileging phenotypic whiteness over phenotypic Blackness. There are also contexts within which these same poor white office cleaners may even feel superior to the Black professor. For example, it is conceivable that these same poor white office cleaners find themselves within a context where their whiteness not only signifies power, but becomes important/makes a difference in terms of their personal deployment of whiteness (for example, in a court of law) when acting in the capacity of their own witness or being a witness for someone else. This would be a context within which their word trumps the words of the Black professor regardless of his/her institutional power, education. Hence, I am led to conclude that whiteness is a sign whose instrumental value is relative to various contexts. Whiteness is unstable across contexts and institutional social relations in terms of how much power it can deploy. Hence, whiteness is a socially constructed sign whose power is mobile and dependent upon different contexts for its effective deployment. However, I still maintain that a white person, even if he/she makes all disclaimers to holding racist beliefs/attitudes, can, because of how he/she is positioned by racist institutions, reap benefits from being white in phenotypic constitution over and above his/her intentions.

58 Carl Gutierrez-Jones provides a very insightful reading of the killing of Amadou Diallo and how his death can be interpreted within the context of how racist narratives are constructed and function to buttress the Black body as criminal. He convinces readers of the importance of taking into account how the white NYPD officers came with their own pre-judgments/narratives regarding the “threatening” nature of Diallo’s actions. On this view, Black bodies are weaved into larger narratives that depict any minority body, no matter how it is positioned, whether on the ground with the palms of its hands showing or standing in the entranceway of its own home, as criminal. As Gutierrez-Jones notes, “For its part, the prosecution claimed that we can only fully understand Diallo’s shooting by approaching critically the assumptions [white racist narrative assumptions] that the officers carried with them as they confronted Diallo. In this interpretation, Diallo’s presumed guilt set in motion a chain of events that had little if any basis in evidence and certainly took no account of the fact that Diallo may himself have been fearful of four burly, civilian-dressed men who aggressively approached at [sic] him. The defense lawyers worked to censor these sorts of considerations altogether, arguing that the only way to judge the officers was to view their actions as a split-second, life-or-death decision. This tactic effectively evacuated Diallo as a person; as understood by the defense lawyers, he was significant only in terms of the officers’ projection of him as a threat.” See his book Critical Race Narrative: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 4.
59 This raises the larger issue concerning the ways in which white embodiment might be counter-configured within the context of a white semiotics that is supported by white supremacist institutional and material power.
60 It is important to note, however, that I realize that being a Black male qua Black male may not necessarily lead to a perspective, a range and depth of vision and knowledge, of which those in power (read: white) are devoid. After all, think of the scenario where a bourgeois Black male has been raised in such a way that he has been insulated from experiencing his existential reality as marginalized and oppressed. Although Black, he may come to “see” himself in ways that are not as complete or “objective” as other Black males (who have been marginalized, oppressed, and the objects of white hatred) see him. Indeed, it would appear to follow that some whites, economically poor whites, might come to develop a form of knowledge that is more complete regarding his bourgeois identity and social role than his knowledge of them. I relate this example to note that I am cognizant of these exceptions. It is my contention, however, that within North America, for example, Black folk, generally speaking, have had to gain a more complete knowledge of whites in ways that whites have not had to gain knowledge of Blacks. In the end, though, these observations do not in any way render insignificant the knowledge-seeking and knowledge-producing liberatory efforts of anti-racist whites. See Sandra Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women’s Lives (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 371.
67 Mills, *From Class to Race*, 192.
70 Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 57.
71 For an elaboration on this concept of “being just me” in Black, see my chapter “Seeing Blackness’ from Within the Manichean Divide,” in *White on White / Black on Black*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 235–238.
73 Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 33.
75 West, *Race Matters*, x.
76 West, *Race Matters*, x.
77 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 165.
85 As I will show, this returned distorted appearance can have powerful somatic consequences for non-white bodies, leading to profound levels of self-hatred, double consciousness, feelings of body distortion, and psychological rupture. Moments of living one’s non-white body as the object of white projections is not limited to the identification with, or the internalization of, the distorted projections. It is enough that the white engages in a set of racist communicative practices that signify for me that I am somehow disturbingly different. Because we are always already social, we come to develop a certain semiotic literacy regarding how bodies react to us. Hence, a young Black child in a class with all white students will become aware of her difference - perhaps becoming hyper-vigilant about her darkness in ways that she had not been prior to coming to that class - as she is summarily not called upon when she raises her hand to respond to a question. She will begin to cognize herself, feel herself, indeed, *live her being* in the mode of an outsider, a stranger.
91 For an elaboration on these three interpretive points regarding the body, see Deborah E. McDowell, “Recovering Missions: Imagining the body Ideals,” in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self*
92 McDowell, “Recovering Missions,” 301.
93 McDowell, “Recovering Missions,” 301.
94 Mills, Blackness Visible, xiv.
95 Mills, Blackness Visible, xiv.
96 Mills, Blackness Visible, 118.
98 Mills, Blackness Visible, xv.
101 As I will demonstrate in chapter six, Frederick Douglass, an enslaved Black male, not only provides insight into the impact of whiteness upon Blacks, but he reveals how whiteness negatively impacts whites qua “slave masters.”
103 The reader will note that each of these theorists provided critiques of colonialism whether it was practiced in Algeria, Tunisia, or elsewhere. It is also important to note that each of these thinkers speak from an existential phenomenological here with regard to colonialism. Each of them knew what it was like to undergo processes of Otherization within a Manichean colonial order. Cesaire was born in 1913 in Martinique, a French colony, and became deeply committed to political life and was involved in anti-colonial and Pan-African movements. Memmi was born in 1920 in colonial Tunisia. While there, he was treated as an inferior, had his political rights denied, etc. Fanon was born in 1925 also in colonial Martinique. He experienced colonial racism while fighting with the French army in World War II, and while in France, Fanon’s phenomenological descriptions of the lived reality of Blacks vis-à-vis whiteness/white racism continue to have powerful relevance in America’s so-called color-blind historical moment. The point is that each theorist provides mutually reinforcing critical observations that elucidate and critique various aspects (cultural, psychological, racial/racist, economic) of the structure of colonial experience. Moreover, their works were also important in liberation struggles in other parts of Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in North America. Some may reject my use of their work to speak to racism in post-1960s North America. Although the argument is not made here, American racism might be described as a form of “colonialism” or “neo-colonialism” as this gets expressed domestically and internally along systemic racist lines in North America.
Chapter II

Whiteness: “Unseen” Things Seen

In our usual ways of thinking about this, whiteness is something you don’t have to think about. It is just *there*. It is a naturalized state of being. It is “normal.” Anything else is “other.” It is the there that is never there. But, it is there, for in repositioning ourselves to see the world as constituted out of relations of power and privilege, whiteness as privilege plays a crucial role.

—Michael W. Apple

It is hypocritical to espouse the importance of race theories on the one hand and then turn a blind eye to the daily, personal interactions that center on racial dynamics on the other.

—Frances V. Rains

*Philosophy is not simply born of the mind, but born of the body.* This heretical claim—at least judged to be so from some philosophical orientations—shapes my philosophical embarkation vis-à-vis an analysis of whiteness as a fundamental *process* of racialization. Since my project revolves around race as an embodied experiential phenomenon, as that which gets produced and performed within the social interstices of quotidian life, it is important that my philosophical discourse on race is not abstracted from the everyday world of how people are “raced” within the context of various social transactions. It is *not* my contention, however, that this is the only approach in terms of which to make sense of race.

There has been a great deal of important work that argues that race is semantically empty, ontologically bankrupt, and scientifically meaningless. In short, there are many philosophers who argue that race is an illusion, that there is no factual support for a racial taxonomy.¹ Since race has no referent and does not cut at the joints of reality, so to speak,
it is said to be a fiction. From this, we are advised to abandon the concept of race\(^2\) just as the concepts of phlogiston and spontaneous generation were abandoned.\(^3\) On this score, a physicalist view of race would logically lead to the acceptance of eliminativism. “The eliminativist argues that races do not exist, either because they fail to be objective or because they’ve been falsely posited by hopeless theories of human difference.”\(^4\) The problem with this, however, is that the phenomenological or lived intelligibility and reality of “race” exceed what is deemed “real” within the framework of a physicalist ontology. Indeed, one can reject the concept of race from a physicalist perspective, and yet engage in various forms of social performance that are racist. In order words, one can live/embody the fiction of race in such a way that generates real effects in the real world. It is also important to note that to believe that there is no more to be said about race because it is impossible to reduce it to a naturally occurring object in the spatiotemporal world is to engage in a form of disciplinary hegemony. As African-American philosopher John McClendon notes, “Being in nature does not limit the boundaries of reality.”\(^5\) In stream with McClendon, Afro-Caribbean philosopher Clevis Headley points out that it should not be taken lightly that “‘Whiteness’ does not name a real essence precisely because it is not a natural kind . . . . At the same time, we should also not be seduced into a dogmatic realist treatment of ‘whiteness’ as an empty and meaningless semantic term.”\(^6\)

To engage the issue of whiteness as a process of racialization is not to fall into a problematic and unwanted essentialism. The fact is that whiteness continues to exist within the socially and existentially lived sphere of our experiences. On this score, I reject the following disjunction: “either race is biologically real or it is non-existent.” On my view, race is neither biologically real nor is it “non-existent.” A physicalist ontology
does not exhaust all the ways in which we talk about the being/reality of things. The “reality” of race, then, though not a natural kind, is purchased within the framework of a social ontology that recognizes the very serious persistence and implications of race beyond its ontic vacuity. In short, the persistence of race does not have anything to do with its “ontic” reality or its “biologist” basis. Let X represent race. On this score, “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.”

“Race,” in other words, is a social category, but the real bodily-cum-material-institutional-symbolic effects of race are profoundly devastating to which the history of racism attests. In order to sustain the effects of race as “a real social kind at some site . . . [there] has to be present . . . social forces—labels, institutions, individual intentions, laws, mores, values, traditions—combined in a dynamic with enough strength to give the category presence and impact at that site.”

On this score, whiteness is not a metaphysical substantive; it is a relationally lived phenomenon. This is why I emphasize the importance of narrative vis-à-vis “race.” Narrative is important because of its powerful capacity to communicate lived and imaginative dimensions of reality. This approach advances the importance of narrative as a dynamic structure through which we weave and reweave the particulars of lived experience into philosophical discourse without losing either imaginative power or theoretical rigor. Narrative captures the crucible of whiteness qua race beyond mere abstract reflection. One’s feet must be planted firmly on the ground in order to see the “unseen” of whiteness. It is not enough that the concept of race is shown to be false or ontologically bankrupt at the reflective level. Even if science provided an exhaustive list
of reasons why we should abandon race-talk and how race is a fiction, this need not impact the everyday performance of that fiction. In my experience, whiteness is often enacted directly before our eyes. However, if one is seduced by philosophical abstraction alone vis-à-vis race, one might become, like Thales of Miletus, the object of a housemaid’s scornful laughter or even worse the object of white desire, control, fear, or hatred.

At a recent American Philosophical Association (APA) conference, I had the misfortune of living through an experience where the normative status of whiteness was communicated in the form of “advice.” While standing alone at the conference, waiting between sessions, a well-respected white philosopher whom I admire caught sight of me and decided to approach in order to congratulate me on a new book that I had recently edited. I had contributed a chapter detailing aspects of what/who influenced my coming to the field of philosophy. Within the chapter, I consciously decided to use African-American vernacular speech. Had I not drawn from this mode of speech, I would not only have failed to capture the reality of my lived linguistic mode of being-in-the-world, but I would have also failed to honor this speech as a viable mode of communication that was indispensable as a vehicle for capturing what it was like to be raised in the urban ghettos of North Philadelphia. The white philosopher noted how much he had not known about my life and how he really enjoyed reading the chapter. But the rub came when he added: “I really enjoyed it, but why did you use that language [meaning African American vernacular speech]? You speak very well [meaning in “Standard American English.”] You don’t have to use that language to make your point.”
My sense is that his intentions were good. He no doubt thought that he was providing me with helpful advice. There are, however, layers of white racialized meaning within the context of this communicative encounter that need to be exposed. This points to the larger issue of how whiteness gets performed everyday under the banner of “good intentions.” Despite his own philosophical partiality to forms of anti-foundationalism, the social and historical basis of knowledge production, and the acceptance of a form of relativism that this entailed, he showed no recognition that he understood the political and philosophical reasons for my choice of African-American vernacular speech as a locutionary mode for making sense of my cultural reality. Hence, not only did he not see the philosopher in me critically staking out the most effective exegetical means for capturing a unique mode of lived reality, but he did not see the complexity of my identity and how it was possible for me to inhabit joyfully a language-game that was historically described as “baby-talk.” Given the close link between language and identity, in rejecting my use of Black vernacular language, he rejected an important aspect of my identity.

Like the white woman in the elevator, he “saw” something that was phantasmatic. He saw me as a burgeoning Black philosopher on the verge of sacrificing the linguistic and intellectual gifts given to me by Anglo-American culture, gifts for which I ought to be thankful. My use of that language was a clear indication that, at least from his perspective, I had started down the dark side, that I had privileged such embarrassingly sloven speech over “Standard” American philosophyspeak. I had sullied the English language. Like Caliban, he was my Prospero. Like Crusoe, I was his Friday. I had dared to speak my “native” tongue, providing him with the opportunity to remind me that patois was unacceptable within the domain of the “civilized.” His gaze was directed at what
made him feel uncomfortable, perhaps taken aback. And yet, he also saw me through a
c racialized socio-epistemic aperture that made him feel comfortable. For he immediately
disallowed the possibility of being challenged, of having his assumptions and
misconceptions corrected, by my philosophical position vis-à-vis language choice.¹³
Notice that he never said, “slang.” He said, “that language,” which suggested the sense in
which the use of Black vernacular speech offended him in some deep way, and ought to
have offended me. This, however, was not simply about language.

He proceeded with a story about how he was surprised when he heard a well-
known Black philosopher speak at a conference once. By the way, he even had the
audacity to provide the name of the philosopher with absolutely no concern with whether
or not I personally knew this philosopher, which, of course, I did. He noted how poorly,
how badly, this particular Black philosopher had spoken. One might argue that the white
philosopher was simply imposing his class values. While I grant that class was no doubt
operative, it was not sufficient to account for his remarks.

The message was clear and it spoke of race. The problem was not only that I had
used “broken” English to express myself, but it was an issue of him reminding me to
continue to distinguish myself, to make sure that I did not speak like one of my Black
colleagues. It was important that I continue to show the world that I wrote and spoke
“Standard” American English well. After all, he did say, “You speak very well.” In
saying this, I was actually being reduced to his fictive, one-dimensional notion of
“Blackness.” I was being reminded that for a Black, I spoke well. Hence, I was being
reduced to a distorted conception of Blackness, while simultaneously being insulted by
being removed from that general horde of Blacks who speak English so poorly. I was an
exception, perhaps an anomaly. He not only invalidated my unique approach to writing my philosophical autobiography, but he insulted other Blacks, essentializing them, by making me an exception. In fact, I suspect that the subtext of his advice meant that I should continue to speak like him and the majority of white male philosophers. As a representative of that “elite” group, he was there to encourage and secure their intellectual assets, to reinforce their “dispassionate” authority in matters of style, to engage in surveillance to ensure that the white mask that I was expected to wear with honor concealed my Black skin. His ex cathedra pronouncements settled the issue; his was, after all, the white male oracle voice, the imperial self.

I was “too Black” in my speech and thereby speaking an ersatz form of English. As Frantz Fanon observed, “Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world.” Fanon’s observations suggest deeper relationships that may exist between the function of language and a specifically racialized and racist philosophical anthropology: “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language.” In her concluding reflective and insightful remarks regarding the implications of the white philosopher’s reaction to my use of Black vernacular speech, African-American philosopher Janine Jones notes:

Suppose Yancy, following the recommendation of the mysterious, white professor, gave up AAL [African-American Language]: suppose he no longer found it necessary to talk like that, even in speaking about his own
life. What else is he suppose to give up, in addition to his language?

Certain ways of living, I imagine. And should he give them up, where will he then belong? Would he be able to go home? Would his homies recognize him? . . . . Would the academy become his new home, its stewards his new fathers? Would they truly recognize him as one of their own, or would he become their Nigger Son, who no longer possessed the power to express his own life for having freely chosen to extricate his tongue from its roots? Mastery of language may afford remarkable power.

But it should never be forgotten that what we have here is no more than a necessary condition for attaining some (un)certainty degree of power within a world, within an institution where origins of species do matter.17

Asian-American psychologist Derald Wing Sue recalls having experienced what he terms “micro-invalidations and micro-aggressions”18 committed by whites. He had this experience while riding in a cab in Washington, D.C. After some preliminary casual conversation about boxing, the cabdriver said, “You know, you speak excellent English—no accent at all.”19 Sue views the cabdriver’s statement as a reminder that he is an alien in his own country. He maintains that the cabdriver’s assumption was that “only White people speak good English.”20 Raka Shome, whose native tongue is Bengali, remembers when she was being taught “Standard” British English. She relates the entire experience of learning to speak British English and learning English literature as a process of being “caught up in an ‘always already’ desire for the West—and paying a
terrible ideological price for having undergone colonialism. At the risk of making a
generalized statement, we were in many ways participating in our own Orientalizing.”

In my own case, the white philosopher remained silent about his own identity as white. And yet, his interaction with me served to constitute his whiteness. On this score, his normative whiteness was expressed through his maintenance of the status quo regarding “proper” English and how Black philosophers ought to obey basic grammatical rules, particularly if they want to do “serious” philosophy and not be ostracized by respectable white gatekeepers. His whiteness is there and yet not there through his discursive interaction. “You speak English well” marginalizes my identity as Black vis-à-vis his unquestioned (centered) white authority regarding his natural ability to speak English (and perhaps other European languages) well. One might argue that his assessment regarding how well I speak English functioned as an elliptical expression that meant: “You speak English well, but just well enough.” On this interpretation, as I have indicated, I speak English very well for a Black. Yet, as a Black, I speak English just well enough. In short, I parrot really well, but I should not forget that I am Black and thereby still under suspicion, always already perceived as a potential threat. So, I am both encouraged to wear the mask of whiteness, but simultaneously reminded that I should not take the mask too seriously. As Fanon writes, “When a Negro talks of Marx, the first reaction is always the same: ‘We have brought you up to our level and now you turn against your benefactors. Ingrates! Obviously nothing can be expected of you.’”

Within the context of the “safe” space of a professional meeting of American philosophers that space quickly became transformed/reconfigured into a threatening space governed by white male normativity. At the APA, white bodies are thought to
move and have their being in the midst of so-called neutral professional space. However, “as constitutive of the lived space that surrounds the objects of interest in the world, one’s [white] body is part of the horizon through which the disclosure”\textsuperscript{23} of my Black body as problematic is made possible. But what remained unmarked—at least no doubt from his perspective—was his “raced” body as white. The more he talked to me about my problematic use of Black vernacular, the more he no doubt remained distant as the white “raced” authority. One might say that he gets to “play in the dark” without the recognition of how his own white identity is inextricably dependent upon (indeed produced through) my Black body’s inability to achieve the privileged state of normative “absence.”\textsuperscript{24} As Richard Dyer notes:

In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour (as the term “coloured” egregiously acknowledges), and is always particularising; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything—white is no colour because it is all colours. This property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power.

Within the context of the APA conference, I already felt marginalized in a sea of white bodies, but here I was, with someone I knew, in a “benign” social transaction, or so I thought, undergoing a dynamic process of being marginalized and dominated through a ritual of white “praise.” Through the process of what Dreama Moon calls “Whitespeak,” the white philosopher was able to engage in a form of dialogue that concealed that he was
talking about race. The more he talked the more I felt different. The more he spoke from
the discursive center, the more I occupied the discursive margin. “Race is constituted
through the repetition of acts, verbal and nonverbal, that continue to communicate
difference.”25 Drawing from the work of Ruth Frankenberg and Adrienne Rich, Moon
explains white enculturation in terms of evasion of whiteness and white solipsism. Think
here of the white philosopher at the APA:

In the evasion of whiteness, whites experience a disconnection with issues
of race and, indeed, do not “see” . . . issues of race, racism, racial
formation, or the power relations surrounding race as related to their lives.
On the other hand, white solipsism configures the world as a white space
wherein “whiteness” is perceived as a normative and universal condition.26

However, as he continued to point out my racial blunder, suggesting that I had
egregiously “revealed my color,” his whiteness began to feel like an unwanted
imposition. So, this is what the professional field of philosophy had to offer: an unwanted
burden of white bodies determined, with procrustean and narcissistic vigor, to get me to
resign myself to those who failed to see me, to recognize my critical Black subjectivity,
to honor my philosophical perspective on the world. His whiteness became heavy laden
with the unacceptable and ridiculous presumption that bonding, at least philosophically,
with white philosophers meant—for me—some form of self-erasure. In that single
mundane encounter, he became “the master self . . . grasping at the confirmation of its
supremacy through defeating or imposing its existence on [non-white] others.”27 I think
that it is important not to reduce his position vis-à-vis my use of *that* language to an individual anomaly. Rather, it is important to theorize his whitely response within the context of the larger normative values of American philosophy as a significant white institutional force. In this way, the institution of American philosophy no longer appeared to me as a site of play for multiple voices, particularly some of those Black voices replete with their unique inflections, tropes, verb deletions, and so on. All I seemed to hear was: “*turn white or disappear.*”

I have found that within the world of academe, the evasion of whiteness and white solipsism are enacted on a daily basis. Audrey Thomas, part of whose work is importantly concerned with theorizing whiteness vis-à-vis pedagogy, observes, “In educational research, a study of student-centered pedagogy in an all-white classroom is likely to be regarded as ‘not about race,’ whereas a similar study of American Indian students typically would be viewed as involving race.” I recall once having registered for a graduate course in African American literature. My desire was not fueled simply by an intellectual quest to familiarize myself with the African-American literary canon. My aim was not simply to position those texts within the horizon of my own *lived* experiences and assumptions. Rather, I desired to reflect upon *how I was positioned* by those historical texts, how they spoke to me as I spoke to them. The class material and the students proved to be very challenging and stimulating. There was only one Black female student, and I was the only Black male. All of the other students, with the exception of one woman from the Middle East, were white.

One day after discussing Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the
On this particular day, the Black female student was absent. So, there I was challenging whiteness within the “pristine” space of the academy that historically had been closed to Blacks. “After I read these texts, I noticed how angry I became. I find that these texts speak to me as a Black male. I feel angered by the behavior of whites in these texts,” I announced. I went on to add: “I would like to know what the rest of you feel about the white racist behavior of the whites in these texts. Do the texts speak to you as a white person? Do you feel guilty? And how do you feel about the fact that your own whiteness implicates you in a structural white power system from which you are able to gain so many privileges? How do you understand your whiteness vis-à-vis the whites in the texts?” After all, I had a deep visceral response to the various texts. Take Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative, for example. Surely, I thought to myself, the white students feel as enraged as I do by the white sadistic behavior of Covey or Mr. Plummer or the hypocrisy of Mr. Auld? And how does a white person fail to pose counterfactually: “What if I were Covey or Mr. Plummer?” I certainly posed, “What if I were Douglass?” And surely Mr. Flint’s obsessive sexual drive to possess Harriet Jacobs would have stimulated in the white students critical thoughts around the past and contemporary white representations of Black women as overly-sexed, dark, exotic sexual objects.

In retrospect, I should have collapsed my questions into one succinct and effective question. Nevertheless, after posing these questions, there was absolute silence in the room. The silence appeared to last longer than it actually did. Some looked perplexed and others looked thoughtful. However, no one ventured to speak. In a very helpful and skillful pedagogical intervention, the white female professor broke the silence. After
reflecting on this episode many times since, I would now say that she broke the silence of white normativity; she disrupted the performance of whiteness as non-raced, and exposed the sham of whiteness as “innocent” invisibility. She very effectively narrowed my questions down to two. Asking if what she rearticulated was what I was saying, I agreed. Again, however, no one spoke.

Having my questions rearticulated and re-asked from the perspective of a white body apparently made no difference. The silence continued. The norm of whiteness continued to resist exposure, avoiding its own particularization as a “raced” position. The professor then dared say aloud that the emperor wore no clothes. She provided a very thoughtful, short narrative about being born in the South. She specifically named her raced location, disclosing that she was cognizant of her own whiteness as a site of power and privilege. She then explained how she too felt angered by the whites in the text. It was at this moment that one student broke in and attempted to address the questions, even if only in a groping fashion. As the student spoke, one could sense that she appreciated the questions that I had raised. No one else volunteered to respond, though one white male student did say to me as the class ended: “George, I need to get back to you on this. I have not given thought to this before.”

Since that time, I have often wondered what motivated the white students to take that course. As they were mostly graduate students in the English Department, I assume that they were not going to miss the opportunity to take what I believe was an unprecedented course in the department’s history. Beyond this, however, what can be theorized/exposed about how the students understood this course on Black literature vis-à-vis their own identities as white? They came to see, but not to be seen. Perhaps many of
them conceptualized Black literature (indeed, all non-white literature) as an exotic site of difference. My sense is that they came to learn about those dark Others, to get a taste of what the “multicultural” had to offer. They had no idea that a course in African-American literature would fundamentally speak to their whiteness as well; indeed, that it would call into question their privileged status as “non-racialized” readers.

We did read Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark, but the white students did not recognize how they too were “playing in the dark” while their whiteness remained unfathomable, veiled, and curtained. There was no critical self-reflexivity with regard to how they positioned themselves as white readers or how the ideology of whiteness positioned them as “race-free.” In short, the classroom became an important site of performing whiteness. Again, the presumably “benign”—in this case, the reading of Black texts by white students—is exposed as revealing something far more dynamic and extraordinary.

In retrospect, my sense is that the classroom was always already a social formation shaped by the dynamics of whiteness to remain invisible through its normative hegemony. As the white students read the various texts, which were highly charged with racial and racist themes, they spoke not of themselves, but of the texts. Their selective silences, whether conscious or unconscious, allowed them to talk about racism as it was performed within the body of the texts without any attention paid to their own white privilege, which, in this context, signified the very real power to “remove” themselves from the complicity involved in maintaining the normative structure of whiteness. In this case, what was not said was far more revealing than what was said. The “not said” held the group behind a protective racial barrier, so to speak. From behind this barrier, the
white students’ mutually shared self-understanding, their shared interests, and their understanding of what was/was not appropriate territory for interrogation, shaped the classroom dynamics in a specifically racist fashion. This was not a mere symbolic show of power. Their silence controlled the discursive direction of the class, privileged their unquestioned authority to decide the exegetical angle from which to exhume the meaning of the texts, and perhaps instilled levels of trepidation in the few non-white students who may have thought any counter-discursive move might eventuate in some form of unwanted backlash—perhaps being pegged a “hate monger.”

Not naming their whiteness, not identifying their whiteness, had the impact of interpellating Blackness (as exemplified in the texts) as marked, as the “real” object of their gaze. Their whiteness was left unmarked, thus effectively providing them with the needed latitude to distance themselves from the white racists within the texts. They continued to establish racialized meaning within the classroom through the (white) communicative strategy of silence. Whiteness, as normative, legitimated their silence; indeed, guaranteed their whiteness as absence. As John T. Warren argues:

The presence of the body of color and the fact that it cannot achieve absence is exactly what maintains white privilege. It is exactly the presence of “different” bodies that demands the hierarchy which places whiteness invariably over color, for what could ensure the dominance of whiteness more than the impossibility of the erasure of bodies of color? Thus, the desire for bodily absence works to secure the maximum amount of privilege for whiteness through the continual marking and disciplining
of bodies of color—those bodies that are already outside the “normalized”
construct of the educational system.\textsuperscript{34}

Refusing to be merely a marked and disciplined body of color, the essentialized
Other according to which whites dialectically secure and establish their “unmarked”
identities, I took the risk and named their whiteness. By doing so, I not only “marked”
my own body as resistant, but I attempted to disrupt their strategy to remain absent. In
effect, they became “colored.” It was as if my line of interrogation forced them to
experience their whiteness as raciated, as denaturalized, in ways that they had not
previously experienced. I wanted to communicate to them that they were not unseen, but
seen. They were specifically seen from an embodied Black subjectivity.\textsuperscript{35} My guess is
that in that moment they felt uncomfortably exposed, perhaps they even felt a sense of
amazement. However, as bell hooks notes, “[Whites’] amazement that black people
watch white people with a critical ‘ethnographic’ gaze, is itself an expression of
racism.”\textsuperscript{36}

Given the historical racist practice of denying Black people a perspective on the
world, my action of “looking” was not only deemed a “transgression,” but an insult, an
act of “violence” for which years ago I could have been killed. In the eyes of many
whites, I was being the “impudent” Negro, too proud, too reactionary, and too militant. I
was a threat to the “collective unconscious” of the white body politic that shaped the
discourse through a collective act of policing things unsaid. As an act of securing
whiteness as invisible, whites silence, segregate, and de-legitimate “voices that speak
about whiteness from a nonwhite location.”\textsuperscript{37} As philosopher Crispin Sartwell notes,
“Above all we [whites] can’t stand to be looked at, described, or made specific.”

According to Alice McIntyre:

Whiteness is not a topic that is usually covered in college classrooms. One of the concerns then becomes not knowledge enough about whiteness to conduct an effective and educative class. In addition, talking about whiteness with white students is not easy. It generates uncomfortable silences, forms of resistance, degrees of hostility, and a host of other responses that many of us would prefer to avoid.

To allow whiteness the power to go unnamed is to reinforce its status as given, as natural, as simply a site of being human. Moreover, whites often effectively engage in power evasion and color evasion through the deployment of various discursive strategies such as, “I don’t see color, I just see people,” or “After all, we are all human.” Through such a strategy, “the stability of whiteness—as location of privilege, as culturally normative space, and as standpoint—is secured and reproduced.” Within this context, unnamed whiteness places the issue of racism outside the sphere of the everyday experiences of white bodies. Non-raced white bodies are able to “soar free” of the messy world of racism. “That is, in fact, what white self-construction is for, to float free of the material, to forget the body, and to forget the body’s implication in . . . the machinery of racialized and racist actions, privilege, and hegemony. This process of “forgetting the body” has profound existential implications involving the theme of bad faith. On this score, whites believe themselves able to inhabit a space that is not granted to those who
are “trapped” in their bodies, who are nothing more than their bodies or pure facticity.

Whiteness is a site of “release”; it is the place where I can be relieved of my particularity, where I can take pleasure in an *a priori* apparent purity.”

Therefore, in the process of naming whiteness, it is important that whites understand their role in normalizing whiteness and also understand how whiteness is a site that is dutifully maintained. To say that whiteness is “dutifully maintained” is to argue that whites engage in self-constructive efforts at maintaining their normative status. This does not deny the extent to which white bodies are also positioned by an always already larger white racist systemic power structure. Nevertheless, as subjects, we are both subjects qua agents and yet we live our existential freedom in the modality of situational reality or facticity. The latter, however, is what whiteness denies. Whiteness is lived as pure mind. Blackness is lived as pure body. As African-American philosopher Robert Birt argues:

Whiteness is the privilege of exclusive transcendence. But it can live as such only through the denial of the transcendence of an Other, the reduction of that Other to an object, to pure facticity. At least in America, that Other has been primarily the black. Whiteness could not exist without that Other. Whiteness is a parasitic identity.

Hence, whiteness is not only a form of bad faith because it assumes the position of exclusive transcendence, but, by implication, it is a form of bad faith because it denies transcendence to Blacks.
The white, in other words, flees not only some aspect of him/herself, but also attempts to hide some truth from others. Through an elaborate ideology that sustains the appearance of truth (that whites are pure transcendence), whites are not only able to conceal what they know to be the truth about themselves (that they are located, invested in their lived embodied situation as white), but they also attempt to convince Blacks of the appearance of this truth. The lie that whites tell themselves has implications beyond themselves. Indeed, as I will argue later in this project, the lie of whiteness is dialectically embedded within the lie about “Blackness.” As Birt says, “But it should be noted too that it was also themselves whom the whites were inventing in and through their invention of the Negro.” 45

There is another way to understand the phenomenon of whites fleeing processes of self-identifying as raced. Thandeka theorizes the refusal of whites to name themselves white qua “raced” in terms of early childhood moments that involve memories that are confusing and shameful, memories from which adult whites would rather flee. My point here is that the phenomenon of whites fleeing self-ascription as white qua “raced” is complex and can be interpreted at different levels of analysis.

Thandeka writes about her move to Massachusetts to teach at a local college. She relates that after being there for several weeks, a wealthy white colleague, as they were having lunch, asked her what it felt like to be Black. Thandeka says that she did not feel offended by the question. She was, however, cognizant of the white woman’s presumption (or denial) that there was nothing from her own experience that she could pull from that would help her understand what it felt like to be Black. After all, as argued above, whiteness is deemed a site that is non-raced. Implicit in the woman’s question
was: “What does it feel like to be different, to be raced?” Being white, after all, is simply being human; it is to feel, to see, to be, like any other normal (white) person. Perhaps the white woman had just read philosopher Thomas Nagel’s “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (Lest the reader think this comparison exaggerated, keep in mind that to be raced Black was sufficient to be relegated to the status of a fundamentally different “kind” of animal.) To be Black, to be raced, was just enough to convince the white woman that her alleged non-raced experiences/identity/subjectivity prevented her from mapping her experiences onto those of Thandeka’s. It was from this conversation that Thandeka created what she calls appropriately the “Race Game.”

According to Thandeka, whites have adopted a racial lexicon that positions “their own racial group [as] the great unsaid.” Her objective was to get the white woman “to give voice to her whiteness as the racial unsaid in her life. By consciously referring to this unvoiced color, she would become aware of what it feels like to take on and maintain a racial identity in America.” The Race Game consisted of a single, but powerful rule:

For the next seven days, she [the white woman] must use the ascriptive term white whenever she mentioned the name of one of her Euro-American cohorts. She must say, for instance, ‘my white husband, Phil,’ or ‘my white friend Julie,’ ‘my lovely white child Jackie.’ . . . I guaranteed her that if she did this for a week and then met me for lunch, I could answer her questions using terms she would understand.
It was so incredibly easy for the white woman to use Black as a racial designator, but she failed to use the term white to describe herself and her friends. Describing the disappointing outcome, Thandeka notes, “We never had lunch together again. Apparently my suggestion made her uncomfortable.”

During a public lecture in which Thandeka described to whites in the audience how others had refused to play the Race Game, a white woman in the audience threw down the gauntlet and challenged the other whites in the audience, all of whom appeared enthusiastic, to play the Race Game for the duration of the day. The participants were asked to respond to Thandeka by mail. She notes:

A month later, I received my one and only letter from these enthusiasts—sent by the Euro-American woman who had originally proffered the challenge. She could not do it, she wrote apologetically, though she hoped someday to have the courage to do so. Courage? Why courage? What had I asked her to endure? What was she afraid of seeing? What didn’t she want to feel? To glimpse? To know?

Thandeka poses a set of challenging questions. Indeed, what is it that many whites are afraid to see by identifying themselves in racial terms, specifically those whites who do not self-identify as white supremacists? David Roediger is also aware of this process of avoiding the use of racial terms to describe whiteness: “When residents of the US talk about race, they too often talk only about African Americans, Native Americans,
Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. If whites come into the discussion, it is only because they have ‘attitudes’ towards nonwhites.”

On my view, there are various reasons why whites would rather not admit that they are white qua raced. One reason could involve the disavowal of any responsibility in terms of how their whiteness positively positions them within the systemic workings of white racism and white power. By avoiding whiteness as a raced term, whites effectively distance themselves from whiteness as a governing ideology in the US. By avoiding being raced as white, whites are able to maintain the illusion that they have always been individuals, that they have always accomplished their achievements on the basis of meritocracy. “White” as a racial descriptor inevitably brings in the body. This forces the white to come to terms with his/her corporeality, thus relinquishing the view that whiteness signifies a disembodied abstract mind, while the Black remains stuck at the level of the body in the mode of facticity. Another problem with saying the unsaid is that, as raced, whiteness becomes simply one more element in a system of differences as opposed to the transcendental signified or that site from which “racial” differences are established and identified. In this way, whiteness, which maintains its invisibility through its normativity, becomes another marked Other, a space of specificity and particularity. Also, naming their identity as white qua raced politicizes their identity in ways that exposes it as deeply invested in its own survival. Whites would rather masquerade under the rubric of “the non-racialized human” so as to live their identities in a de-politicized fashion, as natural, as given. To attempt to do so, however, is to engage in profound levels of bad faith. Also, by naming the unnamed site of whiteness, whites must come to terms with how their racialized whiteness is predicated upon negation—as in, “I’m not
Black.” By naming oneself as white qua raced unveils the mystery of whiteness as a fixed metaphysical essence, reducing it to a socio-historical status whose power is not a-historically given, but selfishly and brutally maintained through human practices. Hence, the very process of naming functions to historicize whiteness and to dislodge it from those values—beauty, truth, reason, goodness, civilization, humanity—that are deemed a priori constitutive features of its being.

Thandeka forges a response to her own questions through psychodynamic insights gleaned from asking “Euro-Americans about their earliest memory of incidents that helped form their white racial identities.” She locates the psychodynamic problem of avoidance vis-à-vis self-identifying as “racially” white at the incipiency of whites actually learning to be white. Thandeka offered a series of formal and informal invitations to Euro-Americans (across class, age, and religious affiliation) to discuss their early narrative experiences around the process of white racialization. The following are three examples:

Frank remembers putting a coin in his mouth when he was five. His mother disgustedly told him not to put coins in his mouth because “niggers keep them in their underwear.” Frank said he felt both confused and wrong. He knew that he would have to be more careful about what he did in the future.55

Mike, at age four or five, was walking down the street with his father and uncle. They passed by an interracial couple. The man was black, the
woman white. Mike’s father and uncle began a series of critical statements about the man and descriptions of the kind of woman his companion must be. Mike remembers feeling uncertain and confused. He now knew that there was a certain way he must act when he grew up, but he was unsure what it was and whether he could do it. ⁵⁶

In high school, Jackie talked about one of her teachers so often as someone who was playing a formative role in her education that her parents encouraged her to invite him home for dinner. Jackie remembers her mother’s flushed and astonished face when she opened the door and discovered that the teacher was black. After he left, Jackie’s parents were outraged that she had not told them of his race, making Jackie feel she had done something wrong, that she had broken a rule that until that moment she did not realize existed. She was sorry she had embarrassed her parents and knew she must be careful not to embarrass them again in the future. ⁵⁷

Each narrative details how three phenotypic white adults, when they were children, became white in terms of developing a racialized/racist consciousness through a set of lived experiences. The process of becoming white, as is clearly implied, is not the same as being phenotypically white, otherwise I would be committed to saying something like: “The whites became white” or “all whites are white.” Like the tautological proposition “All white horses are white horses,” there is nothing new being communicated. Hence, to say that three phenotypic white children became “white”
suggests the sense in which “becoming white” is an additional characterization to that captured by reference to phenotypic markers alone. In a somewhat awkward expression, they became whitely. “Being white-skinned (like being male),” as Frye argues, “is a matter of physical traits presumed to be physically determined; being whitely (like being masculine) I conceive as a deeply ingrained way of being in the world.”

I would only complicate Frye’s position by arguing that while being white-skinned is physically determined, the materiality of one’s white-skin, within the context of pervasive institutional white racism, is also constituted through social forces. As Warren argues:

I wish to account for both the material and the rhetorical understandings of the body by acknowledging that the body is not accidental. It exists in the form (color) because of a history of individual acts, informed by social and cultural norms, that then produced bodies. In other words, the body is a result of a repetition of acts—acts that are both discursive (through reifying racial categories, the process of racial naming and identification, and metaphorically embedded understandings of race) and reproductive (through the implicit and explicit discursive constructions that dictated who could mate with whom that then created the very skin color that continues to mark one as white).

In this sense, “if one is white, one is a member of a continuously and politically constituted group that holds itself together by rituals of unity and exclusion.” Through the above three experiences one is able to grasp the oppressive nature of the discursive
and non-discursive modalities through which whiteness (or whiteliness) becomes a deeply political, existentially lived, social category that shapes the subjectivities and future racialist/racist practices of whites. On this score, whiteness is a way of performing both one’s phenotypic white body and one’s subjectivity as structured through a specific white racist epistemic orientation. Whiteness involves creating a boundary between the (white) self and those “darkies” that elicit a flushed and astonished look on one’s mother’s face; creating a distance from those who cause one’s parents to become enraged; knowing the appropriate degrading discourse to use when describing miscegenation; becoming aware of those dark and dangerous male bodies that sully the purity of white women; and, keeping informed about the practices of those nasty “niggers” who keep money in their underwear. The reader will note that this process of becoming white has nothing to do with a genetic substratum, but everything to do with what happens at the level of social constitutionality, how the human being comes to be the white self that performs acts of white racism. It would be naive to say that the children could have realistically exercised greater agential power, particularly in the case of Frank and Mike. Of course, this does not mean that they are forever prisoners within a white racist community of intelligibility. “Your [white] membership in it is,” as philosopher Marilyn Frye notes, “in a way or to a degree, compulsory—nobody gave you a choice in the matter—but it is contingent and, in the Aristotelian sense, accidental.”

The reader will note that before becoming adults, each of the children achieved their white identities/white racialized consciousness through a contrastive dynamic, a dynamic that exposed them early on to a Manichean dualism that came replete with racist value-codes of exclusion and inclusion. From the above examples, the ontology of
whiteness is constituted through what it learns to detest about Blacks. The construction of one’s white identity merely through negating, disliking, and hating the dark Other creates an identity which is constantly on the precipice of undergoing complete ontological evisceration. As David Roediger notes, “Whiteness . . . is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn’t and on whom one can hold back.”

Hence, for its own survival, whiteness needs the dark Other in the form of a coon, a boy, nigger lips, big feet, erect penis, rapist, insatiable Black vagina, Black bitch, welfare queen, you name it. In this way, whiteness is clearly understood as a reactive value-creating power. But it is not the materiality of the dark body as such against which whites form and perpetuate their identities. Rather, it is also the dark body as the phantasmatic object of the white imaginary that regulates the production of the white self. Before long, the authority and power of whiteness, through white ideological sleight of hand, appears devoid of a beginning or an end. White reactionary values become human values. The Western world becomes the destined site of greatness. Black male bodies become equated with criminality. The dark body becomes the site of the uncivilized. The act of lynching Black bodies becomes North America’s pastime. And soon whiteness as a racial marker becomes the “great unsaid.”

While it is certainly plausible that Frank, Mike, and Jackie may have previously had pre-reflective experiences of racism, indeed, may already have possessed an unconscious repertoire of learned behaviors regarding how to behave differently around socially sanctioned ("racially") marked bodies, the important point is that each of the adults had childhood memories that were saturated with significant racialized meaning. At the moment of animating the Black body as something to be avoided, Thandeka
argues that there is an associative core feeling of shame. It is this shame, according to her, that prevents so many whites from playing the Race Game. To play the Race Game, whites are forced to recall and expose “feelings that had to be set aside in order to stop the racial attack against the child by members of its own white community.”

Jackie, for example, had no problem inviting her Black teacher to her home. However, to become white she had to deny her legitimate feelings for her Black teacher, that is, she was forced to engage in an unnecessary reevaluation of what felt natural to her, re-signify the teacher’s Black body as something foreboding, and dismantle old relationships (possibly with other Blacks besides her teacher) that no doubt felt right to her. To avoid being ostracized from the community of white folk, and from parents who actually loved them, these children had to become white. Patricia J. Williams notes, “Hate learned in a context of love is a complicated phenomenon.” Furthermore, the feeling of shame does not start and stop with the white individual:

[T]he Game succeeds in indicting their families and communities because they were not-quite-good enough to raise a child as human rather than white, this indictment simply makes the players feel worse. Because it publicly exposes one’s experience of becoming white, the Game is intolerable. It is, in a word, shameful because it reveals the differences within the child that it had to deny in order to become congruent with its own caretaking environment. This induction process of the Euro-American into whiteness is costly.
At this juncture, I will address how whites obfuscate their own racism through the deployment of the “good white”/“bad white” dichotomy, and continue to address the not so obvious ways in which whiteness is a site of privilege. I will draw from the insights of critical whiteness theorists Alice McIntyre, Jessie Daniels, and Peggy McIntosh. Returning to the classroom situation that I described earlier, I would argue that there was perhaps a sense of collective “crisis” felt by the students around the possibility of analyzing and theorizing their raced identities as white on a continuum with those clearly racist whites in the texts. This “crisis” prevented the potential fruits that could have been had from such an analysis. Of course, this does not deny that there are situations where the experience of crisis leads to transformations that are productive. My sense is that the white students understood Mr. Auld, Mr. Flint, Mr. Plummer, Covey, or Mrs. Hick, as “ultra-racists.” The white students were able to distance themselves from these figures through a process of juxtaposing the “good white” with the “bad white.” They saw themselves as “good whites,” whites incapable of such acts of racial brutality. Through this process of subterfuge, however, they failed to locate their own center of power, a center that enabled them to make such a distinction without any recognition of their own whiteness as a species of white racism. When whites take it upon themselves to define what is and is not a racist act, is this not tied into the very power of whiteness? After all, this is another way that whites exercise their power to render null and void the epistemic and affective certainty in terms of which a Black person, for example, knows that he/she has just been subjected to white racism. Living their whiteness as racially unmarked, it is not difficult to understand many whites’ strategy to mute the claim that white racism is
not simply limited to the KKK, Neo-Nazi Skinheads, White Aryan Resistance, various instantiations of the so-call Christian Identity movement, and other white racist groups.

McIntyre uses a participatory action research (PAR) approach to explore how to best get a small group of white female teachers to name their whiteness. Describing one episode where one of the teachers manages to avoid facing her whiteness through the deployment of the above dualistic way of thinking, McIntyre notes:

Faith’s struggle with whether or not she is a racist becomes embedded in an all too common game that white people play with themselves. We compare the various degrees of racism. On the other hand [sic.], the participants conceptualize whites as rednecks, people with a Ku Klux Klan mentality. On the other hand, the participants label some whites as more open-minded and liberal, better educated, and trying to be ‘better’ people. And then there are the whites who are somewhere in between those two extremes. The participants vacillated about their own locations on this artificially constructed continuum of racism.

In the process of avoiding the implications of her whiteness, Faith attempts to shift attention away from her whiteness by refocusing attention on the “extremism” of white supremacy. The interesting point here, though, is that “throughout the history of the U.S., the ‘extremism’ of the far right has often converged with the cultural and political center.”
Critical whiteness theorist Jessie Daniels, in her qualitative content analysis\textsuperscript{31} of white supremacist discourse, also raises the issue of dualistic thinking as a means of shifting the conversation away from the pervasive and systemic nature of white racism. Discussing how this phenomenon functions within the framework of academia, she writes:

By obfuscating the connections between white supremacist movements and the white supremacist context in which they exist, traditional paradigms “e-race” the central importance of being “white.” And, more to the point, these interpretations leave unexamined – indeed, completely irrelevant within such a framework – the privileged position of white academics, or the ways white supremacy (with all the connections to class, gender, and sexuality in place), are inscribed in academic institutions.\textsuperscript{72}

Tracing the theme of the ways in which many whites attempt to derail a direct analysis of the centrism of white racism, Daniels argues that nationally syndicated shows tend to let many whites off the proverbial hook by portraying white racism as contained, isolated, and marginal. What she says is worth quoting in full:

In a different milieu, nationally syndicated shows—such as “Donahue,” “Geraldo,” “Oprah,” and “Sally”—offer an important lens for viewing white supremacists because they provide millions of Americans with their (perhaps only) knowledge of white supremacists. I contend that the format
of talk shows frames racism, as it is expressed by white supremacists, so as to make it appear contained, distant, and nonthreatening; and, the shows in which white supremacists appear distance racism by marginalizing their views in a variety of ways. First the producers of these shows marginalize white supremacists by consistently referring to the groups as “hate groups.” Shows featuring white supremacists appear with titles such as, “I’m Proud to be a Racist,” “Young Hate Mongers,” “I’m Raising My Kids to be Racists,” and “Hatemonger Moms.” Through rhetoric such as “racist,” a label that only the most committed white supremacists utilize, as well as, “hate” and “hatemonger,” terms even white supremacists do not embrace, the shows signal audiences that the guests are members of a lunatic fringe bearing not the slightest connection to the vast majority of viewers. Talk-show audiences are alerted to tune in to “see what racists are like.” Framing the appearance of white supremacists in this way preempts any other interrogation of racism by the audience, the host, or society at large.73

Note that it is not my position that the KKK, for example, attempts to conceal their white racism. Indeed, they are not at all reticent about naming themselves and announcing their white racist views. While white supremacy is a doctrine and those who hold to this doctrine apparently do so intentionally, it is false to assume that just because one is not a card-carrying member of the KKK that one is not a racist/engages in racist actions. For example, think here again of the African-American literature class and the
white philosopher at the APA conference. In both cases, there was a clear case of investment in whitely ways of behaving, that is, performed rituals that were communicated from a position of white normative power. Though he exhibited no signs of white physical aggression, the white philosopher’s communicative performances were no less crushing, no less directed at the/my Black body. As white, he had the privilege of living his white body as an *individual*. Through my use of *that* language, however, I became a stereotype, one of many of those Blacks who bastardize the English language on a daily basis. In the case of the predominantly white classroom, whitely ways of being in the world were covered over, rendered invisible vis-à-vis the white racists in the texts. This process of “covering over” insured that the white students would continue to think of themselves as authentic *individuals* who were incapable of engaging in such abhorrent acts as those performed within the various texts.

This sense of authenticity, however, was purchased at the price of living in bad faith. Were they to find themselves within the context of the Race Game, the students in the classroom would probably have refused to identify themselves as *raced* white readers, thus effectively establishing themselves as race-free, atomic elements within a power-free space within which all voices were equally audible and all subjectivities equally respected. As Beverly D. Tatum notes, “Because racism is so ingrained in the fabric of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating. All that is required to maintain it is business as usual.”74 To have read those texts without auto-critique, without thematizing their own whiteness, the white students completely sidestepped the opportunity to identify and call into question the inertial “business as usual” performance of racism. I argue that there is no difference between their passivity with respect to their whitely ways
of being-in-the-classroom, and situations where whites collude with other whites who laugh “when a racist joke is told, . . . [who let] exclusionary hiring practices go unchallenged, . . . [who accept] as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum, and . . . [who avoid] difficult race-related issues.” In all these cases, having internalized such white behavior as the norm, and therefore ethically “unproblematic,” many whites remain silent. Living their whiteness as nugatory, because they are not like the Klan or skinheads, many whites manage to remain invisible to the ways in which their whiteness is translated into advantage and group solidarity. George Lipsitz warns against the logic of the discourse of liberal individualism when it comes to critical discussions regarding race:

As long as we define social life as the sum total of conscious and deliberative individual activities, we will be able to discern as racist only those individual manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility. Systemic, collective, and coordinated group behavior consequently drops out of sight. Collective exercises of power that relentlessly channel rewards, resources, and opportunities from one group to another will not appear “racist” from this perspective, because they rarely announce their intention to discriminate against individuals. Yet they nonetheless give racial identities their sinister social meaning by giving people from different races vastly different chances.
This raises the issue of white privilege. Again, it is here that many whites operate under the Horatio Alger myth. They see themselves as having achieved their status in society independently of race. Their success is due to ingenuity, wise choices, or even good luck, but not because throughout their lives they have been invested, even if unconsciously, in whiteness. It is easy not to see how one is necessarily invested in something about which, by its very structure, one is supposed to remain ignorant. On this score, whites develop a form of immunity that enables them not to be “mindful of that from which one is exempt. The complicity in racism that privilege provides remains nameless and unnoticed. The responsibility that comes with the location and role of white privilege can be denied.”

On my view, it is not necessary that whites intentionally invest in whiteness in order to reap the benefits of being white. Indeed, as Tatum argues, “All White people, intentionally or unintentionally, do benefit from racism.” Hence, whiteness is not just a question of deliberative investments in whiteness, but has to do with how one is positioned by a white racist social structure that provides one with certain privileges. This does not deny the fact that whites are differentially invested in whiteness, or that there are whites that engage in anti-racist forms of praxis, though, even in this case, they will continue to benefit from being white independently of their good intentions. Furthermore, this does not deny that white people are “privileged by racism while [they] are targeted by sexism, classism, ageism, or homophobia,” nor do I deny that whites reap the benefits of being white in different ways. This demonstrates that whiteness, as a socially constructed sign of power, is mobile and dependent upon different contexts for its effective deployment. Hence, Donald Trump will be able to deploy his whiteness in ways that are different from those of poor whites. This does not, however, erase all of the
multiple contexts in which whiteness will function as a site of privilege/power for poor whites. Those same poor whites can go into department stores, in ways that I cannot because of my Blackness, and reap the pleasures of not being followed by security. If we define power only in terms of the ways in which someone like Trump has power, then, of course, the poor white can be said not to have power. This, however, would unnecessarily restrict the multiple ways that power can be/is operationalized.

On a class analysis, one would think it ridiculous, or so it would seem, to claim that poor whites possess advantages or privileges on the basis of their whiteness that trump the class status of someone like law professor Patricia Williams or talk show host Oprah Winfrey. However, Williams provides a moving story of having been barred from entering a Benetton store as she went shopping one evening in New York in 1986. She saw a sweater that she wanted to get for her mother. She notes that buzzers had been installed in various stores to keep out “undesirables” in order to reduce crime. She writes:

I pressed my round brown face to the window and my finger to the buzzer, seeking admittance. A narrow-eyed, white teenager wearing running shoes and feasting on bubble gum glared out, evaluating me for signs that would pit me against the limits of his social understanding. After about five seconds, he mouthed “We’re closed,” and blew pink rubber at me. It was two Saturdays before Christmas, at one o’clock in the afternoon; there were several white people in the store who appeared to be shopping for things for their mothers.80
Needless to say, Williams felt humiliated and enraged. She writes that the white teenager’s denial to admit her entrance into the space of the store was indicative of “an outward manifestation of his never having let someone like me into the realm of his reality . . . . He saw me only as one who would take his money . . . [he] could not conceive that I was there to give him money.”

Seeing a Black face at the door, the white teenager saw the Black face at the door. The Manichean color-line, which was always already there, made itself felt in the form of segregated spaces, creating an unbridgeable gap between the safe and secure space of whiteness and the unsafe and dangerous space occupied by the Black body. “The tomtoms,” as Cynthia Kaufman notes, “start to beat in the subconscious mind of the clerk.”  

As Williams decided to ring the buzzer, she no doubt inhabited her body as an “anonymous shopper.” It was when the white teenager—filled with anxiety, filled with suspicion, filled with Negrophobia—refused to allow her entry into the store that she became fixed, reduced to her body as raced. Providing an analysis of Williams’ experience through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, philosopher Shannon Sullivan argues:

Because bodies are part of the horizon against which objects and situations stand forth, the spaces of “inside Benetton” and “outside on the sidewalk” were not neutral, uniform spaces. They racially demarcated an “inside” from the “outside” and an “us” from a “them.” Black and white bodies disclosed objects in these spaces, such as the Benetton store and the teenage clerk, in different ways. The horizon of black and white bodies
made visible and invisible, respectively, the coloring and separation of spaces. The apparent racial neutrality of the spaces inside and outside Benetton was itself a product of the racialization of bodies. Space appeared as an empty, unconstituted void when only white people populated both inside and outside, an appearance that can be attributed to what one might call the “whitewashing” of space. When nonwhite people also populated the space outside Benetton’s doors, the illusion of nonraced space in this situation was made visible.83

Similarly, in 2005, Oprah Winfrey, along with a group of friends, was allegedly not allowed to enter an Hermes boutique in Paris because of her race. Although at the time of this writing it is not clear whether she was turned away because the store was throwing a private public relations party, and therefore officially closed, or, as has been reported, whether she was turned away because the store had been “having a problem with North Africans lately.”84 For the purpose of establishing a parallel with Williams’ experience, I will assume it was the latter. On the basis of Sullivan’s analysis, it can be argued that “the polarizing of objective space into inside and outside that racism effects curtails black people’s inhabiting of space. White existence [those inside the store] is allowed an expansiveness when transacting with its world that is not equally available to nonwhite people [Oprah, who was outside the store].” My point here is that her wealth became insignificant within the racist framework where Blackness becomes the essential marker of difference, that is, “difference” defined relative to the norm of whiteness. In
this instance, Oprah became just one more troublesome North African, a dark body whose standing had no legitimacy within the domain of white space.\textsuperscript{85}

Even in stores such as the GAP, although allowed entry, it is not uncommon for Blacks to be followed closely, pegged as potential shoplifters.\textsuperscript{86} I have lived this experience. I have had Black male relatives communicate this point to me in anger. I have read about such cases. To be surveilled is different from being acknowledged as one enters a store. In the latter case, one is simply seen, acknowledged as a potential paying customer. In the former case, however, to be surveilled or “watched over” suggests the sense of being a threat or a potential threat. Helpless things, items of extreme value, and dangerous things need watching over. I am neither helpless nor an item of extreme value. So, when I am followed either by security, or by a mounted camera, I become transformed into a problem, my Black body is given back to me, returned, as a criminal, a site of danger.

The feeling of being seen/constituted as a criminal cannot be captured by what it feels like when one is casually mistaken for another. In such a case, one’s personhood remains intact. To be criminalized through white surveillance is to be attacked at the level of one’s personhood; it involves the invasion of the ontological integrity of one’s sense of self, one’s self-conceptualization. The white security guard who performs this act of surveillance might, if asked, disclose his abhorrence toward organized white racist organizations. Such a disclosure need not, however, translate into how he performs whitely in the presence of dark bodies shopping in department stores. He is a working class white security guard, making very little money, and yet he has the very real power of effecting ontological violence at the level of my being qua possibility. Indeed, in a
court of law, though I could be making three times the income that he makes, his
whiteness has a greater chance of outweighing the veracity of my intentions not to steal.
Not only does he see me as a criminal (or as criminality), the courts, the criminal justice
system, also foreclose any possibility of my being other than that dictated by the white
imaginary. In this way, as Black, I am always already known. “Namelessness,” according
to Lewis Gordon, “characterizes most generalizable features of the social world.” He
notes:

It is usually characterized by the indefinite article “a.” One sees “a
student” or “a passerby” or “a police officer” or “a man” or “a woman.” In
ordinary encounters, we admit limited knowledge of individuals who may
occupy these roles or social identities. The encounters become skewed,
however, when we presume complete knowledge by virtue of individuals
who exemplify an identity. The schism between identity and being is
destroyed, and the result is a necessary being, an overdetermined,
“ontological” reality. To see something this way is to close off
possibilities.87

According to African-American philosopher John McClendon, it would be false
“to call all white people, by virtue of their whiteness, white supremacists.”88 Although I
agree, it is important that we still remain attentive to those whites that continue to benefit
from being white despite the fact that they are not white supremacists. Critical reflections
on whiteness should not begin and end with critical reflections on white supremacy. I
would certainly not describe the white philosopher, in my earlier example, as a white supremacist, nor would I describe the white students, in terms of their non-reflective posture toward their whiteness and hence their maintenance of white normativity, white supremacists. What is important is that the critical project of making seen the unseen of white privilege in mundane contexts is a significant endeavor that transcends the unambiguous cases of white supremacy. Our choice should not be limited to the disjunction of either giving critical thought to whiteness qua mundane whitely ways of being-in-the-world or giving critical thought to white supremacy. On my view, both are part of a continuum. If we think of whiteness as a mobile sign whose power may be significantly depleted in one sphere of social existence, this does not mean that it does not maintain its power, its privilege, in another sphere.

Critical whiteness theorist Peggy McKintosh challenges whites to think about their privileges in terms of the metaphor of an invisible knapsack. McKintosh is fully aware of how she was taught about racism in terms of the disadvantages it had for certain groups of people. She adds, however, that she was not taught how whiteness, her own whiteness, functioned as an advantage. She writes, “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.” Although she provides forty-six examples, eleven that I find particularly interesting are:

- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
• I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

• When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

• I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

• I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

• I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

• I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

• I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.

• I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.

• If I have low credibility as leader, I can be sure that my race is not the problem.

• I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.91

To get a sense of “the state of being Black in America,” it is only necessary to modify any one of the examples above through the use of a negation (for example, “It is not the case that when I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color made it what it is”). McKintosh’s observations are important
because they remind us that within a polity where whiteness continues to be valued, and continues to be privileged, obstacles will continue to exist for non-white people. It is important, to realize, however, that by “white privilege” I am not saying that all whites are lifted in all dimensions above all Blacks. This would be empirically false. It is also important to note that although I believe that all whites can/do benefit from the deployment of their whiteness within various contexts, this does not mean that they “all benefit equally.”

What I find particularly incredulous is the view that says that America has moved significantly beyond race and racism. After all, or so the reasoning goes, we now live in a post-colonial/post-segregation period in which Blacks have made significant historical gains. I recall a white philosopher recently denying the legitimacy of the claim that Blacks still experience inordinate discrimination. To make his point, he argued that since the anti-racist movements of the 1960s, Blacks have done extraordinarily well. George Lipsitz captures the climate of this type of thinking where he notes:

The present political culture in this country gives broad sanction for viewing white supremacy and antiblack racism as forces from the past, as demons finally put to rest by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

This particular white philosopher not only assumed the authority to speak for the experiences of the majority of Black people, but the subtext of his message was that Blacks ought to stop complaining and start doing for themselves, that affirmative action
had run its course, and that there were new victims, white men, whose rightful claims of having been discriminated against need to be adequately addressed. Indeed, I would argue—as Fanon says of French psychoanalyst Dominique Octave Mannoni, given Mannoni’s flawed analysis of the colonial oppression of the Malagasy in Madagascar—that the white philosopher “has not tried to feel himself into the despair of the man of color confronting the white man.” The white philosopher appeared to be under the impression that “racism exists now only because people of color keep talking about it.”

Hence, on this assumption, racism is not something that continues to happen to Black people or something that exists systemically within the fabric of American life. Rather, racism is something concerning which Blacks have the mysterious power of speaking into existence. This move is characteristic of many whites to make the problem of racism the problem of Black people. Externally imposed acts of white racism are then conveniently reconstructed as arising from the weak constitutionality, as it were, of Blacks. Fanon:

The appearance of varicose veins in a patient does not arise out of his being compelled to spend ten hours a day on his feet, but rather out of the constitutional weakness of his vein walls; his working conditions are only a complicating factor. And the insurance compensation expert to whom the case is submitted will find the responsibility of the employer extremely limited.
Besides the self-righteousness of his claims, there appeared to be no awareness of the impact of the Reagan and Bush years of the 1980s and early 1990s and how this period was so devastating to race relations, significantly weakening federal civil rights enforcement programs during this period.\(^9\) He possessed no knowledge that although Blacks are about one-eighth of the national population, they are six times more likely than whites to be incarcerated and they constitute 40 percent of those who are executed.\(^9\)

In contrast, white males make up a little over 35 percent of the population, yet they constitute more than 80 percent of the Forbes 400 group, those who are worth well over 240 million. Of course, within the political sphere, white males dominate as state governors, in the Congress, in the Senate, and in the House of Representatives. White males are also dominant in numbers when it comes to such areas as tenured college faculty (80 percent), daily-newspaper editors, television news directors, corporate management, you name it.\(^1\) There is also the reality that increased urbanization, inequality, and class segregation have had a disproportionate impact on Blacks than on whites. For example, Black home ownership is lower than white home ownership, even at the same income levels. Even in terms of the level of poverty of poor Blacks and poor whites, Blacks are still disproportionately affected. For example, in 2001, 11.7 percent of the total population lived in poverty. What is significant is that in the white population, only 9.9 percent lived in poverty, less than the percentage in the total population; whereas, in the Black population, 22.7 percent lived in poverty, twice the percentage of that in the total population. For children under the age of eighteen in 2001, 16.3 percent of the total population lived in poverty. Again, what is significant is that in the white population, only 9.5 percent of white children lived in poverty, far less than the
percentage in the total population; whereas, in the Black population, 30.2 percent of black children live in poverty, almost twice the percentage of that in the total population. According to Fanon, “A society is racist or it is not.” There is no need to quibble: America is racist.

In addition to these economic and social realities, I continue to live my body in Black within a culture where Blackness is still over-determined by myths and presuppositions that fix my body as a site of danger. I notice, more times than I would like to recall, that a white sales person will drop my money on the counter rather than touch my hand. Perhaps I am, and this image has persisted in the white imaginary for centuries, a site of uncleanness. These are some of the many things that are often unseen within a society that prides itself on being colorblind. But it is the reality of the mundanity of the everyday world of white racist communicative performances—resulting in effects that I somatically bare—that reveals the continued efficacy of the historical force of white embodied ideology.

Notes

1 See Naomi Zack’s *Philosophy of Science and Race* (New York, Routledge 2002). The reader will note that I take Zack’s efforts to show the scientific bankruptcy of the concept of race as being part of a continuum of liberatory efforts at fighting racism. On this score, I would also argue that Anthony Appiah’s philosophical efforts to show how the concept of race is scientifically invalid also contribute toward liberatory efforts. See Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). And while both Zack’s and Appiah’s efforts may not impact the multiple, everyday modes in which white racism get expressed and performed, indeed, while their efforts may not relieve the pain and suffering caused by everyday forms of anti-Black racism experienced by Black people, the effort to gain conceptual clarity regarding race should not be placed outside the sphere of liberatory action. Of course, this does not deny the scenario where a white scientist/philosopher works toward debunking the concept of race, perhaps even seeing his/her efforts as liberatory, and yet enacts racism in his/her daily interactions with non-whites.

2 Philosopher Jorge J. E. Gracia, although critically discussing race, ethnicity, and nationality, delineates five reasons why other thinkers have objected to grouping people by race, that is, that the concept of race should be abandoned. He writes, “When examined closely . . . it becomes clear that these reasons tend to
fall into five main classes: epistemic, factual, moral, political, and pragmatic. The first argues that there are no clear and effective criteria that can be used to distinguish races . . . ; the second, that there is no fact of the matter to race . . . ; the third, that the use of these categories is morally objectionable; the fourth, that their application works against the polity; and the fifth, that there is some clear benefits in the elimination of racial . . . divisions.” Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, in Press).

3 Of course, this does not mean that because the concepts of phlogiston and spontaneous generation are false that such concepts should be dropped from discussion. As Gracia notes, “The concept of phlogiston is inaccurate, but it has some use in the history of science, and perhaps even in science insofar as it can illustrate bad science.” Gracia, *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality*, (page number not available).


7 The reader will note that my depiction of a physicalist might be said to be somewhat exaggerated. My point here is that it is certainly possible for a physicalist to reject the claim that race is a natural kind, and yet to accept the idea that race is “real” in the sense in which we have constructed it. After all, a physicalist would reject the concept of “money” as a natural kind, but would not ipso facto reject the socially constructed ways in which money is used. I guess that the target of my critique here is one who not only says that race is not a natural kind and therefore is a fiction, but one who concedes that race is a social construction, where this is said in a caviler fashion.


10 I would like to thank Clevis Headley for his formulation of this approach.

11 Philosopher Eleanor Holveck does a wonderful job of invoking this tale to situate the importance of the lived dimensions of Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophical stance. See her book, *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Lived Experience: Literature and Metaphysics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), especially chapter 1.


13 This observation resonates with the insights of Marsha Houston’s discussion of fifteen ways that a Black woman knows that a white woman is not listening to her. In my situation, he was certainly not listening to me. In her seventh example, Houston writes, “She [the white woman] insists that you translate your research on black women into terms with which she feels comfortable, which she is willing to accept, terms that challenge none of her preconceptions or misconceptions.” See the appendix to Bernita C. Berry’s chapter, “I Just See People’: Exercises in Learning the Effects of Racism and Sexism,” in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, eds. Linda A Bell and David Blumenfield (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 53.


16 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 18.

19 Sue, *Overcoming Our Racism*, 124.
20 Sue, *Overcoming Our Racism*, 125.
22 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 35.
28 The reader will note that I said “some” of those Black voices, because many Blacks, indeed, many Black philosophers, find little or no value in speaking *that* language. Think here of the controversy surround Bill Cosby’s public pronouncements regarding the poor speech habits, to put it mildly, of Black youth. My point here is that there is nothing about being identified as Black that is logically linked to the endorsement of the legitimacy of something called “African-American vernacular speech.” My point, however, is that philosophers ought to give attention to the importance of Black vernacular speech as a significant site for understanding the communication of different forms of life, the linguistic construction of different modes of lived reality, and so on.
29 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 100. Perhaps in the end, I should not have been surprised about this white philosopher’s “good intentions.” This same philosopher, whom I seem to run into at different venues, once said to me: “George, I think that you’re a fine philosopher, and I think that you can be as good as . . . .” I leave this blank on purpose. In this space, he mentioned a well-known Black philosopher’s name. Again, here we have a case of “praise” that is deeply problematic. Imagine him saying to a white female philosopher: “You are a fine philosopher, and I think that you can be as good as . . . .” I leave it to the reader to name your prominent female philosopher. Talking with a white male philosopher, he might also mention how fine a philosopher he is, but the other philosopher according to whom “he can be as good as” will neither be a non-white philosopher nor a female philosopher. These qualifications will be unnecessary. The assumption appears to be that as a Black, I can be as good as another Black philosopher. For a woman, she can be as good as another female philosopher. In the case of the white male philosopher, however, all that will be necessary is the name of a prominent philosopher. According to this logic, to say to the white male philosopher that he can be as good as a certain Black philosopher or a certain female philosopher would be deemed less praiseworthy. The white philosopher, after all, is simply a philosopher. He is prominent, pretty good, or “run of the mill,” but he is neither Black nor female. The larger point here seems to be that for the Black philosopher and the woman philosopher, there are different criteria for judging excellence. What is often covered over, however, is the fact that “race” and gender are already presupposed and operative when paying a compliment to the white male philosopher.
30 Thomas, “Gentlemanly Orthodoxy, 32.
32 Moon, “White Enculturation and Bourgeois Ideology,” 188.
33 It should be noted that I am not saying that all of the whites in the classroom held interchangeable views on race. Moreover, I am not committed to the position that each white in that course (or in the larger society) invests in whiteness in the same way across all contexts. Indeed, within that classroom alone, the power and advantages of whiteness will have been shaped, though not completely depleted, relative to class and gender vectors. However, in this particular case, each of the students were invested in the normative
power of whiteness, a form of power that created a cognitive “blindness” that prevented them from positioning whiteness as an object of critical reflection.  

34 Warren, *Performing Purity*, 47.

35 The reader will note that African-American, Mujerista, African, Asian, and Native American women have, from their own critical subjectivities, been critical of the feminist movement in terms of its white normativity and hegemony. For example, theorist bell hooks maintains: “In most of their writing, the white American woman’s experience is made synonymous with the American woman’s experience. While it is in no way racist for any author to write a book exclusively about white women, it is fundamentally racist for books to be published that focus solely on the American white woman’s experience in which that experience is assumed to be the American woman’s experience.” See bell hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), 137.


38 Sartwell, *Act Like You Know*, 98.


41 Sartwell, *Act Like You Know*, 98.


46 Thandeka, who is a Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, was given her name in 1984 by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The name is Xhosa and means one who is loved by God.


49 Thandeka, *Learning to be White*, 3.

50 Thandeka, *Learning to be White*, 3.


53 Keep in mind that I am aware that the KKK, for example, do not seem to fall within this discussion as they aim to broadcast to the world that they are racially superior.

54 Thandeka, *Learning to be White*, 4.

55 Thandeka, *Learning to be White*, 5.


58 Marilyn Frye, “White Woman Feminist,” in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, eds. Linda A Bell and David Blumenfield (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 117. Although Frye does not reference Martin Heidegger, to say that being whitely is a way of being in the world suggests the sense in which whitely ways of being are enacted in the social world of everydayness. It also suggests the sense in which being-whitely-in-the-world is “covered over” through processes of normative power and invisibility.


I use the term “achieved” in order to communicate the sense in which whiteness is not given, but something accomplished, something that is a dynamic historical structure.


Thandeka, *Learning to be White*, 18.


Critical whiteness studies has its roots in other sites of critical discourse: critical legal studies, critical race theory, philosophy of race, critical pedagogy, postcolonial scholarship and poststructuralist theory, feminist reflections on the interlocking (not additive) relationships between class, race and gender, and various historical studies which have explored the development of racism and the dynamics of white identity formation. (Margaret L. Andersen, “Whitewashing Race: A Critical Perspective on Whiteness,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 22.) Critical whiteness studies flourished in the late 1980s and 1990s. Taking his cue from sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim regarding the formation of ideas within a changing historical context, Woody Doane locates the historical emergence of critical whiteness studies as follows: “Perhaps the key factor is the “crisis” of whiteness: the continuing challenge to white supremacy and normative whiteness in social institutions and in American culture, and the withering away of white ethnic identities. This occurred in concert with increasing economic change and insecurity and restructuring of the racial/ethnic demography of the United States as a result of post-1970 immigration. These forces not only changed racial understandings but they also made whiteness more visible.” (Woody Doane, “Rethinking Whiteness Studies,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.)

McIntyre notes that “Participatory action research emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as a social, educational and political movement aimed at transforming the daily realities of oppressed people in developing countries.” She maintains that although there are different ways of understanding what constitutes a PAR project, “most participatory action research projects include a collective commitment to (1) investigate a problem, (2) rely on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem, and (3) individual action, collective action, or both to deal with the issue under examination.”


Describing this methodology, Daniels’ notes that she used “a method known as ethnographic content analysis, or qualitative content analysis, in which I read the publications [white supremacist literature] and noted the themes which emerged while foregrounding my theoretical questions about the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality,” 139


Tatum, “Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”, 11.


Tatum, “Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”, 11.


Blacks or I could decide to shop there, ignore the racism, and contribute to the oppression of workers in El Salvador, for example. As I endure the gaze, eventually purchasing a T-shirt from the GAP, my actions are linked to the oppression of a Salvadoran who works in a garment sweatshop. He/she is overworked, lacks necessary health benefits, and gets paid perhaps ten cents for a T-shirt that I purchase for over twelve dollars at retail price. I am then confronted with the ethical question: Is the T-shirt really worth undergoing the process of being pegged a criminal and contributing to the oppression of others? Even if I were allowed access into the GAP without triggering the insidious operation of racism in the form of being followed, though I will have escaped one site of oppression, I would then trigger and sustain another site of oppression works. While it is unjust and oppressive to be followed around in a GAP department store, think of what happens when, though followed and pegged a criminal, I nevertheless purchase an item from the GAP. I could decide not to shop at the GAP because of such racist behavior shown toward myself and other Blacks or I could decide to shop there, ignore the racism, and contribute to the oppression of workers in El Salvador, for example. As I endure the gaze, eventually purchasing a T-shirt from the GAP, my actions are linked to the oppression of a Salvadoran who works in a garment sweatshop. He/she is overworked, lacks necessary health benefits, and gets paid perhaps ten cents for a T-shirt that I purchase for over twelve dollars at retail price. I am then confronted with the ethical question: Is the T-shirt really worth undergoing the process of being pegged a criminal and contributing to the oppression of others? Even if I were allowed access into the GAP without triggering the insidious operation of racism in the form of being followed, though I will have escaped one site of oppression, I would then trigger and sustain another site of oppression, effectively transforming my status from a victim to a victimizer.

The reader will note that in September of 2005, Oprah attempted to clarify what actually occurred in Paris while trying to get into the Hermes boutique. Oprah invited Robert Chavez, the President and CEO of Hermes USA, to make an appearance on her show. After explaining to her audience, and to those millions who probably tuned in, that all of the hearsay going around had misrepresented what had actually happened, Chavez apologized. He said, “I would like to say to you that we’re really sorry for all of those unfortunate circumstances that you encountered when you tried to visit our store in Paris.” He also added, “We really try to service all our clients all over the world. It was an isolated incident. It is not who we are.” The reader will note that he says, “It was an isolated incident.” After watching the show, it was not clear to me what to make of the “isolated incident.” Indeed, neither Oprah nor Chavez made explicit reference to the nature of the isolated incident. Oprah attempted to clarify that she had not been hurt because she, Oprah, the millionaire talk show host, was not allowed into the store. In other words, she was clearing the air that somehow she was upset because of celebrity snobbery. To counter the claim that she was upset because of her fame, she said, “Shame on anybody for thinking that I was upset for not being able to get into a closed store and buy a purse. Please. I didn’t get to be this old to be that stupid.” Oprah did add, “Everybody who has ever been snubbed because you were not chic enough or thin enough or the right class or the right color or whatever – I don’t know what it was – you know that it was very humiliating.” From the exchange on her talk show, I was left with the impression that she had arrived at the store during the time that it was closing because Hermes was preparing to throw a private gathering. However, there were still people in the store shopping. One gets the impression that they were probably completing their shopping. This, however, is where things get fuzzy. After all, in the aftermath of the Oprah incident, Hermes has introduced sensitivity training. But for what reason? Oprah gave the impression that the person who actually spoke to her at the front door said something/did something that was very hurtful. Again, however, viewers were never told the details of the interaction. Prior to Chavez coming on the show, it was implied that Oprah had been told that the store had been having a problem with North Africans lately. The North African reference was never made by Oprah as she attempted to clear the air, not even as a rumor to be disputed. Nor did Chavez mention the North African reference. Personally, though I could be incorrect, my sense is that the person at the door probably did make reference to North Africans, which would have implicated Oprah as a mistaken North African Black body, that is, she would have been typified as a “Black problem.” This would explain, at least for me, the need to make a public apology, although viewers would not have gotten the point because of Oprah’s vague reference to being hurt. So, why didn’t Oprah mention the North African issue? Perhaps, and again this is speculation, if it was known that the derogatory North African reference was made in such a way as to imply that Oprah was mistaken as a North African and hence not allowed in the store (or at least that there was reticence regarding letting her in), this would have been a heavy charge against Hermes for hiring “racists.” See “Hermes President Apologizes On-Air to Oprah for Snub.” Retrieved from http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?=71323.

What is particularly interesting here are the multiple and relational modalities in terms of which oppression works. While it is unjust and oppressive to be followed around in a GAP department store, think of what happens when, though followed and pegged a criminal, I nevertheless purchase an item from the GAP. I could decide not to shop at the GAP because of such racist behavior shown toward myself and other Blacks or I could decide to shop there, ignore the racism, and contribute to the oppression of workers in El Salvador, for example. As I endure the gaze, eventually purchasing a T-shirt from the GAP, my actions are linked to the oppression of a Salvadoran who works in a garment sweatshop. He/she is overworked, lacks necessary health benefits, and gets paid perhaps ten cents for a T-shirt that I purchase for over twelve dollars at retail price. I am then confronted with the ethical question: Is the T-shirt really worth undergoing the process of being pegged a criminal and contributing to the oppression of others? Even if I were allowed access into the GAP without triggering the insidious operation of racism in the form of being followed, though I will have escaped one site of oppression, I would then trigger and sustain another site of pernicious oppression, effectively transforming my status from a victim to a victimizer.


The reader will note that in September of 2005, Oprah attempted to clarify what actually occurred in Paris while trying to get into the Hermes boutique. Oprah invited Robert Chavez, the President and CEO of Hermes USA, to make an appearance on her show. After explaining to her audience, and to those millions who probably tuned in, that all of the hearsay going around had misrepresented what had actually happened, Chavez apologized. He said, “I would like to say to you that we’re really sorry for all of those unfortunate circumstances that you encountered when you tried to visit our store in Paris.” He also added, “We really try to service all our clients all over the world. It was an isolated incident. It is not who we are.” The reader will note that he says, “It was an isolated incident.” After watching the show, it was not clear to me what to make of the “isolated incident.” Indeed, neither Oprah nor Chavez made explicit reference to the nature of the isolated incident. Oprah attempted to clarify that she had not been hurt because she, Oprah, the millionaire talk show host, was not allowed into the store. In other words, she was clearing the air that somehow she was upset because of celebrity snobbery. To counter the claim that she was upset because of her fame, she said, “Shame on anybody for thinking that I was upset for not being able to get into a closed store and buy a purse. Please. I didn’t get to be this old to be that stupid.” Oprah did add, “Everybody who has ever been snubbed because you were not chic enough or thin enough or the right class or the right color or whatever – I don’t know what it was – you know that it was very humiliating.” From the exchange on her talk show, I was left with the impression that she had arrived at the store during the time that it was closing because Hermes was preparing to throw a private gathering. However, there were still people in the store shopping. One gets the impression that they were probably completing their shopping. This, however, is where things get fuzzy. After all, in the aftermath of the Oprah incident, Hermes has introduced sensitivity training. But for what reason? Oprah gave the impression that the person who actually spoke to her at the front door said something/did something that was very hurtful. Again, however, viewers were never told the details of the interaction. Prior to Chavez coming on the show, it was implied that Oprah had been told that the store had been having a problem with North Africans lately. The North African reference was never made by Oprah as she attempted to clear the air, not even as a rumor to be disputed. Nor did Chavez mention the North African reference. Personally, though I could be incorrect, my sense is that the person at the door probably did make reference to North Africans, which would have implicated Oprah as a mistaken North African Black body, that is, she would have been typified as a “Black problem.” This would explain, at least for me, the need to make a public apology, although viewers would not have gotten the point because of Oprah’s vague reference to being hurt. So, why didn’t Oprah mention the North African issue? Perhaps, and again this is speculation, if it was known that the derogatory North African reference was made in such a way as to imply that Oprah was mistaken as a North African and hence not allowed in the store (or at least that there was reticence regarding letting her in), this would have been a heavy charge against Hermes for hiring “racists.” See “Hermes President Apologizes On-Air to Oprah for Snub.” Retrieved from http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?=71323.

What is particularly interesting here are the multiple and relational modalities in terms of which oppression works. While it is unjust and oppressive to be followed around in a GAP department store, think of what happens when, though followed and pegged a criminal, I nevertheless purchase an item from the GAP. I could decide not to shop at the GAP because of such racist behavior shown toward myself and other Blacks or I could decide to shop there, ignore the racism, and contribute to the oppression of workers in El Salvador, for example. As I endure the gaze, eventually purchasing a T-shirt from the GAP, my actions are linked to the oppression of a Salvadoran who works in a garment sweatshop. He/she is overworked, lacks necessary health benefits, and gets paid perhaps ten cents for a T-shirt that I purchase for over twelve dollars at retail price. I am then confronted with the ethical question: Is the T-shirt really worth undergoing the process of being pegged a criminal and contributing to the oppression of others? Even if I were allowed access into the GAP without triggering the insidious operation of racism in the form of being followed, though I will have escaped one site of oppression, I would then trigger and sustain another site of pernicious oppression, effectively transforming my status from a victim to a victimizer.


Why a “continuum” as opposed to a difference in “kind”? I use the term continuum to suggest that there is some common ground. While it is true that the old white woman in the elevator does not live her whiteness as a cause as in the case of a KKK member, it is nevertheless the case that both she and the KKK member live their whiteness/perform their whiteness within the framework of a presumptive ideology of whiteness. The KKK member, though, lives his/her whiteness with a certain awareness and intentionality that is devoid in the case of the old white woman on the elevator. So, while it is true that I would want to distinguish the KKK member from the white woman in terms of how the KKK member holds to his/her belief system (white supremacist ideology), and in terms of the kinds of malicious actions that the KKK member would be willing consciously to carry out against non-whites, the two, nevertheless, live and have their being within a framework that has historically functioned to give them a sense of somebodiness over and against the distortion of the non-white body, in this case the Black body. Hence, both the KKK member and the old white woman are conceptualized in terms of being on a continuum qua performing racist actions, though the former is conscious and certainly more malicious toward non-whites, while the latter is more or less unconscious of the whitely structured epistemic framework through which her acts are shaped.


I would like to thank philosopher Charles Mills for this observation.

Tatum, “Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”, 12.

Lipsitz, The Possessive Investment in Whiteness, 19.

He was working under the assumption of the Horatio Alger myth, with its implications of an abstract individualism. The assumption here is that social actors (in this case, Black people) lack the necessary political fervor that is the determining factor for social success. Contrary to this claim, I argue that political fervor is not a sufficient condition for substantive change for Black people as social actors without robust guarantees that Blacks will be given equal space and equal opportunity to engage in acts of self-development. This raises the very important distinction between freedom-from and freedom-for. Political theorist Carol C. Gould refers to these as negative and positive freedom, respectively. The white philosopher could only see the situation of Black people in terms of “freedom-from.” Of course, even here, I would argue that Blacks continue to live within a context where freedom-from (oppression, discrimination, harassment) is yet to be fully achieved. Hence, person A may have the freedom to get a job doing X, but lack the necessary enabling conditions to achieve X. The point here is that abstract freedom should not be confused with the ability to make a concrete choice toward self-development. Not living under Jim Crow conditions and having prima facie political rights is one thing. Not having the ability to exercise one’s concrete freedom because of social or economic causes is another. Not being constrained by the immediate threat of the KKK, and having the freedom to cast one’s vote, does not “include positive freedom or self-development [for Black people] as well, where this requires access to material and social conditions of one’s activity.” See Carol C. Gould, Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy, and Society. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 83.


Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 85.


See the National Poverty Center’s Poverty Facts. Retrieved from http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/

Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 86.
Chapter III

Whiteness’s Manichean Divide: Colonialist Gazing and “Seeing” Hottentot Venus

My turn to state an equation: colonization = “thingification.”

—Aimé Césaire

Colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an “other” and yet entirely knowable and visible.

—Homi K. Bhabha

The European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

The above three epigraphs point to a profound Fanonian truth: “European civilization and its best representatives are responsible for colonial racism.” Moreover, each of the above epigraphs points to a dynamic process of interpellating the colonizer/colonized through processes of affirmation/negation, respectively. The logic of this racist form of establishment precludes mutual recognition as equals. Indeed, on this score, the two elements or poles of this relationship are paradoxically at once mutually exclusive and yet mutually dependent. Through the process of ideological structuration, the colonizer and the colonized are deemed opposites in an ontologically hierarchical structural relationship. The former are deemed naturally superior and the latter are said to be naturally inferior and fit for domination. The reality, however, is that the creation of the inferior-monstrous colonized is contingent upon the European as superior and non-monstrous. The colonized is fixed, because the colonizer does the fixing, and the “thingification” of the colonized is dialectically linked to the transcendent/master consciousness of the colonizer. In short, what emerges is a dualism that is believed to be
metaphysically fixed. “We go from biology to ethics, from ethics to politics, from politics to metaphysics.”2 Of course, the claim that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is metaphysically fixed and outside history is a position taken up “within the terrain of racialist ideology.”3

In this chapter, my objective is to focus on the dynamics of colonialism “through the economy of its central trope, the Manichean allegory,”4 and how this allegory (dichotomy of black/bad, white/good) creates boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.5 Although it is important to keep in mind that colonialism grew out of and was sustained by both material and discursive forces, I am less concerned with the political economic dimensions of colonialism than I am with the existential phenomenological aspects of how the colonizer and colonized undergo existential nullification through processes of white ideological discursive formations. I am interested in examining how white “colonial domination required a whole way of thinking, a discourse in which everything that is advanced, good, and civilized is defined and measured in European terms.”6 Hence, I am concerned with how colonialism, as a means of socially producing reality, shapes colonized bodies through powerful processes of inscription. In short, there is the violent geo-spatial dimension of colonial territorialization,7 and there is also the violent form of psycho-cultural territorialization. The latter is designed to place the colonized in a pathological relationship to him/herself. This is accomplished not simply through geo-spatial modalities of incursion, but also through the process of getting the colonized, through inculcation, to internalize the desired, phantasmatic image in terms of which they are depicted by the colonizer. On this score, one might speak of colonialism as a form of Foucauldian “governmentality” in which the colonized body is governed and controlled
through various physical and discursive disciplinary strategies. Would that Foucault had
given serious attention to the governmentality of whiteness.

I am particularly interested in the specular dimensions of the colonial situation
and how “instead of seeing the native as a bridge toward syncretic possibility, it uses him
[her] as a mirror that reflects the colonialist’s self-image.”8 Theorizing the specular/ocular
dimensions of colonialist power and knowledge is a significant point of entry into the
racist colonialist Weltanschauung. Indeed, “the hegemony of vision in Western
modernity, its ocularcentric discourse, has been subjected to much scrutiny, and Afro-
diasporic thinkers, in particular, have stressed the centrality of the scopic in constructions
of race and racism.”9 The European gaze was able to discern with “clarity” and
“accuracy” the “truth” about certain human bodies vis-à-vis a white racist discursive
regime of truth. The gaze reinforced the truth of the categories and the categories
reinforced the gaze. However, with regard to the white gaze, it was predicated upon
fictive “racial” categories that were believed to designate empirical differences. The
white colonialist gaze was invested in a racist regime of classificatory “truth.” As
philosopher David T. Goldberg observes:

The neutrality and objectifying distaniation of the rational scientist
created the theoretical space for a view to develop subjectless bodies.

Once objectified, these bodies could be analyzed, categorized, classified,
and ordered with the cold gaze of scientific distance.10

It is not my aim to relegate to insignificance the politico-economic factors vis-à-vis the
formation of colonialism. Such a move would skew the actual historical emergence of colonialism. I do, however, find wanting those theories that privilege the economic aspects of colonialism (or the African slave trade) in terms of its genesis over the discursive and ideological. As intimated, on my view, the politico-economic and the ideological and discursive are interwoven. As Goldberg notes, “Materially colonialism seeks to strengthen domination for the sake of human and economic exploitation. Representationally, it seeks to sustain the identity of the ideological or discursive image it has created of the colonized.”

I question, for example, Abdul R. JanMohamed’s observations, though he is referring specifically to the African slave trade, where he states:

The perception of racial difference is, in the first place, influenced by economic motives. For instance, as Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow have shown, Africans were perceived in a more or less neutral and benign manner before the slave trade developed; however, once the triangular trade became established, Africans were newly characterized as the epitome of evil and barbarity.

JanMohamed not only implies the priority of significance regarding economic motives in the enslavement of Africans and the colonization of Africa, but his “in the first place” phraseology suggests priority in time. On JanMohamed’s view, it would appear that there was first the economic motive, pure and simple, and then, second, temporally speaking, there was the epiphenomenal emergence of European discourse regarding the “evil
barbarity and monstrosity” of the African. On my view, not only does the dark African body as a site of denigration exceed Europe’s economic interests (territorial expansion, wealth, the acquisition of bodies for labor), but the dark African body in the European imaginary, prior to European colonialism, was already scripted and codified as morally and aesthetically problematic. It is not the African’s dark phenotype as such that is problematic. Rather, it is the reactive-value creating power$^{13}$ of those whites who brought with them pre-existing categories of the Same-Other dialectic.

I am fully aware of the Same-Other dualism “where social inequality based on birth was the general rule among Europeans themselves.”$^{14}$ Even the Greeks distinguished themselves from those that they deemed “Barbarians.” I am also cognizant of the fact that the Irish were characterized as “savages.” And who can forget the prevalence in Europe of the horrors of anti-Semitism and the portrayal of Jews as having committed deicide.$^{15}$ I have no wish to engage in the politics of who suffered the most or to say that whites did not oppress and label “sub-human” those who were also white in their phenotypic constitution. However, unlike Jews,$^{16}$ the Irish, and Slavs, Africans represented those who were “diametrically opposed” to whites.$^{17}$

The “visible epidermal terrain”$^{18}$ of the dark African body was the site of Otherness within the framework of a deeper, historically embedded axiological Manichean divide in Europe itself, an epidermal terrain that would continue, even today, to signify (moral, scientific) “truths” regarding the entire cartography, as it were, of the dark African body. As George Fredrickson notes:

If the demonization of the Jews established some basis for the racial anti-Semitism of the modern era, the prejudice and discrimination directed at
the Irish on one side of Europe and certain Slavic peoples on the other
foreshadowed the dichotomy between civilization and savagery that would
characterize imperial expansion beyond the European continent.¹⁹

We should keep in mind that Africa and Africans stood outside of Europe proper.
“The myths of [dark] Africa and other continents correlate with the myth of [light]
Europe itself.”²⁰ In short, it is my sense that the myth of Europe, driven by its
expansionist greed and narcissism, is fundamentally predicated upon tropes of whiteness,
bringing luminosity and light to bear upon the dark world, the dark continent of Africa.²¹
Hence, the Manichean divide was already fundamentally operative in European
consciousness. As Gustav Jahoda writes:

For several of the church fathers in the West the colour black was
associated with darkness, the devil and evil, and this has been suggested as
a causal factor. However, the symbolism of black and white had already
been prevalent in Greece and Rome, black having been the colour of evil
demons, and this does not appear to have had any bearing on attitudes
towards blacks. On the other hand there is evidence that it did have such
an effect already at the beginning of the 5th century. The monk John
Cassian wrote a series of spiritual Conferences, some of which depicted
the devil “in the shape of a hideous Negro,” or a demon “like a Negro
woman, ill-smelling and ugly.” Since Cassian’s admirer, St Benedict,
ordered the *Conferences* to be read in the monasteries, they probably had a wide circulation.\textsuperscript{22}

Consistent with the early axiological frames of reference that codified “blackness” as that which is evil, Jan Nederveen Pieterse maintains:

The symbolism of light and darkness was probably derived from astrology, alchemy, Gnosticism and forms of Manichaeism; in itself it had nothing to do with skin colour, but in the course of time it did acquire that connotation. Black became the colour of the devil and demons. Later, in the confrontation with Islam, it came to form part of the enemy image of Muslims: the symbolism of the “black demon” was transferred to Muslims—in early medieval paintings black Saracens, black tormentors and black henchmen torture Christ during the Passion. This is the tradition of the devil as the Black Man and the black bugaboo.\textsuperscript{23}

My point is that the “economic motive” is necessary for explaining colonial racism, but it is not sufficient. Indeed, in stream with JanMohamed, the perception of racial difference is influenced by economic motives, but economic motives are neither sufficient to explain the complexity of the origins of colonial desire and adventure, nor sufficient to explain the complexity of the Anglo-American/European racist gaze. In short, I question the implications of JanMohamed’s prioritization of “material” causal factors vis-à-vis colonialism or the slave trade. JanMohamed’s view would suggest that
the discursive constitution of “whiteness” and “Blackness,” in terms of the slave trade or colonialism, functions as a super-structural phenomenon resulting from a prior material causation. This does not mean, however, that I give explanatory priority to “ideational”/“idealistic” causation. Intuitively, at least with respect to the slave trade and the colonialization of Black bodies, my sense is that neither explanatory approach should be subordinated to the other, but that both work in conjunction. In this way, whether effectively or not, I avoid a materialist-idealistic taxonomy.24

European colonialism is a form of deep existential trauma, dispossession, displacement, oppression, and physical and psychological murder. It is messianic and imperialistic. Colonialist practices can range from the complete genocide of a native people and/or the deracination of a native people from their land (who are then taken to foreign lands to work as “slaves,” controlled, disciplined, policed, and inculcated to think of themselves as “slaves”) to colonial occupation, resulting in the disruption and devastation of the lived cultural, teleological space of native people, to say nothing of their agricultural ways of life.25 Colonial invasive powers bring with them their own myths, beliefs, and forms of colonial ordering which create a bifurcated form of hierarchy that is designed to distinguish between the natives and the colonizers, a form of hierarchy where the colonizer (white, good, intelligent, ethical, beautiful, civilized) is superior in all things, while the native (dark, exotic, sexually uncontrollable, bad, stupid, ugly, savage) is inferior. Hence, colonialism is a form of violent usurpation that disrupts the psychosocial equilibrium of those indigenous to their lived cultural cosmos. This outside power/violence interrupts “their continuity, making them play roles in which they no
longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance.”

Christopher Columbus’ invasive presence, for example, brought not only the myth of superiority and civilization, but domination, death, and genocide. Upon his second trip to the Caribbean, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain provided Columbus with more men, seventeen ships, “cannons, crossbows, guns, cavalry, and attack dogs.” Why so many weapons of destruction? “Standard” history tells us that he wanted to prove that the earth was not flat and find a western route to the East. This view of history, however, fails to capture the pernicious consequences suffered by those “Others” encountered during Columbus’ “courageous” voyages. The omission of Columbus’ ignoble deeds from “standard” textbooks bespeaks a form of ideological revisionism. For example, after Columbus’ arrival in Haiti, when a native Arawak committed a minor offense, he/the Spanish “cut off his ears or nose. Disfigured, the person was sent back to his village as living evidence of the brutality the Spaniards were capable of.” Of course, the Arawaks did not stand a chance against Columbus. He had horses, cannons, crossbows and the 20 attack dogs, “who were turned loose and immediately tore the Indians apart.” Also, there were Spaniards who hunted the natives for sport and “murdered them for dog food.” The following depict the devastating impact of colonialism on those indigenous to the land of Haiti: natives had their limbs cut off; women killed their own children to avoid having them oppressed; natives killed themselves in mass suicides; many suffered from malnutrition; massive depopulation occurred; native female sex slaves, ages nine to ten, were in demand by the Spaniards; their young bodies were raped and invaded; etc.
Whether in Haiti, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, the Canary Islands, Cuba, Guadeloupe, Antigua, colonialist desire for wealth, with its logic of centralization of power, and its selectivity regarding who and what is deemed “human,” trumped universal humanism. After all, it was at this time that the Renaissance was having its impact.

Césaire:

And that is the great thing I hold against pseudo-humanism: that for too long it has diminished the rights of man, that its concept of those rights has been—and still is—narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist.\(^{31}\)

As with Césaire, Fanon was cognizant of Europe’s hypocrisy regarding its own professed humanism:

That same Europe where they were never done talking of Man, and where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know with what suffering humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind.\(^{32}\)

The point here is that European humanism, which might be deemed one of the most valued aspects of European civilization, became a Euro-humanism vis-à-vis those deemed non-European. The irony is that this universal humanism was shaped through an ideology of exclusion. Indeed, the development of ideas regarding the nature of humanity
and “the universal qualities of the human mind as the common good of an ethical civilization occurred at the same time as those particularly violent centuries in the history of the world now known as the era of Western colonialism.” Hence, to the extent that Euro-humanism was a culturally and “racially” politicized humanism, its very conception of the “human” functioned as an ideological category, a category in the name of which violence toward the Other (the “sub-human”/“non-human”) could be enacted with little or no remorse. Euro-humanism, however, did not simply fail to include “the Other.” Rather, the core of its meaning was exclusionary. However, once faced with “the striptease of our [European] humanism,” as Sartre writes, Euro-humanism stands naked, “and it’s not a pretty sight. It was nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectation of sensibility were only alibis for our aggression.”

To the extent that Euro-humanism was/is grounded within the ideology of whiteness, its conception of the “human” must be rejected as it is really a form of anti-humanism. In the face of a pernicious and racist ontology of the “human,” with its misanthropic axiological frames of reference, it is no wonder that “the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him.”

Critiquing the very concept of European “civilization” and turning its “civilizing” efforts across the globe on its head, Ricky Lee Allen argues:

Given the behavior of whites over the last 500 years, I would argue that it is we whites who are the ones who are yet to achieve the status of “civilized beings” because we have yet to grasp fully what has happened
and is still happening. Consider this: What would it mean to white folk if we found out that our history was in reality not a narrative about the evolution of civilization, but rather a myth that masks our perpetual state of savagery and dehumanization vis-à-vis direct and indirect forms of genocide and institutional violence? The tough reality to face is that we whites, as a people, have yet to move from savagery to civilization. Our notion of “civilization” is part of a dream state that keeps us unconscious of and complacent within our necrophilic desires. Meanwhile, we project our true selves onto Others.  

In Mexico, Peru, and Florida, to name a few, the conquistadors/conquerors enslaved the natives of these lands, exploiting their bodies and their land. The fallout of Columbus’ colonial “progress” became infectious:

Other nations rushed to emulate Columbus. In 1501 the Portuguese began to depopulate Labrador, transporting the now extinct Boethuk Indians to Europe and Cape Verde as slaves. After the British established beachheads on the Atlantic coast of North America, they encouraged coastal Indian tribes to capture and sell members of more distant tribes. Charleston, South Carolina, became a major port for exporting Indian slaves. The Pilgrims and Puritans sold the survivors of the Pequot War into slavery in Bermuda in 1637. The French shipped virtually the entire Natchez nation in chains to West Indies in 1731.
“Because the Indians died,” according to James W. Loewen, “Indian slavery then led to the massive slave trade to the other way across the Atlantic, from Africa.”

Under King Leopold II, Black bodies were cut, hacked, and torn in order to feed his greed in the Congo, to say nothing of Angola “where . . . malcontents’ lips were pierced in order to shut them with padlocks.” Imagine having to look upon the severed limbs of one’s children. Nsala, a native Congolese, knew what it was like to sit, emotionally catatonic, and look at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, Boali, who was a victim of Anglo-Belgian colonialism. The hands of innocent children were viciously severed, and black women’s bodies raped. Within the context of the Congo alone, ten million or more Africans were murdered because of the pernicious phenomenon of colonialist expansionism, colonialist logic, colonialist myths, procrustean narcissism (where the native is forced to yield to the self-centered, all-consuming importance of the colonizer), misanthropic values (some people are hated and simply do not matter and can be enslaved, colonized and decimated), hegemony, and solipsism (only we, the colonizers, really matter, only our ex-istence is really significant). Cornelius Castoriadis matter-of-factly observes that “the earth has been unified by means of Western violence.”

One only need think of the sheer percentage of “ownership” of the earth through European control. Around 1800, 35 percent of the earth’s surface was “owned” by Europeans. This figure had increased to 67 percent by 1878. However, “between 1878 and 1914, the period of the ‘new imperialism,’ European control expanded over 84.4 percent of the [earth’s] surface. The expansion took place mainly in Africa.” In 1920, W. E. B. Du Bois notes:
With the dog-in-the-manger theory of trade, with the determination to reap inordinate profits and to exploit the weakest to the utmost there came a new imperialism—the rage for one’s own nation to own the earth or, at least, a section large enough portion of it to insure as big profits as the next nation. Where sections could not be owned by one dominant nation there came a policy of “open door,” but the “door” was open to “white people only.” As to the darkest and weakest of peoples there was but one unanimity in Europe—that which Herr Dernberg of the German Colonial Office called the agreement with England to maintain white “prestige” in Africa—the doctrine of the divine right of white people to steal.45

Aimé Césaire also sees through the empty rhetoric of colonial expansionism and its mission to “civilize” the world. He is cognizant that colonialism results in “a whole barrelful of ears collected, pair by pair, from prisoners, friendly or enemy.”46 He asks:

Was there no point in quoting Colonel de Montagnac, one of the conquerors of Algeria: “In order to banish the thoughts that sometimes besiege me, I have some heads cut off, not the heads of artichokes but the heads of men.”47

Césaire understands barbarity to be intrinsic to the very structure of colonialism. It is my sense that colonialism, Eurocentric expansionism, and whiteness are inextricably linked. As Samir Amin notes, “Eurocentrism is a culturalist phenomenon in the sense that it
assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples.”

Moreover, the source of these cultural invariants is believed grounded within invariant ontological features of various excluded groups. Whether referring to the colonized Black or the stereotyped Jew, there is a sense in which both excluded groups are deemed eternally problematic. Memmi:

> It is easy to understand how the same movement also extends through time, back into the past and forward into the future. The Jew has always been greedy, the Black man has always been inferior. Conclusion: the Jew will always be greedy, the Black man will always be inferior. There is no hope of a change, no salvation to be expected.⁴⁹

Within the white colonial order of things, the Black/native body bears the imprint of the colonial gaze, its myths and its lies.⁵⁰ The imaginary projection upon the Black body becomes the imagined in the flesh. There is a coalescing of the signifier with the signified.⁵¹ Of course, the Black body is also the object of colonial sadistic brutality. The white colonial gaze is that broadly construed epistemic perspective, a process of seeing without being seen, with its discursive and non-discursive performances, that constructs the Black body into its own colonial imaginary. Masking any foul play, the colonizer strives to encourage the colonized to embrace his/her existential predicament as natural and immutable. The idea is to get the colonized to accept the colonialists point of reference as the only point of reference.⁵² As JanMohamed notes:
By thus subjecting the native, the European settler is able to compel the Other’s recognition of him and, in the process, allow his own identity to become deeply dependent on his position as a master. This enforced recognition from the Other in fact amounts to the European’s narcissistic self-recognition since the native, who is considered too degraded and inhuman to be credited with any specific subjectivity, is cast as no more than a recipient of the negative elements of the self that the European projects onto him. This transitivity and the preoccupation with the inverted self-image mark the “imaginary” relations that characterize the colonial encounter.53

In point of fact, however, “Blackness” vis-à-vis the white colonial gaze is a historically constructed tertium quid; it is that which emerges as a third element, between, as it were, the dark or swarthy skin color of the colonized, which is a natural phenomenon, and the white colonial gaze, which is a form of hegemony and control. Within the colonial space of intelligibility, this Manichean divide, Blacks are neatly positioned along taxonomic-zoological lines. As Frantz Fanon notes:

At times this Manicheism goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man’s reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations.
When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary. On this score, the Black/colonized/Other/native constitutes the natural wild flora and fauna of the landscape. Sharpley-Whiting describes this phenomenon through an insightful analysis of the naturalist writer Guy de Maupassant’s short story, “Boitelle.” In her analysis, she exposes the perversion of love between a white man and a certain “Negress.” The point is that the colonial gaze vis-à-vis the Black body distorts a form of relatiobality predicated upon the dynamics of reciprocal recognition. In the story, Boitelle, the exoticist, one day sees the “Negress” as he gazes upon a wild bird. What he “sees” through his gaze, as Sharpley-Whiting makes clear, is of the same exotic kind as the wild bird. As Sharpley-Whiting notes, “In one fell swoop, Boitelle objectifies and reduces the black woman not only to a quasi-bountiful rarity to be tasted and sampled, but also to a state of animality through the comparative gaze.” Within the framework of the Manichean divide, to say “Black woman” is automatically to imply a so-called untamed and mysterious “object” of interest. The colonialist racist “ascribes to his victim a series of surprising traits, calling him [her] incomprehensible, impenetrable, mysterious, strange, disturbing, and so on. Slowly he makes of his victim a sort of animal, a thing, or simply a symbol.”

Blacks and other indigenous peoples were deemed things vis-à-vis an economy of white sameness. As “things,” they were considered devoid of feeling, humanity, reason, etc. This form of rationalization functioned to erase the dynamic of human relationality, a form of inter-subjectivity where two or more people respond to each other as equally
human, mutually respecting the other’s subjectivity. In the context of colonialism, there is “no human contact,” as Césaire maintains, “but relations of domination and submission.” When the colonizer and the colonized are face-to-face, Césaire sees only “force, brutality, cruelty, sadism, conflict.” Colonialism had embedded within it a racist colonial ethnography/anthropology (or theory of the anthropos). Césaire observes:

Gobineau said: “The only history is white.” M. Caillois, in turn, observes:

“The only ethnography is white.” It is the West that studies the ethnography of the others, not the others who study the ethnography of the West.

As the humanity of the Black/native/colonized is rendered suspect, individualized subjectivity is denied. Albert Memmi refers to this process of depersonalization as the mark of the plural. The ontological structure of the Black/native/colonized is rendered non-distinct. The Black/native/colonized vis-à-vis the white colonizer is an amorphous collectivity, as if moved by the same collective essence.

The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (“They are this.” “They are all the same.”). If a colonized servant does not come in one morning, the colonizer will not say that she is ill, or that she is cheating, or that she is tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract. (Seven days a week; colonized domestics rarely enjoy the one day off a week granted to
others.) He will say, “You can’t count on them.” It is not just a grammatical expression. He refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in his maid’s life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him, and his maid does not exist as an individual.⁶¹

This process of “thingification”⁶² is a dialectical process that negatively impacts both the colonized and the colonizer. For Césaire, dehumanization is not simply restricted to the colonized. His point is that:

Colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on the contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonization, that I wanted to point out.⁶³

Memmi was also aware of this boomerang effect of colonization and dehumanization. Memmi: “To handle this, the colonizer must assume the opaque rigidity and imperviousness of the stone. In short, he must dehumanize himself, as well.”⁶⁴ On this score, the colonizer also becomes a thing, denying his/her freedom to be other than white colonial sameness. In becoming a “thing,” the colonizer need not feel responsible for his/her actions. The colonizer attempts to repress the anxiety that accompanies his/her
freedom either through the process of becoming a “thing” (“I am following the order of nature’s teleological dictates”) or making the colonized into a “thing” (he/she is fixed in his/her nature to be animal-like, inferior). Memmi provides an insightful observation where he notes: “Whenever the colonizer adds, in order not to fall prey to anxiety, that the colonized is a wicked, backward person with evil, thievish, somewhat sadistic instincts, he thus justifies his police and his legitimate severity.”

In his Preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre characterizes the colonizer as undergoing a process of transmutation from the for-itself to the “in-itself.” Sartre writes, “This imperious being, crazed by his absolute power and by the fear of losing it, no longer remembers clearly that he was once a man; he takes himself for a horsewhip or a gun.” On this score, the white colonizer attempts to blur the distinction between his/her own freedom/praxis and the putative “objective necessity” of colonialism. Commenting upon Memmi’s notion of how colonizers manage to engage in a process of “self-absolution,” a process that involves an elaborate process of self-deception and bad faith, Sartre writes:

How can an elite of usurpers, aware of their mediocrity, establish their privileges? By one means only: debasing the colonized to exalt themselves, denying the title of humanity to the natives, and defining them as simply absences of qualities—animals, not humans. This does not prove hard to do, for the system deprives them of everything. Colonialist practice has engraved the colonialist idea into things themselves; it is the movement of things that designates colonizer and colonized alike. Thus
oppression justifies itself through oppression: the oppressors produce and maintain by force the evils that render the oppressed, in their eyes, more and more like what they would have to be like to deserve their fate.\textsuperscript{68}

The white colonialis\textsuperscript{st} strategy was to get the colonized Black (or native) to undergo a process of epistemic violence (a form of violence that can take place within the white semiotic space of an elevator, as discussed in chapter one), a process where the Black begins to internalize all of the colonizer’s myths and thus begins to see his/her identity through the paradigm of white supremacy/Eurocentricity. Indeed, the objective of the colonialis\textsuperscript{st} was to get the Black (or native) to become blind to the farcicality of the historical “necessity” of being colonized. The idea here was to get the native, and in this case the Black, to conceptualize his/her identity/being as an ignoble savage,\textsuperscript{69} bestial, hyper-sexual, criminal, violent, uncivilized, brutish, dirty, inferior, and as a problem.\textsuperscript{70} This kind of physical/psychological colonialis\textsuperscript{st} conquest, as Paulo Freire says, “is at all times present in anti-dialogical action.”\textsuperscript{71} The colonialis\textsuperscript{st} was not interested in dialogue, but a form of monologica\textsuperscript{l} speech that maintained unequal power. The strategy was to create in the Black (or the native) a psychological fissure, a double consciousness, a profound sense of psychic dissonance. Moreover, the colonizer’s strategy was to get the native to think of his/her own cultural ideals/beliefs as worthless. Fanon:

The customs of the colonized people, their traditions, their myths—above all, their myths—are the very sign of that poverty of spirit and their constitutional depravity. That is why we must put the DDT which destroys
parasites, the bearers of disease, on the same level as the Christian religion [or certainly certain ways of practicing it] which wages war on embryonic heresies and instincts, and on evil as yet unborn. The recession of yellow fever and the advance of evangelization form part of the same balance sheet.72

He continues:

The Church in the colonies is the white people’s Church, the foreigner’s Church. She does not call the native to God’s ways but to the ways of the white man, of master, of oppressor. And as we know, in this matter many are called but few are chosen.73

What the colonizer knows about the colonized constitutes what the colonized is. Perception, epistemology, and ontology are collapsed. With regard to the Black/native/colonized, what is seen is what is known, and what is known is what is seen. Moreover, what is known and seen or seen and known is what there is. This will become clear in the case of Sarah Bartmann vis-à-vis the French imaginary. Within the European purview of the white gaze/cartographic grid of representation, Bartmann is seen, known and is a highly developed animal. She will then be “closely scrutinized in order to determine her relationship to other animals and human beings. She will be used as a yardstick by which to judge the stages of Western evolution, by which to discern identity, difference, and progress.”74 According to Memmi, “Far from wanting to understand him as he really is,”
the colonizer strips the colonized of any recognizable human form through “a series of negations.” The Black body, for example, is not beautiful, not civilized, not moral, etc. Of course, the white is constituted through a series of affirmations. These negations and affirmations are designed to be passed off as normal. The colonizers/oppressors “develop a series of methods precluding any presentation of the world as a problem and showing it rather as a fixed entity, as something given—something to which people, as mere spectators, must adapt.” Stating this relationship in correlative terms, Fanon argues, “The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: It is the racist who creates his inferior.” These negations also manifest themselves in the form of negating the very existence of the Black/the Other. “When I search for Man in the technique and style of Europe,” according to Fanon, “I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders.”

To help explain what happens within the space of the white colonial performative gaze, consider the following elements: mythos, codification, ritual, ontologization, constructivity, stereotypification, and over-determination. As in my earlier example with the white woman in the elevator, the white gaze freezes the Black through a process of mythopoetic constructions. The white imaginary projects onto the Black body its own fears in the form of certain created myths (the “Black rapist”). This renders an exploration of the source of these fears unnecessary. After all, once the fears have been projected upon the Black colonized body, the white colonizer erases his/her connection with the projected image. In this way, what is in reality a mere fantasy is made real. These constructions are so powerful that it makes sense to say that the white fails to “see”
anything else. The adequation between the fantasy and the colonized qua “object” has already been firmly established.

The white imaginary also creates a system of codification through which white perception is shaped in predictable ways. Hence, the Black body is coded as a form of pathology; it is coded as evil, dirty, and promiscuous. Indeed, the Black body is coded as a site of axiological nullification. Concerning this last point, Fanon notes:

The colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonialist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces. 
These codes possess incredible cultural and historical weight because of the many agencies of white power and knowledge (e.g., anthropology, phrenology, philosophy, medical discourse, etc.) that function as vehicles through which white hegemony is further expressed and maintained. The point here is that knowledge and power are interwoven. Within the context of colonial power, the science of ethnology helped toward colonial administration. Literary and artistic works depicting the non-Western “Others” combined “with Medieval fables and notions drawn from the Bible and the classics.” As Pieterse states, “In painting, poetry, theatre, opera, popular prints, illustrated magazines, novels, children’s books—a broad range of imaginative work—non-European worlds were represented as part of European scenarios.”

“Seeing” the Black body through these myths and codes, the white will frequently engage in a series of rituals (e.g., a white woman grabs her purse on an elevator and avoids direct eye contact). The above leads to a process of ontologization, a process whereby the being of the Black body (and the white body) undergoes a process of transformation. This involves the process in which the historically and culturally contingent signifiers of the Black/white body are transformed into ontologically intrinsic natural and eternal dispositions.

The white gaze also involves a process whereby both the colonizer/white and the colonized/Black undergo a mutual process of constructivity. As argued above, the social construction of the Black is dialectically linked to the construction of the white, where the latter occupies a superior place within the construction. In other words, the relationship is asymmetrical. There is also the process of stereotypification, that is, where whites and Blacks (and, of course, all other non-white “Others”) become “solid types,”
indelibly marked by nature’s teleological design. Then there is the process of *over-determination*. In this process, Blacks are over-determined from the outside, pre-marked, prefigured aesthetically as ugly, fixed as immoral, and zoologically categorized as primitive animals. On this score, new knowledge (non-alienating and counter-colonialist knowledge) of the Black body is always already epistemologically foreclosed. As Fanon writes, “I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*.” In this way, the Black body appears as something *it is* rather than as something that is *done* to it.

Before considering the white gaze vis-à-vis Hottentot Venus, I would like to address the notion of the reactive value-creating stance of whiteness as sameness. To refer to whiteness as sameness speaks to the hegemonic core of whiteness. In “Boitelle,” for example, the white male exoticist did not come to see himself as *different* in the presence of the so-called Negress. Rather, his reactive value-creating stance involved an assimilatory process. He fixed her within the structure of how he is positioned by and how he positions himself within the economy of whiteness. One might say that her “difference makes no difference at all, since the difference is always the same.” Her “difference” amounts to sameness given that her “difference” is already known within the cultural space of white representations that reflect the narcissistic structure of whiteness.

Within the bounds of a white socio-ontological cartography, whites “see” the Black/colonized, but only through symbols that always already privilege whiteness. The One (the white) “sees” the Black (the Other) as an instantiation of white normativity or the same. In a socio-ontological encounter with the Black/colonized, whiteness does not abandon itself or stray from its familiar white scripts and its familiar acts of scripting.
Even the comportment of the white body, in its daring, its self-assuredness, its spatial distancing vis-à-vis the Black, confirms whiteness as the One. Of course, it is through the physical and spatial movements of the white body that “fixes me, just like a dye is used to fix a chemical solution.” Note that it is the entire white body, its movement, that functions as a metaphoric gaze that structures the Black as the not-One, that has the capacity to fix. All that is visible might be said to fall within the panoptic gaze of the One/the same/the white. Whiteness as the One is deemed “omniscient.” The Black/Other/colonized/native is rendered permanently visible, always the same. In Discipline and Punish, permanent visibility is what Foucault says “assures the automatic functioning of power.” Although this is a theme that will reappear through this project, the Black body internalizes the white gaze such that it continues to exert a controlling influence on the Black body/self even in the absence of a white gazer. On this score, whiteness as the One operates under an imperialistic ontology. It is a form of totalization “in which the same constitutes itself through a form of negativity in relation to the other, producing all knowledge by appropriating and sublating the other within itself.”

Whiteness refuses to see itself as alien, as seen, as recognized, as the not-One. For whiteness to become the not-One would partly involve the destruction of its imperial epistemological and ontological base from which it gazes. To reject the Black as the instantiated sameness of whiteness, would force whiteness to interrogate its status as the One. It might be said that whiteness as the One secures its status as the One vis-à-vis the construction of the Black as the not-One. Not to dismantle the powerful structuration of the white gaze, which is linked to political and material power, whiteness occludes the
possibility to be Other (to be “the not-same”), to see through the web of white meaning that it has spun.

The Other emerges within cultural semiotic and material structures of power. It is not the colonized who, in defining him/herself as colonized, interpellates the colonizer. The colonized is posed as such by the colonizer in defining him/herself as the colonizer. As Beauvoir says, “Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself.” Hence, the reactive value-creating power of whiteness constructs the Other (read: non-white in this case) as inferior. Whiteness, then, as a site of reactive value-creating power not only constructs and perpetuates negative valuations of the Other, but whiteness’s reactive value-creating stance presupposes a subtext of sameness that underwrites its reaction. Moreover, the colonial intervening presence of whiteness is deemed that without which the Other could not possibly advance. In other words, whiteness might be said to be the sine qua non of historical evolution. As Howard Winant notes:

It was the use made of the “other” to define the self, the reliance on difference to produce identity, that constituted the cultural dimensions of modernity on the foundation of racial hierarchy. By relegating most of the world’s population to the derogatory status of lesser and indeed “other” beings, by using them to represent identities antithetical to those of the “civilized” West, Enlightenment culture and its sequels performed spectacular acts of symbolic violence.
In stream with Winant, critical whiteness theorist Ruth Frankenberg observes:

Colonization also occasioned the reformation of European selves. Central to colonial discourses is the notion of the colonized subject as irreducibly Other from the standpoint of a white “self.” Equally significant, while discursively generating and marking a range of cultural and racial Others as different from an apparently stable Western or white self, the Western self is itself produced as an effect of the Western discursive production of its Others. This means that the Western self and the non-Western other are co-constructed as discursive products, both of whose “realness” stand in extremely complex relationships to the production of knowledge, and to the material violence to which “epistemic violence” is intimately linked.93

According to Fanon, the Black body is held captive by “the white man, who had woven [the Black body] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.”94 At this juncture, I will explore how the so-called Hottentot Venus was indeed held captive by the colonial white gaze95 that had woven her out of a thousand details. To theorize the so-called Hottentot Venus is to theorize the French male imaginary as it gets expressed through monopolizing desire and power. Indeed, Hottentot Venus is a mirror through which nineteenth-century French male desire and power get reflected. As Hortense J. Spillers notes:
Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.96

Functioning as a site of rhetorical wealth, the Black female body is identified and constructed for her. She inhabits a social universe within which she is constantly named. As a “sexual abnormality,” Bartmann’s Black body is a site of discursive formation that is structured through a larger historical a priori that always already constitutes a white epistemic orientation to the Black (female) body. In short, the Black female body as marked Other is “trapped” within an “essence” that functions as an important ontological register that constitutes the Anglo-American/European as Same/One. She is the exotic phantasm of the white imaginary. Like the French colonial postcards depicting Algerian women, a phenomenon that was created between 1900 and 1930, Bartmann’s Black body became the fantasized object of the Frenchman’s desire and power. Her body became the phantasm of the French scopic gaze. The scopic gaze directed at Bartmann was a violent act of reduction and mutilation. In The Colonial Harem, Malik Alloula argues that it is through the aperture of the French photographer’s camera, which is actually an extension of his voyeurism, that the Algerian, Oriental female became a sexualized object, an effect of a “vast operation of
The postcard became a cheap opening (a form of penetrating) into the unveiling (strip teasing) of the Orient. It became “the poor man’s phantasm: for a few pennies, display racks full of dreams. The postcard is everywhere, covering all the colonial space, immediately available to the tourist, the soldier, the colonist.”

Not only is the Black female body exotic, it is a site of contradictory investments, at once desirable and undesirable, known and unknown. It was important that Bartmann was both an object of sexual interest and yet degraded. In short, to reconfigure her into “an object of derision, ‘a spectacle, a clown,’ is to strip away her sexual appeal, albeit perverse and objectified, to the French male spectator, to reinforce and reinscribe Bartmann’s position in the Manichaean social world as a primitive savage.” Hence, one consistent theme in the European imaginary is that the Black female body was not “normal” (read: white, civilized). Indeed, it “represents the abnormal in Eurocentric discourse.”

Given the connections between anthropology and European expansionism, it is no wonder that the Black female body, and the Black body more generally, would come to signify the “abnormal,” the “bizarre.” V.Y. Mudimbe notes that the development of European anthropology was “a visible power-knowledge political system,” which led to the “reification of the ‘primitive.’” As Pieterse argues, “Anthropology, as the study of ‘otherness,’ never disengaged itself from Eurocentric narcissism.”

Capturing the gendered, racial and sexual dimensions at stake in the production of the “truth” of Hottentot Venus, Sharpley-Whiting notes:
Black women, embodying the dynamics of racial/sexual alterity, historically invoking primal fears and desire in European (French) men, represent ultimate difference (the sexualized savage) and inspire repulsion, attraction, and anxiety, which gave rise to the nineteenth-century collective French male imaginations of Black Venus (primitive narratives).  

The production of the “truth” of Hottentot Venus is fundamentally linked to the French white gaze. Sharpley-Whiting:

I refer to the concept of the (white) male gaze as a desire to unveil, “to dissect,” “to lay bare” the unknown, in this case the black female. The gaze “fixes” the black female in her place, steadies her, in order to decode and comfortably recode her into its own system of representations.

On this score, one might say that Sarah Bartmann as Hottentot Venus is always already constrained within the anthropological text of a chain of signifiers. The chain of signifiers point back to their source: the white racist and racialized episteme. Sarah Bartmann is caught within the dialectical structure of the same-Other. “Anthropology, as well as missionary studies of primitive philosophies, are then concerned with the study of the distance from the Same to the Other.”
One can only imagine the pain felt as Bartmann measured her body by the constructions projected upon her from the unconscious/conscious European imaginary. Consider the following:

Oh, my god. Becky, look at her butt.

It is so big. She looks like,

One of those rap guys’ girlfriends.

But, y’know, who understands those rap guys?

They only talk to her, because,

She looks like a total prostitute, ‘key?

I mean, her butt, is just so big.

I can’t believe it’s just so round, it’s like,

Out there, I mean—gross. Look!

She’s just so . . . black.¹⁰⁶

The above quote is consistent with French European discourse used to describe Sarah Bartmann. However, the introductory lines are from a rap video in which Sir Mix-A-Lot performs his famous release, “Baby Got Back.”¹⁰⁷ The reader will note the chain of signifiers that move from having a big butt, to being a prostitute, to being Black. This is precisely the inter-referential semiotic space within which Bartmann was constructed.

Within the context of early nineteenth century French society, where Bartmann was put on display for five years (which includes time being displayed in London¹⁰⁸) for the French public to gaze upon, to gaze upon her big butt, French spectatorship¹⁰⁹ was an
active, constructive process that transmogrified Bartmann’s body. One might argue, “But they were only looking.” However, as I will continue to argue throughout this project, “the white racist gaze” is itself a performance, an intervention, a violent form of marking, labeling as different, freakish, animal-like. While in London (where her name was changed from Saartjie Baartman, which was given to her under Dutch colonial rule in South Africa, to Sarah Bartmann), Bartmann, who was of African Khoisan cultural identity, and who stood four feet six inches high, became the “grotesque” prized object to be “seen” by parties of five and upward in a location at 225 Piccadilly. Bartmann later found herself in Paris. Having parted with her previous “guardians” (Alexander Dunlop and Hendrik Cezar) in London, her new “guardian” was “a showman of wild animals named Réaux.” Like a monkey, Bartmann was fed small treats in order to entice her to dance and sing, probably moving in such a way as to clearly exhibit her “large cauldron pot.” For three francs one could either go and “see” the Hottentot Venus or “at rue de Castiglione and for the same admission price, Réaux was also exhibiting a five-year old male rhinoceros.” One had a choice between two wild and exotic animals. Both were oddities, placed on specular display, waiting to be visually dissected by the curious French onlookers. Clearly, Bartmann was being violated despite her right to inviolability. Then, again, “animals” would not have had such rights to inviolability.

Hottentot Venus became the Other through which the French gazers could measure their own humanity and superiority. Echoing Spillers, the French needed Bartmann. Similar to the empire or colonial French films of the 1930s, Bartmann was an outlet for the greatness of French national identity. Sharpley-Whiting writes, “Like travelogues and documentary films, elaborate feature films, depicting ‘happy savages’
and exotic and lush landscapes ripe for the taking, helped to garner support for continued colonial expansion among the French spectators at home.” Hence, the creation of Bartmann and the colonial Other is part and parcel of empire building. The sense of national failure (given “France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and a not-so-stellar performance during World War I”), weakness, and overall fear regarding its status, the “savage Other” writ large (on the screen) became the medium in terms of which France could eject all of its historico-psychodynamic crises. The very act of gazing (even if while sitting in the dark watching a film) is itself a form of visual penetration by the phallicentric hegemony of the colonizing gaze. As Sharpley-Whiting argues:

The gaze is always bound up with power, domination, and eroticisation; it is eroticizing, sexualized, and sexualizing. The indisputable fact that throngs of a predominantly male, French crowd paid to gaze upon Bartmann as the essential primitive, as the undeveloped savage unable to measure up to Frenchness, is undercut by her practically au naturel presentation.

Sharpley-Whiting demonstrates how “seeing” Bartmann is inextricably linked to discourses of power, dominance, and hierarchies. She is aware of the dialectical relationship between whiteness (as pure, good, innocent) vis-à-vis Blackness (as impure, bad, freakish, guilty). The French Africanism is tied into the perception of the French as racially superior. This dialectic is clear where Sharpley-Whiting argues that “geographically, linguistically, culturally, and aesthetically, France, the French language,
French culture, and Frenchwomen are privileged sites against which Bartmann, and hence Africa, are measured as primitive, savage, and grotesque." Within the context of the French imaginary (a site where race, gender, and class intersect), “truth” about Black women, and Bartmann in particular, is manufactured to foreclose any possibility of knowing Black women other than as prostitutes, sexually dangerous, diseased, and primitive. Historically, and I think that this speaks to the pervasiveness of white male hegemony, it is interesting to note that late nineteenth century science constructed all women as pathological (where this is linked to their sexuality), and that they could easily be “seen” as possessing the bestial characteristics of the Black female Hottentot. Within this context, it is also interesting that Freud referred to adult white female sexuality as the “dark continent” of psychology. Nevertheless, white women (read: civilized) were still superior to non-white women (read: savages).

Although she is not writing about the colonial context, it is difficult to resist making reference to Toni Morrison’s examination of a passage from Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and To Have Not*. The point that she raises speaks to the way in which white women, though historically oppressed by white men, receive an “existential wage,” as it were, in virtue of being white when compared to Black/non-white women. The ideological significance of this example vis-à-vis Bartmann is powerful. Within a particular scene in the novel, the character Harry is making love to his wife, Marie. The latter asks:

“That, did you ever do it with a nigger wench?”

“Yes.”
“What’s it like?”

“Like nurse shark.”

Morrison notes:

The strong notion here is that of a black female as the furthest thing from human, so far away as to be not even mammal but fish. The figure evokes a predatory, devouring eroticism and signals the antithesis to femininity, to nurturing, to nursing, to replenishment. In short, Harry’s words mark something so brutal, contrary, and alien in its figuration that it does not belong to its own species and cannot be spoken of in language, in metaphor or metonymy, evocative of anything resembling the woman to whom Harry is speaking—his wife Marie. The kindness he has done Marie is palpable. His projection of black female sexuality has provided her with solace, for which she is properly grateful. She responds to the kindness and giggles, “You’re funny.”

At the apex of aesthetic beauty, “Hottentot maidens and Indian squaws are beautiful because of their comparability to Frenchwomen, the embodiment of beauty itself.” Prima facie, it would appear that to refer to Sarah Bartmann as “Venus” might function as a term of praise. As Sharpley-Whiting points out, however, the use of the term “Venus” to describe the Black female body simply re-inscribes the power of the simeness of European superiority. She writes:
The Roman deity of beauty, Venus, was also revered as the protectress of Roman prostitutes, who in her honor erected Venus temples of worship. Within these temples, instruction in the arts of love was given to aspiring courtesans. It is the latter image of prostitution, sexuality, and danger that reproduced itself in narrative and was projected onto black female bodies. The projection of the Venus image, of prostitute proclivities, onto black female bodies, allows the French writer to maintain a position of moral, sexual, and racial superiority. \(^{123}\)

To reiterate, it is the European who has created a Manichaean world to buttress his/her own sense of who he/she is. The creation of “essences” justified what the French “perceived” to be “true” about Bartmann, and, hence, “true” about themselves. She was reduced to a wild animal. Just as the Black male was constructed as a walking phallus, \(^{124}\) “most nineteenth-century French spectators did not view her as a person or even a human, but rather as a titillating curiosity, a collage of buttocks and genitalia.” \(^{125}\) During a three-day examination of Bartmann, with “a team of zoologists, anatomists, and physiologists,” \(^{126}\) the prominent naturalist Georges Cuvier also wanted to do a painting of Bartmann, just as a naturalist would want to get a better picture of the physiology and physiognomy of any other wild and exotic animal. The idea here was to create a kind of physiological cartography of Bartmann, to map her primitive differences against the backdrop of the European subject.
“To see” her “big butt” (what was called steatopygia) and her other alleged hypertrophies (enlarged labia minora and her large clitoris) was not to “see” her at all. Concerning the labia minora or the Hottentot apron, “investigators of racial differences would spend the eighteen century debating its anatomical specifications, producing in the absence of actual evidence a variety of phantasmatic representations.”127 Having the opportunity to examine Bartmann’s body after she died, Cuvier’s “objective scientific gaze” revealed the “truth” about her Black body. Sharpley-Whiting:

This very detailed examination of Bartmann’s sex, proceeding by the nominating of the visible, consists of Cuvier’s use of measurements, adjectives, and metaphors. His language is flowery and feminine: fleshy, rippled petals, crests, and heart-shaped figures. Bartmann’s sex blooms, blossoms, before his very eyes; the body becomes legible. As he reads and simultaneously writes a text on Bartmann, the mystery of the dark continent unfolds.”128

In short, Bartmann’s body “came into being” through the existence of categories that were ideologically fashioned. As John Bird and Simon Clarke note, “White people’s phantasies about black sexuality, about bodies and biology in general, are fears that center around otherness, otherness that they themselves have created and brought into being.”129 Commenting specifically on the “objective” sketches made of Bartmann, Sharpley-Whiting notes:
The sketches allow the viewer to observe, document, and compare her various physiognomic and physiological differences, differences that vastly differentiate the Other from the European self. Through this comparative/definitive exercise, Bartmann will be relegated to the terrain of the primitive—the lowest exemplum of the human species—while the European will always assume the pinnacle of human development. This process of mediating the self, of reflecting the self, through the body of the black female Other begins and rebegins with every regard.¹³⁰

Bartmann’s body becomes the distorted sexual thing that “it is” in terms of the paradigm/the epistemic regime through which she is being “seen.” Hence, the European power/knowledge position of spectatorship—mediated by certain atavistic assumptions, fears, theories regarding polygenetic evolutionary development—gives rise to an historical accretion, making for the epistemic conditions under which Bartmann “appears.” If we think of Bartmann as the “referent” of the colonial gaze and colonial discourse, Bartmann then becomes Hottentot Venus qua referent, that is, Hottentot Venus as phantasm is located within the discursive field of white re-presentational power. Concerning the power of discursivity, Robert Young notes, “[Edward] Said’s most significant argument about the discursive conditions of knowledge is that the texts of Orientalism ‘can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.’”¹³¹ The white colonist is able to control the epistemic conditions according to which Hottentot Venus becomes an ideological emergent phenomenon, while maintaining its own distance as a mere observer.
On this score, in reference to Hottentot Venus, French male knowledge production and the perception of “reality” is negotiated within a context that ensures immunity to its own vested interests and desires. For this elaborate colonial form of vision to take place, cognitive agents operate under unacknowledged presuppositions that guarantee the “veridicality” of their perception of the projected object of speculation. Hence, one might say that the use of the term “truth” when describing Hottentot Venus is not an epistemic indicator of correspondence, but a way of ideologically fixing belief within the entire colonial form of orientation vis-à-vis the dark Other. If the truth of one’s beliefs were determined simply by stimulation from the external world, then by simply opening one’s eyes one could immediately “see” Hottentot Venus. However, to “see” Hottentot Venus requires nothing short of having lived within a particular language-game, a form of life that always already runs ahead, as it were, creating conditions of intelligibility that have already reconfigured the meaning of some x, for example, as that “dark continent.” In this way, because Hottentot Venus is not simply given, the construction of the phantasmatic object must involve a constant process of maintenance, not only at the level of projecting new information onto Bartmann, providing ad hoc explanations to sustain conceptual coherence, but also to maintain ignorance regarding the role that one plays in the construction. As David Bloor reminds us, “Nature has power over us, but only [we] have authority” Such authority signifies “the ways in which seemingly impartial, objective academic disciplines had in fact colluded with, and indeed been instrumental in, the production of actual forms of colonial subjugation and administration.”
To the extent that Bartmann does not approximate the norm of European identity, which is also always already “seen” and “always constituted within, not outside, representation,” she is deemed ersatz, the *femme fatale*. Drawing from the antagonistic, binary logic of Prospero/Caliban, JanMohamed notes:

If . . . African natives can be collapsed into African animals and mystified still further as some magical essence of the continent, then clearly there can be no meeting ground, no identity, between the social, historical creatures of Europe and the metaphysical alterity of the Calibans and Ariels of Africa. If the differences between the Europeans and the natives are so vast, then clearly . . . the process of civilizing the natives can continue indefinitely. The ideological function of this mechanism, in addition to prolonging colonialism, is to dehistoricize and desocialize the conquered world, to present it as a metaphysical “fact of life,” before which those who have fashioned the colonial world are themselves reduced to the role of passive spectators in a mystery not of their making.

Sander L. Gilman asks, “How do we organize our perceptions of the world?” This question is particularly important when it comes to my efforts to articulate the structure of the white gaze. Gilman, too, is concerned with the issue of how the world is “seen” from the perspective of the white gaze. Gilman ties perception, historical convention, and iconography together in relationship to the science of medicine, that
science that helped to “uncover” the “reality” of Bartmann’s “inferiority”/ “primitiveness.” Gilman writes:

Medicine offers an especially interesting source of conventions since we do tend to give medical conventions special “scientific” status as opposed to the “subjective” status of the aesthetic conventions. But medical icons are no more “real” than “aesthetic” one’s. Like aesthetic icons, medical icons may (or may not) be rooted in some observed reality. Like them, they are iconographic in that they represent these realities in a manner determined by the historical position of the observers, their relationship to their own time, and to the history of the conventions which they deploy.138

The (iconic) ideologically “seen” difference in the buttocks and genitalia of the Hottentot was very important “evidence” to justify drawing the distinction between lines of evolutionary development. Hence, autopsies were performed, differences were “seen,” “facts” and “realities” suddenly “appeared.” Gilman:

The polygenetic argument is the ideological basis for all the dissections of these women. If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan.139
Of course, within a larger context, Africa was deemed that mysterious exotic dark continent. It is “the light of white maleness [that] illumines this dark continent.” Of course, this same light (read: “reason”) illuminated Bartmann’s dark body, creating a historico-racial schematized body through which her alleged simian origins were “recognized.” Sharpley-Whiting:

[Georges] Cuvier’s description abounds with associations of black femaleness with bestiality and primitivism. Further, by way of contemplating Bartmann as a learned, domesticated beast—comparing her to an orangutan—he reduces her facility with languages, her good memory, and musical inclinations to a sort of simian-like mimicry of the European race. By the nineteenth century, the ape, the monkey, and orangutan had become the interchangeable counterparts, the next of kin, to blacks in pseudoscientific and literary texts.

The comparison of Bartmann to an ape is central to the French imaginary concerning the bestial nature of Black women. The sexual appetites of Black people, more generally, were believed to have no end. Some French theorists even claimed that Black women copulated with apes. Robyn Wiegman examines Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774), which proposed a sexual compatibility between Hottentot women and apes. Long notes, “[L]udicrous as the opinion may seem, I do not think that an oran-outang husband would be any dishonour to an Hottentot female.” After all, or so the myth goes, the Black female body is insatiable. The point here is that Bartmann became the site for an
entire range of sexual “perversions.”” Bartmann’s “anomalous” labia was linked to the
over-development of the clitoris, which was linked to lesbian love. Hence, “the
concupiscence of the black is thus associated also with the sexuality of the lesbian.”

The “truth” of the Black body is not outside the domain of white colonial power. White colonial power is exercised through its representational practices that actually constrain the Black body, passing over its embodied integrity and creating a chimera from its own imaginary. As Dyer notes:

White discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a
function of the white subject, not allowing her/him space or autonomy,
permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of
differences except as a means for knowing the white self.

Mythopoetic constructions of Bartmann were designed to “discover” the hidden
“truths” about Blacks in general and Black women in particular. It was this “knowledge”
that enabled the European/Anglo-American to repress many of its fears. “Sexual and
racial differences,” as Sharpley-Whiting argues with psychoanalytic insight, “inspires
acute fears in the French male psyche. Fear is sublimated or screened through the desire
to master or know this difference, resulting in the production of eroticized/exoticized
narratives of truth.” Bartmann was codified as the very epitome of unrestrained
sexuality. Through various rituals (medically mapping her body while dead or alive,
voyeuristically peeping and peering), Bartmann was further “seen” as strange, a
throwback to some earlier moment in evolutionary history. Bartmann became what her
gazers, operating in bad faith, wanted to “see.” She was the victim of “a totalizing system of representation, that allows the seen body to become the known body.” Through the process of “looking,” which I have argued is a powerful act of construction, Bartmann was *ontologized* into the Hottentot Venus. In “becoming” Hottentot Venus, Bartmann underwent a process of dehumanization.

One can only imagine how Sarah Bartmann felt as she learned to re-inhabit her body, to re-relate to it, as her consciousness of her body was shaped through a racial and racist epidermal schema. After all, everywhere she looked she found herself reconfigured by (heteronomous) gazes that returned her to herself, distorted and animal-like, imprisoned in a primitive essence. Within the semiotic social field of whiteness, she became an ontological cipher, waiting to be assigned meaning and identity from without, perhaps forever estranged from her African Khoisan identity. One can only imagine her traumatic experience of double consciousness, how she underwent the psychological duress of seeing herself through white symbols that ontologized her into the epitome of grotesqueness. Even while alone, the white gaze was no doubt operative. As she measured her soul by the tape of a white French world that gazed/looked on in amused contempt, desire, and pity, one wonders whether or not she had the dogged strength to keep herself from being torn asunder.

### Notes


JanMohamed, “The Economy of the Manichean Allegory,” 84.


As will be explored in greater detail in chapter six, some of these reactive-values took the form of philosophical and scientific fictions and fantasies.


I would like to thank philosopher Bettina Bergo for providing the following observation: In a personal communications, she writes: “As I was reading, I thought of a missing ‘link’ in the European constitution of a ‘whiteness,’ one that is essential to any study of the operation and self-deployment of a European imaginary, predicated on the primary binary Same-Other: the Jewish Other. For the ‘Jew’ was white and non-white, and from everything I’ve studied on this, ‘Jews’ had ‘monstrous bodies’ (effeminate, where Africans and then African-Americans and African-Europeans tended to ‘masculinateness’ in ‘monstrosity’); they ‘smelled,’ they ‘reasoned’ differently, etc.”

Fanon notes, “The Negro is the genital. Is this the whole story? Unfortunately not. The Negro is something else. Here again we find the Jew. He and I may be separated by the sexual question, but we have one point in common. Both of us stand for Evil. The black man more so, for the good reason that he is black. Is not whiteness in symbols always ascribed in French to Justice, Truth, Virginity? I knew an Antillean who said of another Antillean, ‘His body is black, his language is black, his soul must be black too.’ This logic is put into daily practice by the white man. The black man is the symbol of Evil and Ugliness.” See Black Skin, White Masks, 180.

The reader will note that Blacks continue to be deemed diametrically opposed to whites, whereas “even highly denigrated and brutalized European ethnics such as Jews and the Irish have eventually been allowed membership into the white race, a kinship that appears to be growing more seamless despite the continued anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism of many white Protestants.” See Ricky Lee Allen, “The Globalization of White Supremacy: Toward a Critical Discourse on the Racialization of the World,” in Educational Theory, 51 (4), Fall 2001, 477–478.


Fredrickson, Racism, 23.

Pieterse, White on Black, 23.

On this score, or so it was rationalized, Africans needed to be helped because of their “childlike” ways. They would never be released from their need for (white) tutelage, unlike the rational independence of the European white male. On a Kantian reading, dependence indicated the opposite of the Enlightenment ethos that called for the freeing of (white) men from a form of self-imposed tutelage.

Gustav Jahoda, Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture (New York: Routledge, 1999), 26. Of interest here is Plato’s metaphor of the soul as a charioteer. In the Phaedrus, Plato likens the soul to a charioteer. The charioteer is put in control of two horses, one white and one Black.
From Plato’s description, it is difficult not to recognize a Black-white binary on a Manichean order. Plato: “The horse that stands at the right hand is upright and has clean limbs; he carries his neck high, has an aquiline nose, is white in colour, and has dark eyes; he is a friend of honour joined with temperance and modesty, and a follower of true glory; he needs no whip, but is guided only by the word of command and by reason. The other, however, is crooked, heavy, ill put together, his neck is short and thick, his nose flat, his colour dark, his eyes grey and bloodshot; he is the friend of insolence and pride, is shaggy-eared and deaf, hardly obedient to whip and spurs,” Plato I: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus. Translated by Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 495.

23 Pieterse, White on Black, 24.

24 Regarding the issue of the origin of white supremacy, see chapter seven (particularly pages 180–182) in Charles Mills’ From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

25 Abdul R. JanMohamed draws from the work of E. A. Brett where the latter demonstrates the negative impact of European colonialism upon African forms of agricultural existence. According to JanMohamed, “Brett found that the European attempt to develop a capital-centered mode of agricultural production in Kenya, where farming was essentially precapitalistic, created a conflict between two incompatible modes of production . . . . Native farming was centered around a subsistence economy and, more crucially, did not offer the means of production—namely, land and labor—for exchange on the market. Consequently, as Brett demonstrates, in order to commodify land and labor and make them available on the capitalist “market,” the British systematically destroyed the native mode of production. In other words, the Europeans disrupted a material and discursive universe based on use-value and replaced it with one dominated by exchange-value.” See, JanMohamed, “The Economy of the Manichean Allegory,” 79.


28 Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me, 61.

29 Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me, 61.

30 Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me, 62.


32 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 312.


34 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 24.

35 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 24–25.

36 America’s self-image was/is predicted upon the distinction between itself and those “dirty niggers.” One wonders to what extent America’s “humanist” self-image is currently in the process of being fashioned through the drawing of boundaries between itself and those so-called swarthy, sand-niggers.

37 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 43.


39 Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me, 65.

40 Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me, 65.

41 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 15.


46 Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 18.

47 Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 18.


49 Memmi, Racism, 176.
The reader will note that I am not saying that prior to Anglo-American and European negative constructions of African people that the latter were not dark people. The African body qua “dark” (where this functions as a trope of evil, inferiority, and primitiveness) does not mean that real material (biological) conditions had no impact upon African bodies. Indeed, extrapolating from the claim that ultimately the origin of humanity was located in Africa, it is not unreasonable to concur with Lewis Gordon: “For a substantial period of the life [of] our species—namely, at least 190,000 years (90,000 as an earlier protohuman community and the other 100,000 as ‘modern’ human beings)—there were no people whom we would today upon observation consider to be ‘white’ people. Such people are relative newcomers on the scene.” See Lewis Gordon, “Critical Reflections on Three Popular Tropes in the Study of Whiteness,” in What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004).

JanMohamed, “The Economy of the Manichean Allegory,” 84.

Of course, if there is any attempt to imitate the colonizer, to gain the colonizer’s recognition by trying to be like, dress like, talk like the colonizer, in short, breakout of the image that fixes the colonized so as to prove that he/she is not a savage, this inevitably, as Gordon notes, “reflects a dependency that [further] subordinates the…humanity” of the colonized. In short, the humanity of the colonized is still negated. See Lewis R. Gordon, “Through the Zone of Nonbeing: A Reading of Black Skin, White Masks in Celebration of Fanon’s Eightieth Birthday,” CLR James Journal: A special Issue: Frantz Fanon’s 80th Birthday, 11 (1), Summer 2005, 8.


Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 42.


Memmi, Racism, 176.

Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 21.

Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 21.

Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 54.


Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, 85.

The reader will note that throughout this project I use the terms “thing” and “animal” relatively interchangeably when it comes to the dehumanization of Black people. To say that Blacks are “things” is to suggest, within the white colonial order, that Blacks/natives/colonized can be manipulated without regard to their rights as “human beings.” Of course, the colonizer does not recognize the for-itself of the Black/native/colonized. Like a thing, the non-white lacks a perspective on the world. The non-white, as it were, enclosed within its own being. To say that the Black is reduced to an animal is to suggest that the Black is animal-like, that is, governed by instinct and without reason. Of course, a cat is not the same as a stone. The important point here is that from the perspective of the white colonizer, Blacks constitute an ersatz form of being. Like apes, Blacks belong to the animal kingdom, but they are not really human. Like beasts of the field, Black people are born with a natural telos to serve. Their importance is defined by their utility value to serve those who are naturally superior and who are at the apex of human civilization. Like stones qua things, Black people are treated like they are surfaces only, as things to be kicked around (both metaphorically and literally). Being without Geist, Blacks are simply “things” that occupy space.

Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 20.

Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, xxviii.

Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, 82.

Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 16.

Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, xxvii.

Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, xxvi.

Pieterse, White on Black, 79.

As I will show, W.E.B. Du Bois also talks about what it means to be a problem and how this is related to double consciousness. My aim is to show how these terms continue to function across various sites of whiteness.

Pieterse, White on Black, 79.


Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 42.

Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 42.

Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 83.

Friede, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 120.

Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 93.

Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 312.


Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 41.


To see how Sharpley-Whiting relates these last three constructs to “the Black Venus narrative” see *Black Venus*, 10.


The reader will note that my consideration of the so-called Hottentot Venus is not designed to add new scholarship to the excellent work that has been done in terms of theorizing the social constitution of Sarah Bartmann’s embodiment. Rather, consistent with the overall thrust of this project, my aim is to provide a sense of how Bartmann was constructed as the quintessential Other of the white same, how her body was confiscated and returned as “primitive” and “deviant.”


Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109. This concept of fixity brings to mind the way in which language also fixes us. In other words, we may be able to disrupt various lexical instantiations, but we are unable to “get out of” language altogether.


Young, *White Mythologies*, 45.


Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

While it is true that each embodied gaze performs an act of “objectification” of another, it is neither true that the structure of the gaze in each case is the same, nor is it true that the somatically “objectified” individual undergoes the same phenomenological experience. I make this point to concede the complexity of the gaze and how it can be impacted depending upon the gendered/sexed body that is either the subject of the gaze or is the object of the gaze. Although I have not given analytic attention to gender in my analysis of the white gaze (or class, age, sexual orientation, or able bodiedness for that matter), it is not thereby conceptually generic.


Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 34.


Pieterse, *White on Black*, 221.


What is interesting here is that the white girls at the beginning of the video reiterate some of the same representational myths that came out of Europe. The reader will particularly note the inter-referential
association of a big butt, prostitution and Blackness. They could have been describing Sarah Bartmann. “Baby Got Back” at once functions as a counter-aesthetic to certain European and Anglo-American values, and as an affirmation of the “Black female body.” When Sir-Mix-A-Lot says that “I’m hooked and I can’t stop staring,” this is reminiscent of the French men who found it difficult to withdraw the gaze from Bartmann’s buttocks. Sir-Mix-A-Lot’s gaze, however, is unequivocal; it does not suffer from the oppositional forces of attraction and repulsion; he knows exactly what he likes. He says that “Cosmo ain’t got nothin’ to do with my selection.” He also adds, “I’m tired of magazines sayin’ flat butts are the thing.”

My sense is that there is a certain disruptive dimension to the rap and the video; it discursively and visually fractures the typical image of the white female “beautiful” body, slim, blond, and almost anorexic. In fact, many of the women performing in the video, which already has problems in terms of how certain performative images of Black women are literally funded and others are not, have very large buttocks, some even visually distorted/enhanced and exaggerated for effect. Of course, one still wonders to what extent Sir-Mix-A-Lot re-inscribes the male gaze, reducing the Black female to a collage of buttocks. A feminist critique would not miss all of the sexual (copulatory) references that appear to transcend the aesthetic dimensions of having a big butt. But to what extent can the sexual/erotic and the aesthetic be separated? After all, it is not that Sir-Mix-A-Lot just wants to make a politico-aesthetic statement, he is “beggin’ for a piece of that bubble.” And if you’re like Jane Fonda, “my anaconda don’t want none.” And if you want to role in his Mercedes, then you have to “turn around! Stick it out!” And admitting that he can’t help himself from “actin’ like an animal,” he says “with that butt you got makes me feel so horny.” Within the context of the politics of desire, one wonders if there is a “legitimate” space within which the Black male might praise/appreciate “the Black female body,” even if it’s her buttocks that he is praising, without the accompanying misogynistic implications often embedded within the position of male spectatorship.

She was displayed from 1810 to 1815.

White spectatorship is deemed the only site of agency. My use of the term “spectatorship” (spectare, “to watch”) functions as a cognate of the white gaze. “Spectatorship” carries traces of other words that are linked to the white scopic economy of the Black body: perspective (a form of looking through to the essence of the Black body), speculation (to theorize the Black body from within white racist disciplinary matrixes), spectacle (the seeing of the Black body as unusual, bizarre), and specter (ghost, something that haunts the Black body). Like the white gaze, white spectatorship, despite its imagery of just absorbing incoming information, is by no means passive. White spectatorship is a way of seeing, looking, watching, representing, constructing, being. White spectatorship is a site of control and is replicative of larger unequal social forces.

Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 18.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 18.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 18.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 19.
Wiegman, American Anatomies, 59.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 4.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 4.
Think here of pornography.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 34.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 37.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 35.
Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 7.
Pieterse, White on Black, 175.
130 Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 23.
131 Young, White Mythologies, 168.
134 Young, Colonial Desire, 196–160.
140 Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 24.
141 Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 24.
143 Edward Long, quoted in Wiegman, American Anatomies, 57.
146 Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 7.
147 Sharpley-Whiting, Black Venus, 22.
148 The reader will note that Bartmann’s skeleton, genitalia, and other party parts were still on display in 1974 at the Museum of Mankind in Paris. Through political protest and years of negotiation, Bartmann’s remains were brought back to South Africa where she was born. On August 9, which was the date of her birth, the government of South Africa, after strongly criticizing England and France for its role in dehumanizing Bartmann as an evolutionary anomaly, provided Bartmann with a proper burial.
149 In a personal correspondence with T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (March 2005), she notes that there is some evidence that Bartmann did enact a form of agency when she did not want to pose for the assembly at the Museum of Man. Apparently, she resisted removing the apron/tablier that covered her. Sharpley-Whiting also notes that Bartmann then hid her genitalia between her thighs, avoiding having to lay herself bare before the white gaze. Rather than equate this with Bartmann’s feelings of modesty, Georges Cuvier, given the racist paradigm that depicted African women as always already immodest, interprets her behavior as indicative of shame rather than pride.
Chapter IV


It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves.

—Ralph Ellison

Blackness embodies the ostracized. Under the duress of racial domination, I undergo the now familiar two-pronged process of externally imposed inferiorization and subsequent internalization of that inferiority. It is thus probable that in my routine state, I carry White hatred of me within me as my own property.

—Thomas F. Slaughter

When you’ve made a man [woman] hate himself [herself], you’ve really got it and gone.

—Malcolm X

I write out of a personal existential context. This context is a profound source of knowledge connected to my “raced” body. Hence, I write from a place of lived embodied experience, a site of exposure. In philosophy, the only thing that we are taught to “expose” is a weak argument, a fallacy or someone’s “inferior” reasoning power. The embodied self is bracketed and deemed irrelevant to theory, superfluous and cumbersome in one’s search for truth. It is best, or so we are told, to reason from nowhere. Hence, the white philosopher/author presumes to speak for all of “us” without the slightest mention of his/her “raced” identity. Self-consciously writing as a white male philosopher, Crispin Sartwell observes:

Left to my own devices, I disappear as an author. That is the “whiteness” of my authorship. This whiteness of authorship is, for us, a form of
authority; to speak (apparently) from nowhere, for everyone, is empowering, though one wields power here only by becoming lost to oneself. But such an authorship and authority is also pleasurable: it yields the pleasure of self-forgetting or apparent transcendence of the mundane and the particular, and the pleasure of power expressed in the “comprehension” of a range of materials.¹

To theorize the Black body one must “turn to the [Black] body as the radix for interpreting racial experience.”² It is important to note that this particular strategy also functions as a lens through which to theorize and critique whiteness; for the Black body’s “racial” experience is fundamentally linked to the oppressive modalities of the “raced” white body. However, there is no denying that my own “racial” experiences or the social performances of whiteness can become objects of critical reflection. In this chapter, my objective is to describe and theorize situations where the Black body’s subjectivity, its lived reality, is reduced to instantiations of the white imaginary resulting in what I refer to as “the phenomenological return of the Black body.”³ These instantiations are embedded within and evolve out of the complex social and historical interstices of whites’ efforts at self-construction through complex acts of erasure vis-à-vis Black people. These acts of self-construction, however, are myths/ideological constructions predicated upon maintaining white power. As James Snead has noted, “Mythification is the replacement of history with a surrogate ideology of [white] elevation or [Black] demotion along a scale of human value.”⁴
I think that it is important to note that I do not hold the view that Blacks only offer *experiences* while whites provide the necessary *theoretical* framing of those experiences. Consistent with my own theorizations on the subject, philosopher Lewis Gordon recognizes the historical impetus of this move toward experience and how such a move as such is not problematic. “After all,” as Gordon argues, “for a long time there was the denial of black inner life, of black subjectivity; the notion of a black person’s point of view suggested consciousness of the world, which would call for dynamics of reciprocal recognition.” Of course, the objective is to 1) avoid a reductionist move whereby Blacks are reduced to experience and 2) avoid the move of making whites the oracle interpretative voices of Black experiences. Hence, by implication, the objective is to avoid a relationship of dependency and to assert an agential Black exegetical role in rendering their experiences meaningful.

To have one’s dark body invaded by the white gaze and then to have that body returned as distorted is a powerful experience of violation. The experience presupposes an anti-Black lived context, a context within which “the lived experience of the Black” unfolds. The late writer, actor, and activist Ossie Davis recalls that at the age of six or seven two white police officers told him to get into their car. They took him down to the precinct. They kept him there for an hour, laughing at him and eventually pouring cane syrup over his head. This only created the opportunity for more laughter, as they *looked* upon the “silly” little Black boy. If he was able to articulate his feelings at that moment, think of how the young Davis was returned to himself: “*I am* an object of white laughter, a buffoon.” The young Davis no doubt appeared to the white police officers in ways that they had approved. They set the stage, created a site of Black buffoonery, and enjoyed
their sadistic pleasure without blinking an eye. Sartwell notes that “the [white] oppressor seeks to constrain the oppressed [Blacks] to certain approved modes of visibility (those set out in the template of stereotype) and then gazes obsessively on the spectacle he has created.” Davis notes that he “went along with the game of black emasculation, it seemed to come naturally.” After that, “the ritual was complete.” He was then sent home with some peanut brittle to eat. Davis knew at that early age, even without the words to articulate what he felt, that he had been violated. He refers to the entire ritual as the process of “niggerization.” He notes:

The culture had already told me what this was and what my reaction to this should be: not to be surprised; to expect it; to accommodate it; to live with it. I didn’t know how deeply I was scarred or affected by that, but it was a part of who I was.

Davis, in other words, was made to feel that he had to accept who he was, that “niggerized” little Black boy, an insignificant plaything within a system of ontological racial differences. This, however, is the trick of white ideology; it is to give the appearance of fixity, where the “look of the white subject interpellates the black subject as inferior, which, in turn, bars the black subject from seeing him/herself without the internalization of the white gaze.” On this score, it is white bodies that are deemed agential. They configure “passive” Black bodies according to their will. But it is no mystery; for “the Negro is interpreted in the terms of the white man. White-man psychology is applied and it is no wonder that the result often shows the Negro in a
ludicrous light.” As in the case of the elevator, where I lived my body as confiscated, Davis too had his young Black body stolen. The surpluses being gained by the whites in each case are not economic. Rather, it is through existential exploitation that the surpluses extracted can be said to be ontological—“semblances of determined presence, of full positivity, to provide a sense of secure being.”

When I was about seventeen or eighteen, my white math teacher initiated such an invasion, pulling it off with complete calm and presumably self-transparency. Given the historical construction of whiteness as the norm, his own “raced” subject position was rendered invisible. After all, he lived in the real world, the world of the serious man, where values are believed anterior to their existential founding. As I recall, we were discussing my plans for the future. I told him that I wanted to be a pilot. I was earnest about this choice, spending a great deal of time reading about the requirements involved in becoming a pilot, how one would have to accumulate a certain number of flying hours. I also read about the dynamics of lift and drag that impact a plane in flight. After no doubt taking note of my firm commitment, he looked at me and implied that I should be realistic (a code word for realize that I am Black) about my goals. He said that I should become a carpenter or a bricklayer. I was exposing myself, telling a trusted teacher what I wanted to be, and he returned me to myself as something that I did not recognize. I had no intentions of being a carpenter or a bricklayer (or a janitor or elevator operator for that matter).

The situation, though, is more complex. It is not that he simply returned me to myself as a carpenter or a bricklayer when all along I had this image of myself as a pilot. Rather, he returned me to myself as a fixed entity, a “niggerized” Black body whose
epidermal logic had already foreclosed the possibility of being anything other than what was befitting its lowly station. He was the voice of a larger anti-Black racist society that “whispers mixed messages in our ears,”13 the ears of Black people who struggle to think of themselves as a possibility. He mentioned that there were only a few Black pilots and that I should be more realistic. (One can only imagine what his response would have been had I said that I wanted to be a philosopher, particularly given the statistic that Black philosophers constitute about 1.1% of philosophers in the US). Keep in mind that this event did not occur in the 1930s or 1940s, but around 1979. The message was clear. Because I was Black, I had to settle for an occupation suitable for my Black body,14 unlike the white body that would no doubt have been encouraged to become a pilot. As with Davis, having one’s Black body returned as a source of impossibility, one begins to think, to feel, to emote: “Am I a nigger?” The internalization of the white gaze creates a doubleness within the psyche of the Black, leading to a destructive process of superfluous self-surveillance and self-interrogation.

This was indeed a time when I felt ontologically locked into my body. My body was indelibly marked with this stain of darkness. After all, he was the white mind, the mathematical mind, calculating my future by factoring in my Blackness. He did not “see” me, though. Like Ellison’s invisible man, I occupied that paradoxical status of “visible invisibility.” Within this dyadic space, my Black body phenomenologically returned to me as inferior. To describe the phenomenological return of the Black body is to disclose how it is returned as an appearance to consciousness, my consciousness. The (negatively) “raced” manner in which my body underwent a phenomenological return, however, presupposes a thick social reality that has always already been structured by the ideology
and history of whiteness. More specifically, when my body is returned to me, the white body has already been constituted over centuries as the norm, both in European and Anglo-American culture, and at several discursive levels from science to philosophy to religion. In the case of my math teacher, his whiteness was invisible to him as my Blackness was hyper-visible to both of us. Of course, his invisibility to his own normative here is a function of my hyper-visibility. It is important to keep in mind that white Americans, more generally, define themselves around the “gravitational pull,” as it were, of the Black. The not of white America is the Black of white America. This not is essential, as is the invisibility of the negative relation through which whites are constituted. All of embodied beings have their own “here.” My white math teacher’s racist social performances (for example, his “advice” to me), within the context of a white racist historical imaginary, asymmetric power relations, suspends and effectively disqualifies my embodied here. What was the message communicated? Expressing my desire to be, to take advantage of the opportunities for which Black bodies had died in order to secure, my ambition “was flung back in my face like a slap.”

Fanon:

The white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger. I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.
According to philosopher Bettina Bergo, drawing from the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, “perception and discourse—what we see and the symbols and meanings of our social imaginaries—prove inextricably the one from the other.”19 Hence, the white math teacher’s perception, what he “saw,” was inextricably linked to social meanings and semiotic constructions and constrictions that opened up a “field of appearances” regarding my dark body. As was argued in the case of the white woman on the elevator, there is nothing passive about the white gaze. There are racist socio-historical and epistemic conditions of emergence that construct not only the Black body, but the white body as well. So, what is “seen” when the white gaze “sees” “my body” and it becomes something alien to me?

In stream with phenomenology, consciousness is always “consciousness-of.” What was my white math teacher “conscious-of”? The answer to this question, to which I already alluded, can only be given through the acknowledgment of a culturally and historically sedimented “racialized” consciousness-of structure. Moreover, all acts of consciousness for phenomenology are meaning-giving. However, white racist acts of consciousness vis-à-vis the Black body are meaning-giving in ways that specifically distort the Black body. After all, they are acts of meaning-giving that are structured through the white imaginary. Indeed, the construction of the “manners-of-givenness” of the Black body as inferior, for example, is contingent upon white racialized consciousness-of a socially ordered, and, by phantasmatic extension, naturally ordered world. Conversely, the construction of the “manners-of-givenness” of the white body is contingent upon the distortion or negation of the Black through the reactionary value-creating force of whites. But instead of my white teacher self-consciously admitting to
the role that he has played, and continues to play, in the perpetuation of this white social imaginary (and the racist way in which he is conscious-of my body) in his everyday social performances, ideologically he “apprehends” the Black body, my Black body, as pre-given in its constitution as inferior. Of course, he cannot claim responsibility for the entire stream of white racist consciousness given the fact that these constructions are part of a larger historical imaginary, a social universe of white racist discourse which comes replete with long, enduring myths, perversions, distorted profiles, and imaginings of all sorts regarding the non-white body.

African-American philosopher Charles Johnson notes that one can become blind to seeing “other ‘meanings’ or profiles presented by the object if the perceiver is locked within the ‘Natural Attitude,’ as Husserl calls it, and has been conditioned culturally or racially to fix himself upon certain ‘meanings.’” On my reading, within the framework of an anti-Black racist world, the meaning of the Black body is a synthesis formed through racist distal narratives, narratives that ideologically inform whites of their “natural superiority,” that enable whites to flee their part in constructing a “racial regional ontology” fit for Blacks only. Phenomenologically, I experience myself as “the profile that their frozen intentionality brings forth.” After all, whiteness is deemed the horizon of all horizons, unable to recognize the imaginary “racial” dualism that it has created. The white gaze has constructed the Black “as the specular negative images of itself and that hence, abstracts the white person into an abstract knower.” Hence, the meaning of my lived body is phenomenologically skewed when white consciousness negatively intends me as my Black (read: “inferior,” “evil”) body. I become alienated, thrown outward, and assigned a meaning not of my intending. In my everydayness, I live my body from an
existential *here*. Wherever I go, I go embodied. As Gordon writes, “*Here* is where I am located. That place, if you will, is an embodied one: it is consciousness in the flesh. In the flesh, I am not only a point of view, but I am also a point that is viewed.”

In my phenomenological return, however, I am *reduced* to a point that is viewed. My *here* is experienced as a *there*. The experience of being reduced to one’s “Black exteriority,” rendered thing-like, through processes of meaning-intending acts of white racist intentional consciousness, is insightfully described by Charles Johnson:

> I am walking down Broadway in Manhattan, platform shoes clicking on the hot pavement, thinking as I stroll of, say, Boolean expansions. I turn, thirsty, into a bar. The dimly-lit room, obscured by shadows, is occupied by whites. Goodbye, Boolean expansions. I am *seen*. But, as black, seen as stained body, as physicality, basically opaque to others . . . . Their look, an intending beam focusing my way, suddenly realizes something larva in me. My world is epidermalized, collapsed like a house of cards into the stained casement of my skin. My subjectivity is turned inside out like a shirtcuff.

In the face of my white teacher’s racism, I could have decided to lose myself in laughter, but, like Frantz Fanon, I was aware “that there were legends, stories, histories, and above all *historicity*.”

My dark embodied existence, my lived historical being, becomes a chain of signifiers: inferior, Nigger, evil, dirty, sullen, immoral, lascivious. As Fanon says, “In the unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality.”

When
phenomenologically returned to myself, I appear no longer to possess my body, but a “surrogate” body whose meaning does not exist anterior to the performance of white spectatorship. Under the white gaze, “the Black has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”\textsuperscript{27} Again, this involves the asymmetry of representational power. The Black body appears to have no resistance vis-à-vis the somatic regulatory epistemic regime of whiteness. The Black body becomes ontologically pliable, just a thing to be scripted in the inverse image of whiteness. Cutting away at the Black body, the Black becomes resigned to no longer aspire to his/her own emergence or upheaval.\textsuperscript{28} Blacks undergo processes of ontological stagnation and epistemological violence while standing before the one “true” gaze. In very powerful discourse describing how he was “unmercifully imprisoned,” how the white gaze forced upon him an unfamiliar weight, Fanon asks, “What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?”\textsuperscript{29}

The burden of the white gaze disrupts my first-person knowledge, causing “difficulties in the development of [my] bodily schema.”\textsuperscript{30} The white gaze constructs the Black body into “an object in the midst of other objects.”\textsuperscript{31} The non-threatening “I” of my normal, everyday body schema becomes the threatening “him” of the Negro kind/type. Under pressure, the corporeal schema collapses. It gives way to a racial epidermal schema.\textsuperscript{32} “Below the corporeal schema,” says Fanon, “I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by ‘residual sensations and perceptions of a primarily tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character,’ but by the other, the white man [woman].”\textsuperscript{33} In other words, Fanon began to “see” himself through the lens of a historico-racial schema. Note that there was nothing intrinsic to his
physiology that forced his corporeal schema to collapse; it was the “Black body” as always already named and made sense of within the context of a larger semiotics of privileged white bodies that provided him with the tools for self-hatred. His “darkness,” a naturally occurring phenomenon, became historicized, residing within the purview of the white gaze, a phenomenal space created and sustained by socio-epistemic and semiotic communal constitutionality. On this score, the Black body is placed within the space of constitutionality vis-à-vis the racist white same, the One. Against the backdrop of the sketched historico-racial (racist) scheme, Fanon’s “darkness” returns to him, signifying a new genus, a new category of man: A Negro! He inhabits a space of anonymity (he is every Negro), and yet he feels a strange personal responsibility for his body. He writes:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “sho’ good eaten’.”

Fanon writes about the Black body and how it can be changed, deformed, and made into an ontological problem vis-à-vis the white gaze. Describing an encounter with a white woman and her son, Fanon narrates that the young boy screams, “Look at the nigger!…Mama, a Negro!” Fanon:
My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a Negro, it’s cold, the Negro is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother’s arms: Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.  

The white imagery of the Black as a savage beast, a primitive and uncivilized animal, is clearly expressed in the boy’s fear that he is to be eaten by the “cannibalistic” Negro. “The more that Europeans dominated Africans, the more ‘savage’ Africans came to seem; cannibalism represented the nadir of savagery . . . .”  

Presumably, the young boy does not know that his words will (or how they will) negatively impact Fanon. However, for Fanon, the young white boy represents the whole of white society’s perception of the Black. The boy turns to his white mother for protection from the impending Black doom. The young white boy, however, is not simply operating at the affective level, he is not simply being haunted, semi-consciously, by a vague feeling of anxiety. Rather, he is operating both at the affective and the discursive level. He says, “Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.” This locutionary act carries a perlocutionary force of effecting a phenomenological return of Fanon to himself as a cannibalistic threat, as an object to be feared. Fanon, of course, does not “want this
revision, this thematization.”

African-American philosopher Robert Gooding-Williams notes:

For Fanon, the boy’s view of the Negro (of Fanon himself in this case) as an object of fear is significant, as it suggests (1) that the image (racial epidermal schema) of the Negro posited by the boy’s verbal performance has a narrative significance and (2) that such images are available to the boy as elements of a socially shared stock of images that qualify the historicity (the historical situatedness) both of the boy and of the Negro he sees.

One is tempted to say that the young white boy sees Fanon’s Black body “as if” it was cannibal-like. The “seeing as if,” however, is collapsed into a “seeing as is.” In Fanon’s example, within the lived phenomenological transversal context of white racist behavior, the “as if” reads too much like a process of “conscious effort.” On my reading, “youngwhiteboyexperiencesniggerdarkbodycannibalevokestrrepidation” is what appears in the uninterrupted lived or phenomenological flow of the young white boy’s racist experience. There is no experience of the “as if.” Indeed, the young white boy’s linguistic and non-linguistic performance is indicative of a definitive structuring of his own self-invisibility as: “whiteinnocentselfinrelationtothedarkniggerself.” This definitive structuring is not so much remembered or recollected as it is always present as the constitutive imaginary background within which the white boy is both the effect and the vehicle of white racism; indeed, he is the orientation of white epistemic practices, ways
of “knowing” about one’s (white) identity vis-à-vis the Black Other. The “cultural white orientation” is not an “entity” whose origin the white boy needs to grasp or recollect before he performs whiteness. He is not a tabula rasa, one who sees the Black body for the first time and instinctively says, “Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.” On this score, the boy does indeed undergo an experience of the dark body as frightening, but there is no concealed meaning, as it were, inherent in the experience qua experience of Fanon’s body as such. Rather, the fright that he experiences vis-à-vis Fanon’s dark body is always already “constructed out of . . . social narratives and ideologies.”42 The boy is already discursively and affectively acculturated through micro-processes of “racialized” learning (short stories, lullabies, children’s games,43 pre-linguistic experiences, etc.) to respond “appropriately” in the presence of a Black body. The gap that opens up within the young white boy’s perceptual field as he “sees” Fanon’s Black body has already been created while innocently sitting on his mother’s lap.44 His mother’s lap constitutes a “raced” zone of security. This point acknowledges the fundamental “ways the transactions between a raced world and those who live in it racially constitute the very being of those beings.”45 The association of Blackness with “nigger” and cannibalism is no mean feat. Hence, on my view, he is already attending to the world in a particular fashion; his affective and discursive performances bespeak the (ready-to-hand) inherited white racist background according to which he is able to make “sense” of the world.

Like moving my body in the direction of home, or only slightly looking as I reach my hand to retrieve my cup of hot tea which is to the left of my computer screen, the young white boy dwells within/experiences/engages the world of white racist practices in such a way that the practices qua racist practices have become invisible. The young boy’s
response is part and parcel of an implicit knowledge of how he gets around in a
Manichean world. *Being-in* a racist world, a *lived* context of historicity, the young boy
does not “see” the dark body as “dark” and then thematically proceed to apply negative
value predicates to it, where conceivably the young boy would say, “Yes, I ‘see’ the dark
body as existing in space, and I recognize the fact that it is through my own actions and
intentions that I predicate evil of it.” “In order even to act deliberately,” as philosopher
Hubert L. Dreyfus maintains, “we must orient ourselves in a familiar world.”

My point here is that the young white boy is situated within a familiar white racist
world of intelligibility, one that has already “conceded” whiteness as “superior” and
Blackness as “inferior” and “savage.” *Involved* within the white racist Manichean world,
the young boy has found his orientation, he has already become part and parcel of a
constituted and constituting force within a constellation of modes of being that are
deemed natural. However, he is oblivious to the *historicity* and cultural conditionedness
of these modes of being. Despite the fact that “race” neither exists as a naturally
occurring kind within the world nor cuts at the joints of reality, notice the evocative
power of “being Black,” which actually points to the evocative power of being white. The
dark body, after all, would not have evoked the response that it did from the young white
boy were it not for the historico-mythos of the white body and the power of white
normativity through which the white body has been pre-reflectively structured, resulting
in forms of action that are as familiar and as quotidian as my reaching for my cup of tea.
His white racist performance is a form of everyday coping within the larger unthematized
world of white social coping. On this score, one might say that the socio-ontological
structure that gives intelligibility to the young white boy’s racist performance is prior to a set of beliefs of which he is reflectively aware.

Notice that Fanon undergoes the experience of having his body “given back to him.” Having been “given back to him,” Fanon undergoes a profound phenomenological experience of being disconnected from his body schema. Fanon experiences his body as flattened out or sprawled out before him. And, yet, Fanon’s “body,” its corporeality, is forever with him. It never leaves. So, how can it be “given back”? The physical body that Fanon has/is remains in space and time. It does not somehow disappear and make a return. And, yet, there is a profound sense in which his “corporeality” is interwoven with particular discursive practices. Under the white gaze, Fanon’s body is not simply the res extensa of Cartesian dualism. Within the context of white racist practices vis-à-vis the “Black” body, there is a blurring of boundaries between what is “there” as opposed to what has been “placed there.” Hence, the body’s “corporeality,” within the context of lived history, is shaped through powerful cultural schemata. This does not mean that somehow the “body” does not exist. After all, it is my body that forms the site of white oppression. To jettison all discourse regarding the body as “real,” being subject to material forces, etc., in the name of the “postmodern body,” is an idealism that would belie my own philosophical move to theorize from the position of my real lived embodiment. The point here is that the “body” is never given as such, but always “appears there” within the context of some set of conditions of emergence. The conditions of emergence for the phenomenological return of Fanon’s body qua inferior or bestial are grounded in the white social imaginary, its discursive and non-discursive manifestations. Having undergone a gestalt-switch in his body image, his
knowledge/consciousness of his body has become “solely a negating activity. It is a third-
person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain
uncertainty.”

Linda Alcoff discusses this phenomenological sense of being disjointed as a form
of “near-incommensurability between first-person experience and historico-racial schema
that disenables equilibrium.” What this points to is the “sociogenic” basis of the
“corporeal malediction” experienced by Blacks. On this score, “the black man’s
[woman’s] alienation is not an individual question.” In other words, the distorted
historico-racial schema that occludes equilibrium takes place within the realm of
sociality, a larger complex space of white social inter-subjective constitutionality “of
phenomena that human beings have come to regard as ‘natural’ in the physicalist sense of
depending on physical nature.” Of course, within the context of colonial or neocolonial
white power, the objective is to pass off what is historically contingent as that which is
ahistorically given.

In Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison’s “thinker-tinker,” his “Jack-the-Bear,” his
invisible man, also experiences the phenomenological “return of his Black body.”
Although he tries to live the life of an individualist, he soon finds that this is an illusion,
particularly given the fact that at every turn he learns that his efforts at “autonomy” are
threatened by whites. After all, he is constantly under erasure, unable to stand out as an
individual. In an anti-Black racist context, it is difficult for Blacks to be “just me.” His
Blackness prevents a mode of living according to liberalistic ideals. More accurately, it is
whites who are able to enact a “just me” status because of their normative status.
However, they prevent the Black from hiding in a fictive world where race ceases to
matter. Society whispers, “Don’t forget. Don’t think that you’re above race, that you’re
one of us. After all, you are Black!”

The invisible man knows himself as embodied flesh and blood, and yet he is
invisible. His body is, and yet he is not. The invisible man observes:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar
Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man
of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be
said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people
[in this case white people] refuse to see me.54

The reader will note that in Fanon’s example, the Black body is seen as hyper-visible,
while, for Ellison, the Black body is seen as invisible. In the case of hyper-visibility, the
Black body becomes excessive. Within this racially saturated field of hyper-visibility, the
Black body still functions as the unseen as it does in the case of its invisibility. Perhaps in
the case of invisibility, though, one has a greater opportunity of not being seen while
taking advantage of this invisibility. Think here of those whites who may have disclosed
pertinent information in the company of Blacks that had been rendered invisible,
information that may have functioned to empower them in some way. The ocular frame
of reference in both cases is central. “Seen invisibility” suggests the paradoxical sense in
which the Black body is a “seen absence.” In either case, the Black body “returns”
distorted.
There is a fundamental phenomenological slippage between one’s *own* felt experience of the Black body and how others (whites) understand/construct/experience/see that “same” Black body. Ellison also raises the issue of how the Black Other is a reflection of the white *same*. Ellison says that when whites “see him” they see “themselves, or fragments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.”

The invisible man’s invisibility is a racialized invisibility. The white One sees everything and anything vis-à-vis the Black Other, but not the Black. Fanon questions, “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence.”

Felt invisibility is a form of ontological and epistemological violence resulting from “the construction of their inner eyes with which they [whites] look through their physical eyes upon reality.”

Note Ellison’s reference to the inner eyes that look through the physical eyes. The “inner eyes” are precisely those white racist, epistemic perspectives, interlocked with various social and material forces, from which whites “see” the world/violate Black subjectivity. The “inner eyes” which Ellison refers to as “a matter of construction” raises the issue of the sociogenic. Ellison’s invisible man is “seen” against the unthematized backdrop of everyday forms of white coping. To be “seen” in this way is not to be seen at all. Gordon: “The black is invisible because of how the black is ‘seen.’ The black is not heard because of how the black is ‘heard.’ The black is not felt because of how the black ‘feels.’” Within this context, the Black is trapped, always already ontologically closed. In each case, the Black is held captive by the totalizing power of whiteness. When the Black speaks or does not speak, such behavior has been codified in the white imaginary. To be silent “confirms” passivity and docility. To speak, to want to be heard, “confirms” brazen contempt and Black rage. The point here is that no matter the response, Black
emergence outside of whiteness’s *scopic* power is foreclosed. Ellison’s invisible man knows the frustration of being “seen” and yet “not seen.” There is an upsurge of protestation whereby the Black body begins to make itself felt. Invisible man:

You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you.

And, alas, it’s seldom successful.\(^{59}\)

Again, note that even as he protests it is seldom successful. Perhaps this is partly why the invisible man decides to “walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers.”\(^{60}\)

Throughout the text, the invisible man finds himself objectified/distorted by the white gaze. Hence, like Fanon, he has difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consider the Black males who are made to participate in the battle royal. This is a site constructed for white men only, indeed, for white eyes. During the fight, the Blacks are all blindfolded. Symbolically, the blindfolds replicate the larger socio-economic powerlessness of Blacks vis-à-vis whites. The Black body is *looked at*. The Black body does not return the gaze. The white body is *the looker*. The battle royal is a spectacle, a visual (or ocular) power zone within which Black male bodies are mere surfaces. Before they are instructed to fight like animals for the pleasure of *the lookers*, however, a naked blond white woman, with a small American flag tattooed on her abdomen, sensuously
dances before them. One might say that she is “dangled” before them like a piece of white flesh that they dare not touch or look upon. Indeed, “some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling.”

Some of the white men threatened them if they actually looked, while others were threatened if they did not look. After all, she is a white woman and therefore tabooed. She is not to be looked at by Black males, and yet some of the white men forced them to look. This creates a psychosexual “complex fusion of desire and aversion.”

The Battle royal is a site of pain, pleasure, hatred, misogyny, and white myths interwoven into a sadistic and erotic spectacle. It is a site of white male terror, anxiety, and desire. I would argue that the white men—the “bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants”—create a context of sexual intensification through the unthinkable juxtaposition of the Black male bodies with the white female, creating an erotic space in terms of which the white male imaginary is able to “get off” at the thought of watching a Black male desiring a white woman. The erotic ritual is designed to intensify the pleasure of the white men as they imagine one of the Black men having sex with the blond white woman. Referring to the early days of Malcolm X’s career as a hustler, Sartwell notes, “Thus interracial sex has a very intense and particular erotic/specular power, an erotic power that draws the white men . . . to stare obsessively at black men fucking white women.”

It is also through the eyes (inner eyes) of white women that the protagonist is rendered invisible. Ellison explores this theme through the female character, Sybil. She never really sees our protagonist. All that she sees is her own distorted and sexually perverse projections upon the Black male body. He describes himself as “Brother Taboo-
with-whom-all-things-are-possible” She is interested in symbolically enacting the myth of the “Black rapist.” She wants him to take her against her will, to play at being raped by a Black “buck.” “But I need it,” she says, uncrossing her thighs and sitting up eagerly. “You can do it, it’ll be easy for you, beautiful. Threaten to kill me if I don’t give in. You know, talk rough to me beautiful.” She describes him as “ebony against pure snow.” She describes her husband as “forty minutes of brag and ten of bustle.” She describes the protagonist, however, as having unbelievable sexual endurance, who she wants “to tear [her] apart.” Playing into her fantasies, and playing within his own invisibility, he says, “I rapes real good when I’m drunk.” She replies, “Ooooh, then pour me another.” In a state of mythopoetic (and masochistic) frenzy she says, “Come on, beat me, daddy - you - you big black bruiser. What’s taking you so long?” she said. “Hurry up, knock me down! Don’t you want me?” He never rapes her, but constructs the moment with a different semiotic spin, writing on her belly with lipstick: “SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED BY SANTA CLAUS, SURPRISE.” Invisible man has unveiled the core of Sybil’s projections. What she wants is a fantasy that does not exist. The point here, though, is that Ellison provides a rich narrative portrayal of the psychosexual dynamics involved in the erasure of Black male identity vis-à-vis white female desire for the Black body as phantasmatic object.

Throughout the text, Ellison’s protagonist is never really in charge of who he is, which is another manifestation of his invisibility and powerlessness. When he joins the Brotherhood, which is where he thinks he will finally gain recognition, he is still treated as amorphous, invisible. During a moment in the text where he is used to give a speech at a rally, invisible man notes:
The light was so strong that I could no longer see the audience, the bowl of human faces. It was as though a semi-transparent curtain had dropped between us, but through which they could see me—for they were applauding—without themselves being seen.75

Significant here is the influx of light. In one way or another throughout the text, the protagonist has had to contend with the blinding light of whiteness, its power to see, to gaze, to control. Here again, the protagonist cannot return the gaze, he is seen, but cannot see. Indeed, he cannot see that he is being tricked by the Brotherhood. Beneath the façade of an intrinsic interest in the invisible man, the Brotherhood want him as a political and ideological speaking Black body, a mere verbal Black surface. For example, a character named Emma asks, “But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?”76 His subjectivity and humanity are not valued. Rather, it is his Blackness that simply functions as a site of political semiosis; he is a manipulated political tool. The invisible man notes, “Maybe she wants to see me sweat coal tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite. What was I, a man or a natural resource?”77 Perhaps the history of American slavery offers the answer: he is a means to a larger white purpose.

Ellison explores the dialectics of how whiteness is constructed through the reconstruction/negation of Blackness through a brilliant example where the protagonist gets a job working for a paint plant. As Ellison arrived at the plant, he sees a large sign that reads: “KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS.”78 Working under Mr. Kimbro, invisible man is told how to make the paint. He is instructed to open each bucket
of paint and to put in ten drops of a liquid that is black. To his surprise, as the black liquid disappears, the pure white paint appeared. After completing a few buckets, Mr. Kimbro exclaims, “That’s it, as white as George Washington’s Sunday-go-to-meetin wig and as sound as the all mighty dollar! That’s paint!” he said proudly. “That’s paint that’ll cover just about anything!” Another white employee, Lucius Brockway, later describes the pure white paint as “Optic White.” Describing how he helped to create the slogan for Optic White paint, Brockway says, “If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White.”

The symbolism regarding the black liquid is fascinating. It raises the dynamics of Black erasure vis-à-vis whiteness. Just as the paint’s quality of pure white needs the black drops, “racialized” whiteness as normative, moral, good, and pure is dependent upon the projection of the Black body as “inferior,” “stained,” and “impure.” Of course, by the time the paint as become pure white, there is no trace of Blackness. Think here of white America’s denial that its very existence is inextricably linked to the presence of Black people. On this score, the large sign rings true, America must be kept pure. The pure whiteness of the paint is also said to “cover just about anything.” Hence, whiteness “covers” that which is sullen, dirty, evil. It does away with the unclean. As will be demonstrated in chapter seven, the tragic character Pecola Breedlove, in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, believes that whiteness can “cover” over her Black ugly features, permanently washing from her the stain of Blackness. Also, think here of how American culture “covers” the cultural productions by Black people. To acknowledge Blackness, after all, might lead to the uncovering of whiteness. It might also be said that the power and normative structure of whiteness, through the denial of its own history, “covers” over
its acts of injustice and brutality through an ideological structure that gives the appearance of all things are proceeding as normal.

“Optic White” can literally be translated as “eye white” or “seeing white” or figuratively as, “I white,” where the verb is deleted. Of course, “Optic” raises the issue of the gaze. Optically, the protagonist is rendered invisible. Optically, whites refuse to see him or they see him as if he was the reflected image given back as a result of being “surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass.”81 As Optic White is “Right White,” the white gaze, as it renders the protagonist invisible/distorted, is exempt from critique because white is always right. Moreover, since Optics is the science that deals with the propagation of light, which, historically, Europeans have supposedly brought with them to backward cultures of “darkness,” Optic White is “Right White.” Of course, on this score, Africa became “dark” as “explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of ‘savage customs’ in the name of civilization.”82

As stated earlier, felt invisibility is a form of ontological and epistemic violence, a form of violence initiated through white spectatorship, a generative gazing that violates the integrity of the Black body. The white gaze defines me, skewing my own way of seeing myself. But the gaze does not “see” me, it “sees” itself. This is similar to what happened in Malcolm X’s early experience with his English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski.83 The reader will note the parallel between my early experience with my math teacher and Malcolm’s early experience. At Mason Junior High School, Malcolm was the only Black student in the eighth grade. Although Malcolm mentions that he had not given thought to it before, he says that he disclosed to Mr. Ostrowski that he wanted to be a lawyer.
Malcolm makes it clear that Ostrowski always provided encouragement to white students when asked for his advice regarding their future careers. Ostrowski replied:

Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A Lawyer—that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something that you can be. You’re good with your hands—making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person—you’d get all kinds of work.\(^84\)

The reader will note the perverse construction of “We all here like you.” Ostrowski is attempting to obfuscate the fact that he is a racist. He wants to clear his conscience by stating upfront his “affections” for Malcolm right before he violates Malcolm’s body integrity, reducing him to a nigger, as someone who must learn to live with mediocrity and accept his place within the “natural” order of things. The young Malcolm is returned to himself qua nigger. “To forcibly strip someone of their self-image,” as Drucilla Cornell argues, “is a violation, not just an offense.”\(^85\) Keep in mind that at this time Malcolm had already been elected class president and was receiving grades that were among the highest in the school. Yet, all that Ostrowski “saw” was a nigger. Despite the countervailing empirical evidence, Ostrowski “sees” more of whiteness’s same. As Malcolm notes, “I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever I wanted to be.”\(^86\) Malcolm’s point is consistent with what has been
theorized thus far. First, within a white racist order of things, for the Black, there is apparently no being-as-possibility beyond the totalizing white gaze. As argued above, this is where perception, epistemology and ontology are collapsed. Second, Malcolm’s first-person perspective (“I desire,” or “I have my own perspective on the world”) is disrupted and rendered void vis-à-vis the third-person (white) perspective that has negatively over-determined his Blackness.

Malcolm also describes his history teacher, Mr. Williams, as one who was fond of “nigger jokes.” Of course, such “nigger jokes” were told at Malcolm’s expense and no doubt “confirmed” many of the circulating myths consciously or unconsciously held by the white students. Malcolm notes:

[W]e came to the textbook section on Negro history. It was exactly one paragraph long. Mr. Williams laughed through it practically in a single breath, reading aloud how the Negroes had been slaves and then were freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless. He added, I remember, an anthropological footnote of his own, telling us between laughs how Negroes’ feet were “so big that when they walk, they don’t leave tracks, they leave a hole in the ground.”

Although Malcolm heard these racist jokes, one might say, in stream with Alexander G. Weheliye, that “the white subject’s vocal apparatus merely serves to repeat and solidify racial difference as it is inscribed in the field of vision.” Whether through the ritualistic practice of Ostrowski putting Blacks in their “natural” place or through the racist jokes
told by Mr. Williams, whites “adjusted their microtomes” and objectively cut away at Malcolm’s reality. After such racist acts, Malcolm later admitted, “I just gave up.”

Fanon:

I slip into corners, and my long antennae pick up the catch-phrases strewn over the surface of things—nigger underwear smells of nigger—nigger teeth are white—nigger feet are big—the nigger’s barrel chest—I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me.

Malcolm was reduced to the anonymous Black Other. He is returned to himself as an absence. Although “accepted” by whites, he is accepted only on their terms. “We [whites] will sweep you up into significance; we offer you a name: our name. But as we inscribe ourselves on you, we erase you.” Hence, there is no genuine acceptance. There is only further distancing from the Black body. Only as a mascot does Malcolm come to experience his “acceptance” (his erasure!) by whites. Malcolm:

They all liked my attitude, and it was out of their liking for me that I soon became accepted by them—as a mascot, I know now. They would talk about anything and everything with me standing right there hearing them, the same way people would talk freely in front of a pet canary. They would even talk about me, or about “niggers,” as though I wasn’t there, as
if I wouldn’t understand what the word meant. A hundred times a day, they used the word “nigger.”94

Malcolm is cognizant of the hidden questions residing at the heart of white acceptance: How much are you (the Black) willing to erase of yourself? How much are you willing to conform to our (white) stereotype of you? How much can you hate yourself, while forgetting that it came from us? On this score, within the context of an anti-Black racist context, white acceptance comes at an existential ontological price for Black people: a mode of non-being.

Critiquing the “good-will” white, Malcolm notes, “I don’t care how nice one is to you; the thing you must always remember is that almost never does he really see you as he sees himself, as he sees his own kind.” Expounding upon the Ellisonian theme of invisibility, Malcolm notes:

What I am trying to say is that it just never dawned upon them that I could understand, that I wasn’t a pet, but a human being. They didn’t give me credit for having the same sensitivity, intellect, and understanding that they would have been ready and willing to recognize in a white boy in my position. But it has historically been the case with white people, in their regard for black people, that even though we might be with them, we weren’t considered of them. Even though they appeared to have opened the door, it was still closed. Thus they never did really see me.95
When one thinks about the long-range negative impact of Ostrowski’s and Mr. Williams’ racism on the young Malcolm, one can understand the dynamic of Black self-hatred. Self-surveillance or getting the Black body to regulate itself in the physical absence of the white gaze is a significant strategy of white racist ideology. Malcolm had internalized the white gaze. Through the act of conking his hair, he policed his Black body in the image of whiteness:

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are “inferior”—and white people “superior”—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look “pretty” by white standards.96

It is not difficult to comprehend the powerful appeal that the Nation of Islam had for the older Malcolm. Given the murder of Malcolm’s father, Earl Little, who was believed to have been killed by white racists because of his affiliation with Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), given that the KKK had surrounded Malcolm’s house and threatened his family while his mother, Louise, was pregnant with him, given that the white state social service system had broken his family apart,97 and given that his mother was declared insane by white doctors, the Nation of Islam’s narrative of Yacub’s history would certainly have helped Malcolm to make sense
of white America. According to the narrative of Yacub’s history, a Black mad scientist named Yacub rebelled against Allah and created, along with 59,999 of his followers, evil white people.98

In his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois, on my reading, also locates the problem of white *racism* within the realm of the sociogenic. As will be shown, Du Bois’ conceptualization of double consciousness attests to the significance of the *lived* experience of race.99 Du Bois provides a revealingly profound example of how “Blackness” gets negatively configured within a (white) gestural, semiotic space. In the following example, the reader will note the phenomenological moment of slippage, resulting from the white gaze/glance, between how he may have understood himself and how he suddenly feels different from the other (white) children. Du Bois writes:

In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards,—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.100

In this example, Du Bois suggests that he was in some sense similar to the other (white) children. In “heart,” “life” and “longing” he appears to have felt a kindred
relationship. But something went awry. There was this sudden self-doubt, which presumably did not exist prior to this encounter. Hence, Du Bois undergoes a distinctive phenomenological process of coming to appear to himself differently. He moves from a sense of the familiar to the unfamiliar. A slippage occurs in his corporeal schema. In this example, it is Du Bois’ body schema that has become problematic. He is forced to deal with the meaning of a racial epidermal schema as a result of (or introduced by) the meaning-constituting activities of the young girl’s racialized consciousness. As with Fanon, Ellison’s invisible man, and Malcolm X, he was “taken outside” of himself and returned. Surely, Du Bois is the same self that he was prior to the gestured glance performed by the tall white girl. Surely, he was classified as “Black” prior to his encounter that day with the tall newcomer, though he may not have experienced this classificatory designation as something problematic or as a mark of disdain. But is he the same? As the tall white girl refused him, she sent a semiotic message, a message whose constructive meaning was immediately registered in the consciousness of the young Du Bois. Her body language, her refusal, involved a ritual that had tremendous power. The ritual glance (and the refusal) took place within a pre-interpreted space of racial meaning. This is the only way in which the glance’s meaning could have registered for Du Bois that something had become problematic at the level of his phenotype. I would argue that in order for Du Bois to have understood the specific racial meaning of the glance he had to have a certain level of racial narrative competence. In short, part of Du Bois’ horizon involved an awareness of difference, but also an awareness of difference in an exclusionary sense.
The ritual glance is both a product of this space and a vehicle through which racial and racist performances are perpetuated. Note that she is said to have “refused it peremptorily, with a glance.” This involves the arrogance and self-centeredness of whiteness, a form of white narcissism articulated within the form of a glance. The performance of whiteness, then, is not restricted to a set of articulated propositional beliefs or in the deployment of various rhetorical strategies. White racism can be expressed through the modality of physical comportment, a way of inhabiting physical space, a way of glancing/not glancing. “Seen” through the eyes of the newcomer, Du Bois’ Black body was already coded as different, as a problem, as that which should be avoided. Though young, the tall white newcomer had already learned complex ways of white coping, ways of “seeing” the Black body as a site of avoidance. It is through this exclusionary act that her whiteness as norm is reinforced. The tall newcomer’s racial status as white is marked and congealed as white in this communicational space, though she never spoke. Within the context of this highly raced communicational space, Du Bois’ body came to matter. Indeed, the newcomer’s ritual glance functioned to produce Du Bois’ body in its materiality as “raced”; her glance “produced bodily effects through immediate [non] verbal acts that reify racial difference.” By refusing to exchange with Du Bois, he returns to himself as excluded. The white girl, however, returns to herself as the center; her glance policed her whiteness as a privileged (unspoken) site. She never says in a declarative voice, “I’m white!” Her whiteness is interpellated, performed, claimed, through a non-verbal gesture of negation. Although young and “innocent,” her actions reflect larger political hallmarks of white racism: the audacity and power to
relegate non-whites to the margins, to segregate them, to instill in them the sense of existing outside the space of white normalcy and normativity.

The tall white newcomer has been situated (and situates her own identity) in the role of a member of a “superior” group. As within a dramaturgical narrative (as homo histrio), she plays her assigned role well. One might say that she has been given a role to play from within a distal narrative (an influential narrative of white supremacy that extends back into her past) that comes replete with assumptions regarding how to act in the presence of a dark body qua Other. In other words, she has become a prisoner of a distal anti-Black racist hermeneutic that informs her actions vis-à-vis differentially “raced” bodies. Through the performative act of refusal, though words were presumably never spoken, Du Bois became, even if unknowingly, “a damn nigger.” Through her glance and her refusal, she reduced Du Bois to his Blackness, a mere surface, a thing of no particular importance, though important enough to reject and avoid. Du Bois was no longer within the group, but outside of it, left looking upon himself through the eyes of the newcomer. One might say the meaning-giving acts of his own consciousness vis-à-vis his own dark body for all intents and purposes functioned as an instantiation of white racist consciousness intending the Black body as Other. Hence, he became Other to himself.

Like Fanon, who describes the phenomenological dimensions of corporeal malediction, Du Bois undergoes a similar process, one that he terms “double consciousness.” Du Bois:
It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Du Bois began to experience a disjointed relationship with his body. In this process of disjointedness, one ceases to experience one’s identity from a locus of self-definition and begins to experience one’s identity from a locus of externally imposed meaning. In short, Du Bois is forced into a state of doubleness, seeing himself as Other (the inferior Black) through the gaze of the young girl as the One (the superior white). This white scopically imposed meaning of Blackness as dirty, immoral, and inferior, interpellates the Black body as a pre-scopic essence. The tall white newcomer’s glance marked Du Bois as absent, as different. Her white glance possesses the power to confiscate the Black body, only to have it returned to Du Bois as a burden and a curse.

At the heart of each of the aforementioned experiences (those of Fanon, Ellison’s invisible man, Malcolm X, and Du Bois) emerges a question. The question is posed from within what Du Bois calls the “veil.” Whether interpreted as symbolic of systemic racism/structural segregation or as that which “indicates, rhetorically, a knowledge of difference that is itself discursively based,”¹⁰⁴ the veil is fundamentally linked to the hegemonic performances of whiteness, performances that can lead to deep societal fissures or to profound levels of existential phenomenological fracture. It is the latter that
is emphasized within this project. So what is this question? It is not a question born of solitude, but of racial, embodied struggle, a struggle that emerges within the interstices of a powerful racializing white regime. It is not born of hyperbolic doubt, a questioning of all things that fail the test of epistemological indubitability, though it may involve, as Du Bois says, “incessant self-questioning and the hesitation that arises from it.”\textsuperscript{105} The question is: “What, after all, am I?”\textsuperscript{106} Unlike Descartes, who asked a similar question—“But what then am I?”—after arriving at the indubitable \textit{Cogito} argument and who reaches the eventual conclusion that he is a \textit{thing} that thinks,\textsuperscript{107} Du Bois’ question is linked to his suddenly having been racially marked. Far from a \textit{disembodied} thing that thinks (\textit{res cogitans}), Du Bois feels marked, cursed in \textit{his racially epidermalized} \textit{embodiment}. Stuart Hall writes:

\begin{quote}
It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge,’ not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

Hence, one plausible answer to the question might be: “I am a problem! Who I am as an embodied Black body \textit{is} a problem!” This response to the question would indicate, as Halls says, an “inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the [white] norm.”

The connection between Blackness and the concept of “being a problem” is central to Du Bois’ understanding of what it means to be Black in white America. Du Bois reveals how whites engage in a process of duplicity while speaking to Blacks. They
often approach the Black in a hesitant fashion, saying “I know an excellent coloured man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?” Du Dois maintains that the real question that whites want to ask is: “How does it feel to be a problem?” Du Bois also points out that as a Black, some whites greet you with a certain amicable comportment. They talk with you about the weather, while all along performing hidden white racists scripts:

My poor, un-white thing! Weep not nor rage. I know, too well, that the curse of God lies heavy on you. Why? That is not for me to say, but be brave! Do your work in your lowly sphere, praying the good Lord that into heaven above, where all is love, you may, one day, be born—white!

Notice with regard to the notion of being a problem, whites do not ask, “How does it feel to have problems?” The question is raised to the level of the ontological: “How does it feel to be a problem?” As a problem, from the perspective of white mythopoetic constructions, Du Bois is aware that it is the “stained” Black body at both the phenotypic and the consanguineous level that is deemed criminal. He notes:

Murder may swagger, theft may rule and prostitution may flourish and the nation gives but spasmodic, intermittent and lukewarm attention. But let the murderer be black or the thief brown or the violator of womanhood have a drop of Negro blood, and the righteousness of the indignation sweeps the world.
The reader will note that the question regarding how it feels to be a problem does not apply to people who have at some point in their lives felt themselves to be a problem. In such cases, feeling like a problem is a contingent disposition that is relatively finite and transitory. When Black people are asked the same question by white America, the relationship between being Black and being a problem is non-contingent. It is a necessary relation. Outgrowing this ontological state of being a problem is believed impossible. Hence, when regarding one’s “existence as problematic,” temporality is frozen. One is a problem forever. However, it is important to note that it is from within the white imaginary that the question “How does it feel to be a problem?” is given birth. To be human is to be *thrown-in-the-world*.

To be human not only means to be thrown within a context of facticity, but it also means to be in the mode of the subjunctive. It is interesting to note that the etymology of the word “problem” suggests the sense of being “thrown forward,” as if being thrown in front of something, as an obstacle. Within the white imaginary, to be Black means to be born an obstacle at the very core of one’s being. To ex-ist as Black is not “to stand out” facing an ontological horizon filled with future possibilities of being other than what one is. Rather, being Black negates the “ex” of existence. Being Black is reduced to facticity. For example, it is not as if it is only within the light of my freely chosen projects that things are *experienced* as obstacles, as Sartre might say; as Black, by definition, I am an obstacle. As Black, I am the very obstacle to my own meta-stability and trans-phenomenal being. As Black, I am not a project at all. Hence, within the framework of the white imaginary, to be Black and to be human are contradictory terms.

Du Bois, akin to Toni Morrison, is aware of the strategic significance of averting
the critical gaze from the racial object (the Black) to the racial subject (the white). In 1920, in a powerful and engaging chapter entitled “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois writes:

I see these souls [the souls of white folk] undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious! They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped—ugly, human.\(^{113}\)

At this juncture, I will provide a delineation of what Du Bois’ “tired eyes” have seen of whiteness “ever stripped.” As stated earlier, in my view, critical whiteness theorists have not given the attention to this pivotal chapter that it deserves. Du Bois says of whites that he is “singularly clairvoyant.”\(^{114}\) He claims to be able to see the working of their entrails. Du Bois’ project is to demystify whiteness, to reveal “the mechanisms by which whiteness has reproduced its foundational myths.”\(^{115}\) Hence, Du Bois might be said to work within the critical space of ideology exposure. Historically situating the whiteness of Pan-Europeanism, Du Bois writes, “Today…the world in a sudden, emotional conversion has discovered that it is white and by token, wonderful!”\(^{116}\) Blacks, under this “religion of whiteness,”\(^{117}\) as Du Bois says, come to see themselves as inferior,
often resulting in a powerful form of psychological deformation. Within the context of white power and brutality, Black people have come to internalize negative images of themselves, thus resulting in what I have previously referred to as epistemic violence.

Aware of how myths harden into “empirical truths,” Du Bois writes:

How easy, then, by emphasis and omission to make children believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man’s soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was a white man’s thought; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man’s dream.118

Many Blacks, through white “emphasis and omission,” have come to internalize the myth, at their own psychological peril, that whiteness is supreme. This raises the larger issue of how whites exclude non-whites from playing significant roles in the movement of human history. Through the deployment of “meta-narrative” historical constructions, white (read: western) civilization is unified across space and time to represent the apex of human genius, scientific thought, political organization, philosophical speculation, and ethical behavior. As Du Bois notes, though, this is achieved through “emphasis and omission,” which points to the interest-laden, self-referential dynamics of whiteness. On this score, Black children are taught to believe that “Blackness” is an aberration, that Black people, those who carry the human stain, are stupid by nature, uncivilized, and uneducable. Blackness is said to be that which sullies the “purity” of whiteness. Indeed, all is beautiful without Blackness; all is rational without Blackness; all, indeed, is perfect without Blackness. “In fine,” Du Bois writes, “that if from the world were dropped
everything that could not fairly be attributed to White Folk, the world would, if anything, be even greater, truer, better than now.”

Du Bois’ “tired eyes” have seen even more. As long as Blacks resign themselves to “naturally” assigned stations in life, whites are content to provide them with gifts for minimal sustainability. As long as Blacks remain docile and thankful for “barrels of old clothes from lordly and generous whites, there is much mental peace and moral satisfaction.” However, as soon as Blacks begin to question the entitlement of whites to the best things that life has to offer, and when their “attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity,” whites charge Blacks with impudence. They say “that the South is right, and that Japan wants to fight America.” Note how Du Bois has internationalized the rationalizations of whiteness vis-à-vis the Japanese, the so-called Yellow Negro. Whiteness, within this context, functions as a trope of capitalist domination, exploitation, and cultural imperialism.

Du Bois notes that as whites begin to think that Blacks are insisting upon their right to human dignity, as John Jones did, and as whites subsequently begin an unapologetic wage of brutality and oppression against Black people, “the descent to Hell is easy.” This “descent to Hell” is a powerful image. Du Bois sees whiteness as a form of misanthropy, a form of hatred that lusts for Black blood. Du Bois:

I have seen a man—an educated gentleman—grow livid with anger because a little, silent, black woman was sitting by herself in a Pullman car. He was a white man. I have seen a great, grown man curse a little child, who had wandered into the wrong waiting-room, searching for its
mother: “Here, you damned black —.” He was white. In Central Park I have seen the upper lip of a quiet, peaceful man curl back in a tigerish snarl of rage because black folk rode by in a motor car. He was a white man.

The reader will note the refrain, “He was a white man.” Du Bois uses this refrain to establish a deepening and deafening portrayal of anti-Black racist hatred.

One tragic way in which this hatred has historically expressed itself is in the form of lynching, that spectacle of white fear, anxiety, desire, and sexual psychopathology, with its attendant pleasure reserved for the white racist scopophiliac. “These lynchings, then, formed a crucial part of the black subject’s ecology both as physical threats and media representations,” according to Weheliye, “making them subject to the look of white folks, yet unable to return the look.” Within this context, Du Bois speaks of the “lust of blood” that fuels the madness of lynching Black bodies, that “strange fruit” about which Billie Holiday sang. Du Bois was aware of how it really did not matter whether or not the Black person that was lynched had done anything wrong. All that mattered was that some Black, any Black, had to pay. Blood had to be spilled to satisfy and appease the white demigods. With deep psychological insight into the “entrails” of whiteness, Du Bois observes:

We have seen, you and I, city after city drunk and furious with ungovernable lust of blood; mad with murder, destroying, killing, and cursing; torturing human victims because somebody accused of crime
happened to be of the same color as the mob’s innocent victims and because that color was not white! We have seen—Merciful God! in these wild days and in the name of Civilization, Justice, and Motherhood—what have we not seen, right here in America, of orgy, cruelty, barbarism, and murder done to men and women of Negro descent.”

Du Bois places the responsibility on whites to be honest about their anti-Black racism. He writes, “Ask your own soul what it would say if the next census were to report that half of black America was dead and the other half dying.” He responds:

I suffer. And yet, somehow, above the suffering, above the shackled anger that beats the bars, above the hurt that crazes there surges in me a vast pity—pity for a people imprisoned and enthralled, hampered and made miserable for such a cause, for such a phantasy!

It is important to focus on Du Bois’ use of such terms as “imprisoned,” “enthralled,” “hampered,” “miserable,” and “phantasy.” Du Bois feels pity for those who are white, because they have to live with the lie of being “greater” than non-whites by virtue of “natural design”; they live their whiteness in bad faith, covering over the truth that whiteness is not beyond interrogation. Substituting the historical constructivity of whiteness for “manifest destiny,” whites remain imprisoned within a space of white ethical solipsism (only whites possess needs and desires that are truly worthy of being respected). Although I will say more about this in chapter eight, it would seem that
many whites would rather remain imprisoned within the ontology of *sameness*, refusing to reject the ideological structure of their identities as “superior.” The call of the Other qua Other remains unheard within the space of whiteness’s sameness. Locked within their self-enthralled structure of whiteness, whites occlude the possibility of developing new forms of ethical relationality to themselves and to non-whites. It is partly through the process of abandoning their hegemonic, monologistic discourse (functioning as the “oracle voice”) that whites might reach across the chasm of (non-hierarchical) difference and embrace the non-white Other in his/her Otherness. “A true and worthy ideal,” as Du Bois says, “frees and uplifts a people.”

He adds, “But say to a people: ‘The one virtue is to be white,’ and people rush to the inevitable conclusion, ‘Kill the 'nigger'!’ Of course, the idea that “the one virtue is white” is a false ideal, for it “imprisons and lowers.”

Du Bois writes of the arrogance of white power mongers: “These super-men and world-mastering demi-gods listened, however, to no low tongues of ours, even when we pointed silently to their feet of clay.”

Whiteness, however, takes itself as that transcendent universality that is beyond the realm of *particularity*. It is Black people who embody particularity, who have “feet of clay.” Whiteness, however, embodies *all* that is good, moral, beautiful, and supreme. This is confirmed in terms of a veritable social field/stream of “truths”:

This theory of human culture and its aims has worked itself through warp and woof of our daily thought with a thoroughness that few realize.

Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is “white”;
everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonorable is “yellow”; a bad taste is “brown”; and the devil is “black.” The changes of this theme are continually rung in picture and story, in newspaper heading and movie-picture, in sermon and school book, until, of course, the King can do no wrong—a White Man is always right and a Black Man has no rights which a white man is bound to respect.\textsuperscript{135}

The last line in this quote is an explicit reference to the famous Dred Scott decision in which (white) Chief Justice Roger B. Taney declared that Dred Scott and his wife, Harriet, who had petitioned to be freed, would remain enslaved. How could it have been otherwise when whiteness proves “its own incontestable superiority by appointing both judge and jury and summoning only its own witnesses.”\textsuperscript{136}

Whiteness is a “particular social and historical [formation] that [is] reproduced through specific discursive and material processes and circuits of desire and power.”\textsuperscript{137}

On this score, reproduced through circuits of desire and power, whiteness strives for totalization; it desires to claim the entire world for itself and has the misanthropic effrontery to territorialize the very meaning of the “human.”

Notes

2 Charles Johnson, “A Phenomenology of the Black Body,” \textit{Michigan Quarterly Review}, 32(4), (1993), 600. The reader will note that my claim is not that one must embody Black “racialized” experiences in order to theorize the Black body. This, of course, goes without saying that it is also not necessary that I embody white “racialized” experiences in order to theorize the white body.
3 The reader will note that I am aware that Fanon, Ellison, Malcolm X, and Du Bois in their work and in their lives strove to embody lives that were self-affirming within the midst of an anti-Black white racist
world. Charting their differential philosophical, political, “racial,” and existential strategies for negotiating positive Black identities, however, is not the objective of this chapter.


6 Sartwell, *Act Like You Know*, 11


Of course, one could complicate the issue here by raising the question of how my math teacher would have responded to certain class markers of either a Black body or a white body. The point here is that a certain white body indicating certain “class markers” (let us say, dresses poorly, expresses him/herself in a certain fashion, lives in the poorest white section of the city, etc.) might be returned back upon itself, in a negative fashion, by my white math teacher. Or perhaps a well-dressed Black body, one that came from old wealth, whose parents had attended Ivy League universities, might be returned back upon itself in a positive fashion, as a possibility of becoming a pilot. Concerning this last point, or so it would seem, my math teacher judged my not being fit to be a pilot on the basis of “racial” markers, not class markers. After all, he did not say, “George, be realistic, poor Blacks have a harder chance becoming pilots. If you were wealthy, I would encourage you to pursue your goal despite the fact that there are only a few Black pilots.”

15 As I have done in chapter three, I also delineate some of these discursive levels in chapter six.

16 I would like to thank philosopher Bettina Bergo for our conversation regarding this point.


25 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

26 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 192.

27 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.


29 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112
This is where the “materiality” of the Black body almost “disappears,” or so it would seem, against the backdrop of the white gaze, a gaze that places the Black body within a phenomenal space where “discovering” the Black body and “inventing” the Black body is difficult to disentangle, where the “materiality” of the Black body is collapsed into the discursively produced Black Body. My sense is that from the perspective of the colonial white gaze vis-à-vis the early years of European anthropology, Black bodies were always already “invented,” though whites, operating under a structured blindness, an epistemology of ignorance, a European solipsism, would have said “discovered.”

By “darkness,” I mean the naturally dark body due to natural environmental conditions, like melanin that protects the body from dangerous rays from the sun. The white gaze, however, “sees” something entirely different. The darkness becomes the darkness/Blackness as instantiated evil, inferiority, savage, that is, as I have argued, the same of whiteness. As I have already indicated, it is intriguing how even phenotypic “white” bodies can become “Black” bodies. For example, historically, in the light of the rise of revolutionary movements for Irish liberation, the British re-presented the Irish as “Black Negroes” (read: evolutionarily inferior).

The reader will note that the expression “sho’ good eaten’” is an English translation of the so-called African French “Y a bon banania.” “Y a bon” stands for C’est bon. In this quote, Fanon is making an important reference to the ways in which Blacks were caricatured not only in the French imaginary, but for purposes of selling French products. “Sho’ good eaten’” makes reference to Bonhomme Banania. This is a French breakfast food which consists of sugar, banana flour and cocoa. The caption consisted of a picture of a Senegalese, with a broad smile, eating the Banana. Whether or not the image was originally intended for purposes of caricature, it is impossible to miss the “smiling, contented darky” that the image depicts. The Senegalese man appears non-threatening and exemplifies the close association of Blacks with the process of serving (whites) food. Political acts can often come in the form of very small quotidian decisions. When I’m shopping for syrup, I consciously decide against purchasing the bottle of syrup that is constructed in the image of Aunt Jemima. Although her frozen smile is inviting and sweet, it belies the material and ideological conditions that positioned her identity as “Mammy” vis-à-vis those whites, especially little white children, that she assiduously served. Her smile is not for me!

Lewis Gordon insightfully points out that Fanon deliberately uses the ambiguous French word nègre which means both “Negro” and “nigger.” See, “Through the Zone of Nonbeing: A Reading of Black Skin, White Masks in Celebration of Fanon’s Eightieth Birthday,” CLR James Journal: A special Issue: Frantz Fanon’s 80th Birthday, 11 (1), Summer 2005, 22.


David R. Roediger reveals how something as “benign” as playing a child’s game is shaped through the white racist imaginary. Though he did not know any Blacks personally and lived in an all-white town, he notes: “I learned absolutely no lore of my German ancestry and no more than a few meaningless snatches of Irish songs, but missed little of racist folklore. Kids came to know the exigencies of chance by chanting ‘Eeny, meeny, miney, mo/Catch a nigger by the toe’ to decide teams and first batters in sport. We learned that life—and fights—were not always fair: ‘Two against one, nigger’s fun.’ We learned not to loaf: ‘Last one in is a nigger baby.’ We learned to save, for to buy ostentatious or too quickly was to be ‘nigger rich.’ We learned not to buy clothes that were a bright ‘nigger green.’ Sexuality and blackness were of course thoroughly confused.” See David R Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the
American Working Class (New York: Verso, 1999, Revised Edition), 3. The reader will note that I recently learned that the chant, “Eeny, meany, miney, mo/Catch a nigger by the toe,” is still used by white children as far away as Australia.

44 While it is true that the young boy has come to internalize a form of Negrophobia, I would not claim that he is in bad faith.


47 Does this mean that Fanon had a sense of his body being something else before it was “given back” to him? Being among other Blacks, one does not undergo the profound sense in which one’s being is fixed like a thing, that is, like a chemical solution vis-à-vis the white racist gaze. Fanon says, “As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others.” Of course, this does not deny that within certain Black communities that darker bodies are not seen as inferior to light Black bodies. The point here is that Fanon’s body, assuming that one can speak of a time before he became cognizant of his dark body as a problem, was interpellated according to a racial and racist taxonomy that categorized various bodies, his included, as “Black.” Hence, before he became aware of his dark body as raced Black, others would have still categorized him as Black. However, prior to having his body returned to him as inferior, as ontologically problematic, he could have experienced his body as a site of possibility, a site that is challenged the moment the white gaze freezes his being, distorts his Black embodiment.


49 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 110–11.


51 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 111.

52 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 11.

53 Lewis Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 38.


55 Ellison, Invisible Man. 3.

56 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 139.

57 Ellison, Invisible Man, 3.

58 Gordon, Her Majesty’s Other Children, 37.

59 Ellison, Invisible Man, 4.

60 Ellison, Invisible Man, 5.

61 Ellison, Invisible Man, 19.


63 Ellison, Invisible Man, 18.

64 Sartwell, Act Like You Know, 109.

65 Ellison, Invisible Man, 517.

66 Ellison, Invisible Man, 518.

67 Ellison, Invisible Man, 520.

68 Ellison, Invisible Man, 521.

69 Ellison, Invisible Man, 520.

70 Ellison, Invisible Man, 521.

71 Ellison, Invisible Man, 521.

72 Ellison, Invisible Man, 522.

73 Ellison, Invisible Man, 522.

74 Given the Brotherhood’s pro-proletarian emphasis, and its stress upon a classless society, one might argue that Ellison’s invisible man’s inner contradictions and existential plight within the context of his “raced” invisibility transcends the history of class conflict. I say this with some hesitation given my understanding of Ellison’s ambivalent “involvement” with the Communist Party (CP).
Note that this theme of separating Black families was a strategic method deployed during slavery to obliterate any sense of genealogical continuity, shared familial ties, and inter-subjective validation among enslaved Blacks. I will say more about this in chapter six.


99 Note that given Du Bois’ discourse regarding such things as “Black blood,” Negro ideals, aims, habits of thought, (natural) spiritual and psychical dispositions, one is led to believe that Black people have identities that will naturally spring from within, as it were, a hidden Black self that is governed by some inner racial telos. Cf. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of the Races,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 22.


102 Keep in mind that this act should not be deemed an aberration, a single, isolated incident. It is the result of a larger process, no matter how subtle the forms of acculturation. Hence, the newcomer’s performance of the glance is an instantiation of a larger system of white forms of policing Black bodies that secure white power and privilege.

103 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45. Note that Du Bois’ conception of double consciousness, like his use of the “veil” metaphor, can be said to have more than one meaning. Moreover, it is not always clear that Du Bois sees “twoness” as a split to be overcome. After all, he does talk about the Negro soul having a message for the world, and how important it is that the Negro wants to be both a man/woman while being both a Negro and an American.


“The Coming of John,” which is an important chapter in Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, is a story of John Jones who left his hometown in Altamaha, Georgia, to be educated. He was always known as an excellent worker in the fields. His mother, Peggy, wanted him to be educated. Hence, he subsequently went away to school and passionately embraced the areas of astronomy, history, and ethics. Upon his arrival back home, he wanted to open a school for Black folk, but was told that he must only teach them how to be submissive. John had higher aspirations. He taught them about the French Revolution. Whites in the small town were furious, particularly a white racist magistrate, Judge Henderson. The school was closed and the children forced to leave. As the story progresses, Judge Henderson’s son, whose name is also John, attempts to force himself physically upon John Jones’ sister, Jennie. John sees this, and kills Judge Henderson’s son. The story ends with John looking bravely toward the sea, as the Judge and a white lynch mob ride toward him. It is important to note that Du Bois appears to define the notion of double consciousness in positive terms here. Had John remained ignorant of his situation, he would not have been able to realize that there was a world of white oppression and how that world functioned to keep him ignorant and oppressed. Hence, developing a double consciousness, although now resulting in a state of unhappiness and ultimately death, John is empowered. Hence, Du Bois appears to define the state of unhappiness felt within the “veil” in terms that are empowering.


Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 42.


Sullivan, “The Racialization of Space,” 100.


Chapter V
The Agential Black Body: Resisting the Black Imago in the White Imaginary

Disalienation will come into being [for Blacks] through their refusal to accept the present as definitive.

—Frantz Fanon

Ol’ Aunt Jemima was always spitting in massa’s soup, while ol’ John out in the field couldn’t pick up a hoe without it just seeming to break in his hands. And, Lord have mercy, somebody was always running away.

—Julius Lester

We need to recognize that infrapolitics and organized resistance are not two distinct realms of opposition to be studied separately and then compared; they are two sides of the same coin that make up the history of working-class self-activity.

—Robin D. G. Kelley

Frantz Fanon was painfully aware of the hegemony and misanthropy of white racist ideology. He notes, “All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into the world that was ours and to help to build it together.”¹ However, within the lived or phenomenological domain of anti-Black racism, Fanon was expected to live, to think, to feel, to exist, to be “like a nigger.”² Within the context of an anti-Black racist world, the lived experience of the Black is under the constant threat of being collapsed into the phenomenological or lived experience of the nigger. Once collapsed, living this historical-racial schema, it is easy to undergo a certain ontological resignation, a capitulation in the face of a reality whose past, present, and future seem fixed and stacked against any possibility of historical breach. Although by the end of Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon calls upon his body “to release itself from the enmeshed web of social pathologies to the expression that best suits a mature, free consciousness—the embodiment of questioning,”³ it is not difficult to understand and empathize with Fanon where he writes:
Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.  

Historically, “the imago of the [Black] in the European mind” involves a process of discursive and material violence. As I have argued, the Black body, through the hegemony of the white gaze, undergoes a phenomenological return that leaves it distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence. The Black body becomes a prisoner of an imago—an elaborate distorted image of the Black, an image whose reality is held together through white bad faith and projection—that is ideologically orchestrated to leave no trace of its social and historical construction. The aim is to foreclose any possibility of slippage between the historically imposed imago and how the Black body lives its reality as ontically fixed. But like the white body, the Black body is never simply pre-given. While “history has been terribly unkind to the African body,” the Black body has, within the context of its tortuous sojourn through the crucible of American and European history, been a site of discursive, symbolic, ontological, and existential battle. If the Black body’s meta-stability reached a point of ontological closure vis-à-vis the power of the distorted imago projected from the white imaginary, there would have been no history of the Black body engaged in struggle and transformation. Blacks have struggled mightily to transcend white fictions. They have struggled with profound issues around identity and place. Yet, Blacks have always struggled to make a way out of no way, utilizing the resources that they had available. Although I will return to a discussion of the Middle Passage in chapter six, one might look at the movement through the Middle Passage to the so-called New World as a medium
through which an especially dynamic and difficult challenge to define and redefine a narrative of Black identity emerged. This narrative tells a complex story of the Black experience, one that is shaped through syncretism, the blending of cultural, epistemological, and ontological-retentions with ever new horrific and challenging experiences.\(^8\)

In *A Tempest*, which is Aime Cesaire’s version of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the Black body’s resistance is captured through the voice of a transformed Caliban\(^9\) as he refuses to live by the dehumanizing imago. Cesaire’s Caliban has become cognizant of the source of his double consciousness, he is now able to nihilate the given of Prospero’s world and to resist the existential phenomenological problem of corporeal malediction. At the level of the gaze, he challenges the relational asymmetry of which he has been a victim.

Prospero, you’re a great magician:

you’re an old hand at deception.

And you lied to me so much,

about the world, about myself

that you ended up by imposing on me

an image of myself:

underdeveloped, in your words, undercompetent

that’s how you made me see myself!

And I hate that image . . .

But now I know you, you old cancer,

And I also know myself!

And I know that one day
my bare fist, just that,

will be enough to crush your world!

The old world is crumbling down!  

The significant point here is that the needed slippage did occur; indeed, I would argue that the Black body’s history in the “New World” has been a history of resistance. This does not deny its history of self-hatred, its passing for white, its history of Uncle Tomism, and its history of accommodation. As John McClendon observes, “Resistance is cardinal and crucial to any description, definition, and interpretation of African American culture. . . . [That culture] in its full substance and scope is more complex than a singular thrust in the monodirection of resistance.”

Despite the power of white discursive disciplinary control and physical brutality, the Black body has historically disrupted the reduction of its being to that of a thing. To comprehend the Black body as a site of resistance, it is important to understand that the body “is not what it is and it is not yet what it will become.” In short, the Black body (as with the white body) is a process. It might be argued that the Black body/embodied Black existence vis-à-vis the white gaze is ontologically excessive, something more than the white gaze is capable of nullifying through its power. Of course, to refer to the Black body as a site of resistance, I am referring to Black embodied existence, that perspective from which the embodied self is capable of recognizing the possibility of overcoming a set of circumstances. On this score, resistance is linked to a level of comprehension of one’s social conditions. Resistance involves seeing through the so-called impersonal discursive practices of whites, of rejecting their nature-like constructions that threaten the lives of Blacks. As philosopher and sociologist Paget Henry notes,
“Agency against these normative and institutional structures require[s] the decoding of their impersonal, nature-like appearance and their rewriting in codes that reveal their roots in ordinary communication and social action.” Indeed, Black resistance is a form of decoding of the ideological prison house of racist discourse, a discourse that “operates in the name of values” that valorize whiteness and dehumanize Black people. Of course, such values assume the status of neutrality so as to appear natural.

I argue that Black resistance, as a mode of decoding, is simultaneously a process of recoding Black embodied existence through processes of opposition and affirmation. According to bell hooks, “Opposition is not enough. In that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become—to make oneself anew.” While I agree with hooks’ claim that opposition is certainly not enough, I disagree with her thesis that there is a “vacant space after one has resisted.” Indeed, I argue that resistance occupies that “vacant space” and that the process of becoming and making oneself anew has already been enacted, though time is certainly needed to nourish and further develop the process of becoming and remaking the self anew. Hence, rather than asking what exists on the other side of resistance, one might explore the affirmative dimensions of what is already embedded within resistance itself. The moment of resistance, in other words, is the moment of becoming, of being made anew. And while “human transcendence always involves becoming . . . , self-creation for an oppressed people whose transcendence is denied often finds its founding moments in resistance.”

Within a context where Black bodies are constantly under discursive and physical erasure, to resist (re-sistere), “to take a stand,” is linked, existentially, to taking up a different project, that is, no longer settling for a project superimposed by the white Other. On this score, to resist is not simply limited to saying “No, I refuse!” It is not simply a negative process.
Resistance is an instantiation of *affirmation*. Within the context of white myth making regarding the docility and sub-humanity of the Black body and the refusal to grant the Black body a perspective on the world, taking a stand demonstrates and *affirms* the existential and ontological validity of having a perspective, a subjectivity. Indeed, the moment of Black resistance calls into question the philosophical anthropological assumptions of white racism. Black resistance, then, is a profound *human* act of epistemological re-cognition,\(^\text{18}\) an affirmation that carries with it an ontological repositioning of the being of Black embodiment as a significant site of discursive self-possession.

We typically think of resistance in terms of opposing an external force, which suggests a reaction couched in negation. On my interpretation, under colonial conditions or enslavement, when Black bodies re-sist, they affirm. Resistance embodies onto-existential resources that might be articulated in the following forms: *I am, I exist, I recognize myself as standing beyond the white racist episteme that has attempted to render void my capacity to imagine other/alternative possibilities of being.* However, it is not as if the Black body opposes, or resists, and then passively waits around, as it were, for an inventory of possible values to affirm. To take this interpretation of resistance even further, I would argue that at the moment of resistance, there involves an instantiation of an axiological moment that grounds the Black body with value, value that has been historically denied by whites.

It is not that through resistance the Black body “founds” a new set of values *ex nihilo*. Rather, even if the Black “leans into,” “takes up,” Anglo-American and European values of freedom, the Black body affirms itself through a set of values historically denied it. I would argue that the very embryonic moment of “leaning into” a set of values already presupposes a certain level of agency that is operating in the name of affirmative values. The Black body denies
its being as pure facticity. In affirming itself as a site of possibility, as a site of value, Blacks realize that values are for the claiming/taking, that values are founded through human practices, and that as a lack, as an ontological excess, as it were, new modes of being, new ways of valuing can be explicitly taken up—despite the efforts of white racists who maintain that the servitude of Black bodies is sanctioned by *absolute* values. Also, at the moment of resistance, or so I would argue, besides the axiological moment, there is a moment of re-narrating the self, which also involves a disruption of the historical continuity of the white *same*; for to resist is to re-story one’s identity, even if that story is only short lived. The point here is that at the moment of resistance, a counter-narrative, perhaps even a counter-memory,\textsuperscript{19} has been performed. One might argue that resistance, according to this construal, has built into it its own end. Hence, from the moment that resistance is executed, in one sense, it is complete. Even if one is whipped or killed after the moment of resistance, the act remains “complete” qua an act of resistance. This, of course, should not be confused with the valid point that there have been historical instances of Black resistance that have been terminated before the aims of those resisting were accomplished.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, there is something to be said about the initial moment that the Black self proposes, reflectively generates, other ways of being-in-the-world. It is that initial moment that points to the power of the Black self to interpellate itself and to respond to the call to *affirm* itself (“I am human!”) against a history of dehumanization and Black non-being.

At the moment of resistance, a process of epistemic intervention also occurs. When called, when interpellated as “nigger,” Blacks may *knowingly* refuse to answer, refusing this form of “recognition,” preparing for an epistemic challenge. For example, I may opt to say, “I am not the one!” Through this act of resistance, from the perspective of the white gaze, I become a living contradiction, an anomaly. I become *more* than the white can measure within the horizon
of his limited understanding of the Black body. “I am not the one!” throws the white into a state of cognitive dissonance. After all, the Black imago has served him well. He knows that he is being seen; his visibility is exposed. But I now return him to himself, which is a place of reaction. It is a place of bad faith, a place where I am needed to be what he says I am. By rejecting his need, I force him into a state of anxiety. For he is forced to see the emptiness of a self dialectically predicated on a lie. Of course, refusing to face his freedom, he may continue to flee, which could cost me my very life. As philosopher David Theo Goldberg argues:

> While whites could cower for so long behind the presumed invisibility of their whiteness, this paradoxically hides from view the very vulnerability of whiteness and white folk. The presumptive invisibility of whites could be turned against them, their spoiled nature revealing a fragility at the heart of whiteness, its decadence a powerlessness possible to be challenged.²¹

Of course, I may also resist through an ironic and exaggerated locutionary act. That is, I may respond to his interpellation with, “Yas suh, Cap’n?” In doing so, I throw back in his face a form of servility that I actually reject, retaining an epistemologically privileged position regarding the mimicry that I intend.

The concept of resistance is inextricably linked to the concept of identity. As one resists, a reconfigured identity is affirmed; for in the act of resistance, the Black subject has already achieved a level of separation from the Black imago in the white imaginary. However, transcending the Black imago is not a case of archeologically removing all of the white racist/colonialist distortions in order to uncover an essential Black self. As philosopher Clevis
Headley writes:

Claiming an identity need not imply any kind of essentialist, dogmatic, or objectivist understanding of self. Realist portraits of identity oftentimes dissipate in the face of the fluidity of identity. The realist begins with the assumption of a specific ontology, namely a totality of objectivist entities that are discourse-independent; these entities are called identities.  

At the moment of discursive disengagement from white racist hegemonic discourse—which does not mean that one will be free of additional discursive and non-discursive racist somatic attacks—one does not uncover a pre-discursive self or a real self that is believed to be “prior to all identities.” This does not imply, however, that one should abandon Black identity discourse. On my view, identity discourse does not necessarily lead to bad faith. There are ways of claiming identity without the assumption that all identities are metaphysically fixed. This does not mean, however, that the only alternative open to Blacks is that of strategic essentialism. The subtext of strategic essentialism appears to presuppose that there is something fundamentally or intrinsically problematic about identities as such. The expansion of embodied Black subjectivity must move beyond the white oppressors’ representations, but not beyond all representations, not beyond all forms of discursive constructivity. Hence, I reject the view that there is a history-less “Black essence” existing simpliciter, waiting to be accurately represented, waiting for a true representation that will establish a one-to-one correspondence as formulated in realist philosophical and scientific parlance. And while it is the case that white racist hegemonic and distorted representations do create profound levels of corporeal malediction in Black people,
it is not the case that this process of corporeal malediction obtains because there is a lack of corresponding fit, as it were, between the Black imago in the white imaginary and the Black simpliciter.

In realist parlance, one would say that white representations of Black people are false, because they fail to correspond to a Black essence; whereas those representations that do not create profound levels of ego instability in Black people would be said to be true, because they do correspond to a Black essence. This apparent aporia is due to the use of certain epistemic operators. Through the suspension of the use of true and false epistemic operators, this problem can be resolved. Hence, when Blacks reject and move beyond white oppressors’ representations of them, this might be thought of in terms of moving beyond an unworkable set of categories or narratives. In other words, the white oppressors’ narrative is not faithful to Blacks’ hermeneutic self-understanding. But this does not mean that Blacks are in need of a true narrative, that is, one that describes determinant or objective features about the Black as such. Rather, there is the need for a set of categories or a narrative that illuminates Blacks’ being-in-the-world. In this way, the discourse of workable and unworkable narratives replaces the logic of metaphysical essentialism regarding racial identities, and dispenses with the correspondence theory of truth.

One advantage of the narrative perspective is that questions regarding Black identity are not couched in ahistorical terms that necessitate a monolithic descriptive vocabulary. Instead, multiple vocabularies regarding Black identity and Black-being-in-the-world abound. On this score, Black identity is theorized as a dynamic core of narrative gravity that is sustained through historical and imaginative Black agency. As Linda Alcoff argues:
To self-identify even by a racial . . . designation [is to] understand one’s relationship to a historical community, to recognize one’s objective social location, and to participate in the negotiation of the meaning and implications of one’s identity. The word real here is not meant to signify an identity that is nondynamic, noncontingent, or not the product of social practices and modes of description. Rather, the word real works to counter a view that interpellations of social identity are always chimeras foisted on us from the outside or misrepresentations.  

“Taking a stand,” re-narrating one’s Black identity, takes place from a historical location, a location within which one is already constituted and yet constitutes one’s identity.

Black identity can be read as a site of meaning formation, one that avoids the totalizing tendencies of whiteness. Within the context of anti-Black racism, whites affirm themselves through negating Black existence. By “negating Black existence,” my aim is not to suggest that all whites literally desire to negate qua kill Black people. To “negate” (or negare, “to say no”) suggests the sense in which whites affirm (or make firm) their identities through the discursive or non-discursive act of negating the reality of full Black humanity, saying no to Black worth and no to Black critical subjectivity. After all, white identity needs Black existence in order to aggrandize its own. Of course, this does not deny those moments where negating Black existence does in fact mean killing Black bodies. Even in such cases as these, the killing of the Black body is an act that functions to provide the white body with an “omnipotent” consciousness, providing whites with the illusion of absolute power to take the life of a Black, which, according to the racist ideology, is no more problematic than taking the life of a subhuman animal. In this way,
although the Black body is negated qua killed, the dead Black body, the burned, castrated, and lynched Black body, is still needed in order to aggrandize white existence. Black identity, however, does not have as its ontological aim the negation of white people, though Blacks must negate the ideological structure of whiteness. Black embodied subjectivity is a dynamic process that is historically ensconced and engaged in the complex fusion of re-narrating, rearticulating, and recreating its being-in-the-world, creating ways of combating anti-Black racist effects, and making sense of what it means to be Black-in-the-world. Hence, Black identity is both a historically *narrated* and *narrating* process, a process that speaks to Black facticity and transcendence, respectively. In other words, Black identity is not to be sought in the realm of universal abstraction. “Nor is there a question of wrapping ourselves in a delusional shroud of ‘ontological blackness.’”\(^29\) As Robert Birt argues:

Such essentialist methods create a new prison in which the many and often enriching complexities and perplexities of black consciousness and identity are concealed and denied. We do not wish to make of blackness a tomb within which to bury ourselves. But to abandon our common identity as blacks, to forget the common history, struggles and experiences which make us a people, is to deny our situated existence. And by denying our situation we undermine the prospects of actualizing our transcendence. Transcendence is also situated, or is realizable only within a given situation. That is why the flight toward an abstract humanity is vain. It forsakes our concrete, lived humanity for a metaphysical phantom.\(^30\)
Black people have had to struggle and pro-actively create themselves in order to survive. Within this context, identity discourse is not to be feared, but embraced as a constant process that is shaped within historical boundaries, shaped by coefficients of adversity, and shaped through imaginative and critical consciousness. In this way, Blacks ground their identities in a complex history that is constantly unfolding and rearticulated because Blackness is a lived existential project, the affirmative content of which is shaped by (but need not be reduced to) that complex history. As bell hooks argues:

The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African-Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience. An adequate response to this concern is to critique essentialism while emphasizing the significance of “The authority of experience.” There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black “essence” and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle.32

Though the history of Black people is inextricably linked to experiences of exile and struggle, indeed, such experiences constitute a fundamental matrix out of which Black identity has been shaped, it is important that Black identity is not defined simply in reactionary terms. While no one will deny that aspects of Black identity are formations of recoil against white power and hegemony, it is certainly not the case that Black identity is a cultural and historical fragile structure waiting for the white Other’s action in order to establish the reactionary
trajectory of its identity. Given the continued nature of white racism, Black identity must remain attentive to and resist against oppressive modes of being whitely-in-the-world. This is not the same as saying that Black identity is saturated with reactionary resentment. “Black is beautiful!” While this affirmation is always already linked to an inter-play of voices (after all, the affirmation already contests and speaks to a history of the white “oracle voice” which claimed that Blackness is ugly), this form of identity affirmation is not to be reduced to anti-white rehabilitation efforts to counter anti-Black racism. “Black is beautiful!” as an illocutionary affirmation of intent to celebrate and value the vivacity of Black embodied existence should not be reduced to an inverted value response to the white claim that “Black is ugly.” Historically, this affirmation has had a powerful perlocutionary impact on Blacks in terms of how they have affirmed their Black embodiment, creating a collective celebration of Black embodiment. “Black is beautiful!” can, must, and does occupy that Black existential space—a space within which Blacks responsibly affirm who they are—where whiteness has ceased to matter, where it has ceased to be a point of reference.

African-American psychologist Adelbert H. Jenkins’ conceptualization of Black agency provides a further theoretical framework that contests the imago of the Black as passive and without an embodied subjectivity from which to negotiate the conditions of white oppression. I briefly draw from Jenkins’ work because his project specifically grounds Black agency and resistance within a theoretical framework that is opposed to a behavioral or mechanistic model that sees behavior as the result of push and pull independent variables. The behavioral or mechanistic view of human behavior resonates with the way in which whites conceptualized Black people. According to Jenkins, to comprehend Black people, particularly within the context of white hegemony, it is important to come to terms with the “telic” element involved in
Black agency. By “telic,” Jenkins has in mind the teleological aspects of Black embodied subjectivity, particularly regarding the concept of human intent.

It is from an embodied subjective here that Blacks project some end for the sake of which they engage in some set of actions. By theorizing the concept of intent vis-à-vis Black people under conditions of oppression, Jenkins elaborates a hermeneutic framework in terms of which to describe modalities of Black agency. For example, whites believed that Blacks were meek and obsequious by nature. According to Jenkins:

Although Blacks showed humble and meek behavior in interracial situations historically, the intent of such behavior was often quite at variance with such a demeanor. Thus, at times Blacks intended in their meekness to act out of a conception of personal (Christian) dignity (“turn the other cheek”) and/or moral superiority.

Where whites could only see meek or obsequious forms of comportment, Blacks intended the very opposite of such constructions. Jenkins cites an example from Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. In the example, a dying elderly Black man advises his son: “I want you to overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction.” Ellison, as this example shows, was cognizant of the various ways that Blacks enacted agency through processes of ironic signification. Although more will be said about this, African-American historian and cultural critic Robin Kelley, drawing from the work of political anthropologist James C. Scott, maintains that Black working-class people were able to resist those in power by developing a “hidden transcript.” In short, Black people were able to engage in acts of resistance from a
hidden transcript that was beyond the cognitive range of white oppressors.

Although engaging white expectations outwardly, Blacks were able to engage in a process of re-signifying the meaning of their modes of embodied comportment that created an important slippage between white *a priori* assumptions, mythical self-serving beliefs, racist expectations, and Black agential reality. Take “thievery.” Enslaved Blacks living on plantations would often steal food and tools. Rather than see agency, and, thus, recognize the possibility that enslaved Blacks envisioned alternative ways of survival, white oppressors rationalized such behavior as the result of a natural proclivity toward criminal behavior. Acts of stealing were not only indicative of the capacity of Blacks to negotiate their circumstances and think beyond the veil of white control, but such acts can be conceived as a means of maintaining a sense of dignity. The point here is that Black people had to imagine *alternative* ways of securing those things (both material and non-material) that were denied them. To steal, under circumstances of tremendous oppression, can function as an act of self-assertion, an act of re-thinking the possibilities inherent within a given context, no matter how oppressive. Hence, an act of stealing, within the context of oppression, can function to reinforce and confirm one’s self-worth.

As I will show, enslaved Blacks also broke tools as a form of resistance, and no doubt as a form of gaining some sense of themselves as empowered, but given the magnitude of whites’ denial of Black agency, they rationalized such behavior as indicative of clumsiness and stupidity. Relentless in his belief that Blacks were *agent-less*, a white Louisiana doctor, Samuel W. Cartwright, claimed that some work habits of Negroes were the direct result of what he termed *Dysaesthesia Aethiopica*. Concerning this disease, and commenting on Cartwright’s medical rationalizations, historian Kenneth M. Stampp writes:
An African who suffered from this exotic affliction was “apt to do much mischief” which appeared “as if intentional.” He destroyed or wasted everything he touched, abused the livestock, and injured the crops. When he was driven to his labor he performed his tasks “in a headlong, careless manner, treading down with his feet or cutting with his hoe the plants” he was supposed to cultivate, breaking his tools, and “spoiling everything.” This, wrote the doctor soberly, was entirely due to “the stupidness of mind and insensibility of the nerves induced by the disease.”

The reader will note the phrase “as if intentional.” Since intention is a key feature of resistance and agency, it serves the racist aims of Cartwright to say, “as if intentional.” This allows him to acknowledge a possible subtext of Black intentionality, and, hence, agential behavior, only to nullify any such possibility by describing the behavior as the result of stupidity and insensibility of the nerves caused by a “Nigger disease.”

Along with his understanding of teleological aspects of embodied subjectivity, Jenkins argues that Blacks engage in processes of “dialectical” thinking, “that quality in which every specific meaning is seen to suggest either its opposite or any number of other alternatives.” Disalienation is crucially dependent upon dialectical thinking. To see beyond the imago requires the capacity to imagine a form of Black humanity that has been denied. If “basic to identity, self-image, and being in the physical world is the body,” then Blacks had to envision alternatives to the corporeal distortions projected from the white imaginary. Dialectically, Blacks were able to live their bodies, to perform their bodies, in ways that transformed their identities and self-images. Cesaire’s Caliban had to project dialectically an alternative to his colonial situation. He
had *to take a stand* against the myths of colonial whiteness, demonstrating not only to Prospero, but to himself, that he was capable of transgressing and transforming the caricatured body-image into which he had been made. Jenkins is worth quoting in full where he summarizes:

> The human individual brings an actively structuring mind to the world, one capable of seeing alternative meanings in any given object or event. This enables the individual in principle to rise above the environment and to create or at least imagine something new and different. Since any one event can be interpreted in different ways, one must know how the individual conceives that event. Looked at this way, the survival of Black Americans can be understood as depending to a significant degree on their capacities to imagine a dignified sense of their humanity in spite of external circumstances.  

Black resistance in America is a powerfully and historically rich narrative journey of individual efforts and mass movements. It is a history that is variegated, that has assumed various strategies and trajectories, and has led to defeats and incredible victories, to say nothing of the history of resistance throughout the Diaspora by people of African descent. At this juncture, I will examine a variety of instances of Black resistance and agency within the context of everyday work activities during the antebellum period and later within the Black working-class in the Jim Crow South. This focus is consistent with my efforts to deal with the existential quotidian experiences of Blacks.

As agential, Black people confront the world and construct the world from unique perspectives. They take up their *ex-istence* within the framework of a given set of
circumstances. Despite the horrible conditions that came with being forced to live and to work on plantations, many Blacks were able to reconfigure what was given. They were able to take a stand against dehumanization and negotiate ways of achieving a sense of dignity. Moreover, this had to be done while making whites think that they had succeeded in producing the most obedient and docile slaves around. In short, Blacks had to “conform” to white myths while undermining those myths simultaneously. The negotiation between myth and reality took place within a variety of work activities. For example, as stated, many Blacks would break tools and destroy crops. As one white plantation owner related, “It always seems on the plantations as if they [Blacks] took pains to break all the tools and spoil all the cattle that they possibly can, even when they know they’ll be directly punished for it.”\textsuperscript{49} As has been shown, whites rationalized such behaviors as the result of clumsiness and stupidity. Apparently, these same tools were not broken when Blacks worked their own meager areas for planting. In fact, “one slaveholder felt aggrieved when he saw that the small patches which his Negroes cultivated for themselves were better cared for and more productive than his own field.”\textsuperscript{50} This suggests a process of selective valuing. To be selective, of course, involves deliberation. Hence, contrary to the myth that Black people were dumb chattel, Blacks cultivated these small patches of their own in order to exercise a measure of economic independence and agency. Blacks would grow their own food, as well as steal food from the plantation, selling it through a complex network of trade with passing ships.

Breaking tools was one way that enslaved Black people were able to exercise control over their work. To break a tool (or destroy a patch of land) requires the establishment of a different/alternative way of relating to a given object (the tool or the land). To engage in this type of alternative engagement involves the telic dimensions of embodied subjectivity. In sort, Blacks assumed a “transcendent” position in relationship to a field of objects. Deborah White notes,
“While some Southern whites called such behavior ‘rascality’ [breaking tools, for example], slaves [or the enslaved] understood it to be an effective form of resistance.”

Getting out of work or playing a role in selecting the type of work performed was an important manifestation of Black resistance. Other Blacks, so as to avoid work, would pretend to be “crazy” or “idiotic” without white folk being the wiser. White notes:

For instance, Josiah Henson knew Dinah . . . to be as “clear witted, as sharp and cunning as a fox.” Yet, she purposely acted like a fool or idiot in order “to take advantage of her mistress.” According to Henson, “When the latter said, ‘Dinah, go and do your work,’ she would reply with a laugh, ‘Yes, yes; when I get ready,’ or ‘Go do it yourself.’ Sometimes she would scream out, ‘I won’t; that’s a lie—catch me if you can’; and then she would take to her heels and run away.” Henson revealed that Dinah was always doing odd things, but she escaped the whipping that other slaves received because her mistress thought she was an idiot.

Dinah was not what she seemed. She was able to confuse the white gaze to her advantage and to challenge the supposed epistemic “grounds” that informed the perspective of the white other. She was able to “lean into” a different form of embodied social representation. I make this point in order to emphasize the significance of the social matrix within which resistance takes shape. In this way, there is the recognition that agency takes place within a space of social intelligibility that has, within it, roles that can be taken up that function as efficacious vehicles in terms of which someone like Dinah could pull off such a deception in the first place.

Enslaved Blacks exercised their agency at work, not only in relatively harmless forms
such as spitting in food prepared for whites, but they also resorted to more deadly forms of resistance. For example, White relates:

A less overt form of resistance involved the use of poison and this suited women because they officiated as cooks and nurses on the plantation. As early as 1755 a Charleston slave woman was burned at the stake for poisoning her master, and in 1769 a special issue of the *South Carolina Gazette* carried the story of a slave woman who had poisoned her master’s infant child.  

In *More than Chattel*, Bernard Moitt notes that both men and women laborers in the “field gangs were likely to participate in the plotting and execution of all forms of resistance whatever the gender of leadership. Both groups also worked in the masters’ household as domestics and engaged in poisoning as a means of resistance.” He goes on to note that there were forms of resistance specific to Black women. For example, some Black women would pretend to be ill as a means of escaping work. And although the subhuman conditions of plantation life were conducive to Blacks actually suffering from various illnesses (smallpox, pneumonia, and other illnesses), some Black women were able to fake illness by engaging in what might be called the *dialectics* of feigning. In other words, Black women outwardly re-presented themselves through one stream of embodied symbolic possibilities (looking ill) while maintaining epistemological priority concerning the truth of the situation (being well). White:

On Landon Carter’s eighteenth-century Virginia plantation, this form of resistance was raised to an art. Although Carter was certain that Mary faked her fits, her
violent and uncontrollable howls always got the better of him, and she spent a
good deal of time away from the fields.\textsuperscript{56}

In feigning her illness, Mary was not only able to “take a stand” against the “omniscient” white
gaze. She was also able to create an alternative meaning for her body. She resisted the “physical
labor demanded by plantation economy”\textsuperscript{57} and the myth that Black bodies were chattel.
White also suggests that the most significant distinction between Black male and female
resistance “was the greater propensity of women to feign illness in order to gain a respite from
their work or change the nature of their work altogether.”\textsuperscript{58} Given that some enslaved Black men
engaged in labor that allowed for greater mobility, and that they were trained as skilled laborers,
they could exercise a degree of agency through different labor experiences. Of course, enslaved
Black women did work as midwives. Their work did occasionally take them off the plantation.
These midwives would not only deliver babies, but were able to deliver important messages
between plantations. However, Black women for the most part were restricted to plantation
work. Hence, Black women created spaces of agency/resistance right there on the plantation.
Although some Black women feigned pregnancy as a way of resisting chattel labor, which, of
course, would only provide “relative advantages of escaping work,”\textsuperscript{59} other Black women who
were actually pregnant used their pregnancy as a means to withdraw from work for many
months. Despite the fact that Black women were still arduously worked while pregnant, some
stayed in bed for months, “playing the lady” while pregnant, thus avoiding the arduous work of
the fields.\textsuperscript{60}

In another passage White writes, “Slaves may have thought about overthrowing the
system of slavery but the odds against them were so overwhelming that the best most could hope
for was survival with a modicum of dignity. Slave resistance was aimed at maintaining what seemed to all concerned to be the status quo.\textsuperscript{61} While it is true that American slavery was an overwhelming system of white oppression, one must keep in mind that Blacks exercised sound judgment in the forms of the resistance that they enacted. They wanted to live. There is no dispute that the deployment of such acts of resistance left the institution of American slavery standing. In that sense the status quo remained the same. We must keep in mind, however, that a single act of resistance (breaking a tool, poisoning food, destroying crops) was precisely aimed at \textit{disrupting} some aspect of the status quo. Micro-resistant acts do not leave the status quo unchanged, though slavery as an institution may have remained intact. There are some who may find the following analogy problematic, but I would argue that such acts of resistance by enslaved blacks, to the extent that they involved sabotage and the disruption of certain aspects of the system from within, might be compared to guerilla tactics. Short of certain death through massive counter-violent revolutionary action, micro-acts of resistance, or leaving the plantation altogether, Black people were severely restricted.

Work slowdowns were another means of exercising agency. Some enslaved Blacks worked in solidarity to bring work to a crawl. Even some enslaved Black males who were “slave drivers” only pretended to whip field workers. The workers would scream within earshot of the plantation owner to give the impression that they were being disciplined and worked hard.\textsuperscript{62} “The amount of slowing up of labor by the slaves must, in the aggregate, have caused a tremendous financial loss to plantation owners.”\textsuperscript{63} Such slowing up of work might be seen as a form of working-class consciousness. Historian Thomas C. Buchanan notes that enslaved Blacks on steamboats also engaged in work slowdowns: “For slaves, good victuals and decent treatment by the officers, could be the difference between hard work and a work slow down.”\textsuperscript{64}
Black mariners in the antebellum also engaged in day-to-day acts of resistance. In fact, the very idea of a Black mariner/seamen was itself a challenging proposition to white racist myths. However, Africans brought a fund of complex skills and cultural knowledge to the New World. David S. Cecelski relates a story about Moses Ashley Curtis as he arrived at the mouth of Cape Fear on his voyage into the American South. Cape Fear, which emptied into the Atlantic, “was a tumult of heavy waves, strong currents, and dangerous shoals.” Curtis would need a local pilot to get across the inlet’s bar. So, the signal flag was raised and he noticed a pilot boat racing toward them. As the crew from the pilot boat boarded, Cecelski relates that Curtis wrote in his diary, “And what saw I? Slaves!—the first I ever saw.” Blacks and First Nation peoples (Siouan, Iroquoian, and others) shared skills and knowledge that made for greater proficiency in navigating through heavy currents and dangerous shoals. “Many tidewater slaves,” as Cecelski makes clear, “came from sections of West Africa more closely resembling, and with maritime traditions better suited to, the shallow, marshy Carolina coastline than did their colonial masters, with their deepwater experience.” Moreover, Cecelski notes that Peter Wood, in his book, *Black Majority*, documents that many Africans “had grown up along rivers or beside the ocean and were far more at home in this element than most Europeans.”

Black seamen enjoyed a measure of “freedom” that was denied other enslaved Blacks. For example:

Moses Grandy’s master, James Grandy, allowed the slave waterman to “hire out” his own labor. Having the space “to use his own labor,” provided Grandy with an alternative way of understanding himself, an understanding grounded in a sense of self-activity as opposed to an object that is acted upon. This was a common
arrangement for watermen and other slaves with a skilled trade; it left them free to
solicit business with little oversight.\textsuperscript{70}

Of course, enslaved Blacks who were allowed to hire out their own labor were deemed a threat to
white workers. As early as the 1750s in lowcountry Georgia, for example, white skilled and
semiskilled workers came to see the self-hiring of Black bondpeople as a threat to their living
standards.\textsuperscript{71} As with life on plantations, it was Black men who had far more mobility. Mobility
allowed for a greater feeling of self-activity/agency.

Despite his relative mobility, Moses Grandy still suffered from pernicious acts of white
racism. His first wife, whom he loved as he loved his own life, was sold away by one of his
many white “masters.”\textsuperscript{72} Despite this, Grandy, who eventually fled North Carolina and gained
his freedom, played a key role in helping enslaved Black communities stay informed and to
“overcome their masters’ attempts to keep them isolated from one another and uninformed about
antislavery movements.”\textsuperscript{73} Hence, not only did Grandy realize his own vision of freedom, he
exercised agency in terms of keeping other enslaved Blacks informed. As shown earlier,
midwives also exercised their agency to communicate important messages between plantations,
hence establishing complex networks of communication. Thus, as with the midwives on
plantations, Grandy was part of a larger communicative network created by Black watermen that
was used to transmit abolitionist and revolutionary news from as far as New England, France and
Haiti.\textsuperscript{74} As Elizabeth Hyde Botume notes:

Without any knowledge of newspapers, or books, or telegraphy, the slaves had
their own way of gathering news from the whole country. They had secret signs,
an “Underground Telephone”. . . . Intuitively they learned all the tricks of
dramatic art. Their perceptions were quickened. When seemingly absorbed in
work, they saw and heard all that was going on around them. They memorized
with wonderful ease and correctness. . . .

Information transfer no doubt helped to keep alive a sense of collective agency, struggle, and
shared identity. Perhaps it is not by accident that Denmark Vesey was a cabin boy and that David
Walker, author of the famous and feared *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829),
which advocated organized counter-violent revolt against white slave “masters,” was raised in
the seaport of Wilmington, NC. Blacks restructured sites of work activity into sites of
empowerment. They used their mobility to keep close contact with family members, and to help
other Blacks to locate family members. Like enslaved Black plantation workers, Black steamboat
workers were cognizant of sites and spaces of resistant possibilities in everyday mundane work
experience. In short, they threw off the phenomenological return of the imago that depicted them
as submissive and re-narrated their identities as agential. Jenkins writes:

> We are . . . aware of ourselves as agents. By *agents* I mean we recognize
ourselves as persons who take action, take initiative, make decisions, and make
choices from among possibilities. Thus, self is also a way of talking about our
capacity to come to a situation that is full of possibilities (as most situations are)
and make a choice in that situation.\(^76\)

Unlike Moses Grandy, who operated within the “formal slave economy,” some Black
seamen exercised agency within the context of the informal work economy. The very process of operating outside of a “formal economy” might itself be understood as an act of resistance. As Buchanan writes:

The men created a world of their own on docks, levees, plantation landings, city quays, and steamboat decks of the Mississippi River economy. While these men were not above occasionally swindling other working-class people, for the most part their actions were directed at the region’s elites. They lied to, cheated, and stole from bankers, shopkeepers, plantation owners, and merchants—the people who possessed the wealth they coveted.°°

The term “rascal” was appropriated by Black steamboat workers to denote something positive; indeed, the term’s meaning was inverted to deflect its negative implications created by the power of whites to name and thereby construct “reality.” Buchanan:

The men termed their activities “rascality.” In a world of danger and exploitation, where death was only a steamboat explosion away, and the plantation of Louisiana and Mississippi loomed with an ominous omnipresence, they referred to rascality as any number of illegal acts that allowed them to create a life on their own terms. The men took pride in their ability to avoid what they called “honest labor,” to out think the world around them, and to take advantage of the weaknesses of the slave economy. In a world that commodified humanity they were independent men. They lived by their own wits as confidence men and
Avoiding “honest work” was an alternative way of exercising resistance against an economic system that was oppressive and dehumanizing. Working outside of the sphere of formal labor, Black steamboat workers were able to gain a new sense of “masculinity.” Their exercise of independence provided them with a counter-white notion of Black masculinity, one that threatened whites, for they refused to be controlled by superimposed weak and subservient identities. More generally, of course, maritime culture, as W. Jeffrey Bolster notes, “allowed them to ‘feel as men’.” Maritime culture created a space that was conducive to agential attempts on the part of Black working men to carve out a dignified identity, even if it meant stealing, as noted above within the context of the plantation, within the very midst of Black dehumanization and degradation. Buchanan notes:

While these men were not social revolutionaries bent on overturning the slave system in one bold stroke, nor were they solely foot draggers content to slow production. Instead they sought to live outside the formal economy in a black river world where talents were rewarded and material gain was possible. They were outlaws. And as such their actions represent a challenge to antebellum society that should be incorporated into our understanding of the range of ways African Americans battled both bondage and the limits of freedom.

Blacks who worked as “legitimate seamen” were also able to exercise resistance within spaces of white hegemony. During roustabouts (free and enslaved) Blacks were able to take
control over their bodies. They would sing as a way of reconfiguring the work experience and environment. “Singing created a collective consciousness while salvaging African-American humanity from the indignities and monotony of the work process.” Dancing during leisure time was also a form of resistance; for “dancing was a way of reclaiming their bodies from the oppression of both slave and wage labor.” For Jenkins, as has been argued, dialectical thought is linked to our ability to create opposite and multiple symbolizations. Hence, the dancing Black body functioned as a form of opposition to meager wages and oppressive circumstances, signifying a form power at the site of work itself. The dancing Black body, within the work environment, symbolized, among other things, an existential commitment to joy and a sense of somatic freedom.

Historian Tera W. Hunter has done significant work on post-bellum Black women and how they performed their bodies through the modality of dance to reclaim a level of Black embodied autonomy. Looking at such dance performances within the context of “jook joints,” Hunter insightfully reveals the implications of such Black working-class activity on white norms that attempted to govern and police Black bodies and to restrict them to spaces of servile labor. Hunter: “White employers opposed the violation of what they considered their rightful claim to restrict black women’s exertions to manual work.” So, too, Black steamboat workers in the very act of dancing and singing were projecting multiple significations of meaning: aesthetic, agential, and self-definitional. In short, they engaged in forms of resistance that embodied acts of self-reclamation. Hunter’s work shows how these early forms of body comportment, within a larger framework of African American work activity, functioned as important forms of resistance/agency during the early 1900s. She writes:
The importance of laboring bodies in the political economy is revealed . . . in the obsession of employers to express and contain the autonomy of workers in order to reap the maximum benefits of their exertions. The mere sight of African Americans, especially domestic workers, deriving pleasure and expressing symbolic liberation in dance halls by posing alternative meanings of bodily exertion seemed threatening to employers.  

Hunter’s discourse of “alternative meanings” resonates philosophically with Jenkins’ understanding of the dialectical character of agency and how individuals are capable of giving multiple (alternative) meanings to what they do.

Returning to the Black steamboat “rascals” who exercised agency along the Mississippi river, it is important to note that although each one of them engaged in very lucrative informal economic work activity and agency (from stealing, break-ins, selling stolen goods, passing counterfeit bills, purchasing various items from smugglers, and so on), they paid for this with their lives, not unlike Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser. Resistance must be seen along a continuum, whether it is breaking tools, slowing down work, or on the scale of a collectively organized revolt. The point here is that Black resistance, irrespective of its form of manifestation, had its dangerous and deadly consequences. Self-named rascals Madison Henderson, an enslaved Black, and three free Blacks, Amos Warrick, James Seward and Charles Brown, who diligently worked within the lucrative informal economy, were all hanged and beheaded once caught and separately tried for murder. “Charles Brown, James Seward, and Amos Warrick traveled . . . widely. With contacts in both free territory and the slave South, they were among the most feared of free black river workers.” Madison Henderson worked a variety
of Mississippi River trades. He was able to make significant networks because of his contacts with riverside society. Each of the men brought with him significant experiences of daring, resistance and agency. Steamboats allowed many Blacks the opportunity to run away from slavery, to live on the margins, and to fashion new identities fueled with daring and rebellion. After robbing a bank in St. Louis in which a white Bank clerk was murdered, whites became outraged. Buchanan interprets the murder of the Bank clerk within the framework of a form of resistant rascality:

> It is my view that the killings were a dramatic form of noncompliance and thus a form of resistance. The pursuit of money through violence was a perfectly understandable means of self-activity in the context of a slave system founded on this logic.

Buchanan also notes that during their final months each displayed a defiant sense of “resilience and independence.” Henderson wore very expensive hats during the trial. Embodying what the four men called “fashionable rascality,” and the values of working-class flamboyance, when they got money they used it “to transform subservient identities.”

As a feature of working-class consciousness, more generally, flamboyance might be understood as a form of resistance that is designed to offset the appearances of poverty, economic marginality, and existential derailment. Instead of an “extraspective” analysis of such behavior, Jenkins, consistent with his understanding of the anatomy of agency, suggests that such flamboyant behavior be examined from the perspective of the agent (the introspective sphere). He argues:
A particular Black man’s spending his meager funds on a luxury is not necessarily just an arbitrary and irrational mimicking of (over-idealized) wealthy people. It may also be an act that helps this man define and express a sense of dignity that is different from the external conditions forced on him. In the terms that we have been using, such an act at times stems from the bipolar recognition of what is (poverty) and what could be (material comfort), were his opportunities not unfairly blocked and manipulated by the system.  

The reader should note that it was not only Black men who participated within and reaped rewards from resisting the sphere of formal economic activity. Like Black men (both enslaved and free), many Black “rascal” women, as recently as the 1930s, engaged in a bipolar or dual recognition of what is real (namely, anti-Black racism, sexism, and economic scarcity and marginality) and what is imagined. Black women imagined, dialectically, what could be (economic independence, power, and self-aggrandizement). In short, they exercised agency within the sphere of the informal work economy (though work nevertheless) and were able to self-fashion their identities. As Sharon Harley notes, “Rejecting a work life characterized by low wages, poor work conditions, and frequent abusive treatment, a group of courageous, independent-minded women sought first and foremost the economic benefits of working in the largely black underworld.” One such Black woman was Odessa Madre, who was known as the Black female “Al Capone.” Although well-educated, Madre rejected the notion of the cult of true womanhood, rejected the “meager” pay that she may have gotten as a school teacher, and rejected those high “yella gals” who made her feel ostracized. As the Black queen of the informal underground in Washington, D.C., she had her hands in running numbers, selling
bootleg liquor, prostitution, gaming houses, and more. At one point it was estimated that she had an annual income of $100,000. Not only did Madre exercise Black womanist agency in a world of white racism, but she also resisted being confined within a male dominated and restrictive space of domesticity. Unlike the four Black male rascals, however, Madre was not executed, though she did spend time in prison and died penniless. The important point here is that a few Black women defined their roles/lived their bodies against the grain of societal expectations (including Black middle-class moral sensibilities) and made huge profits beyond the confines of wage labor. Keeping in mind the white myths about Black women, Madre disrupted those myths. She challenged the belief that Black women were born to serve, proving that such a belief was an ideological construction and not the result of so-called natural evolution. The reader should also keep in mind that whether one was a patron or a worker within the vernacular culture of the underground, such spaces provided Black women with an agential space within which they could “escape from the world of assembly lines, relief lines, and color lines.”

Within the context of the underground informal economic sphere, Black people danced and celebrated (as with the roustabouts on the steamships) against the backdrop of restrictive, structuring norms of “labor behavior.” Black people used their bodies to defy and transcend a work ethos that consisted of implicit norms of being constantly subordinate to the work itself. Antithetical to “a chaste, disciplined submissive, and hard-driving labor force” ethos, Black people conceptualized alternatives to this ethos, carving out a non-subjugating space within which they could cast off their identities as wage laborers. In short, the dancing Black body functioned as a form of re-narration. The dancing Black body, in its articulated movements, re-articulated what it meant to be Black over and above the confining spaces of wage labor, and over and beyond the stultifying effects of the white gaze. Theorizing the dancing Black body
within the context of a blues aesthetic, the “jook joint” (a site that was even deemed repulsive by
the Black bourgeoisie\textsuperscript{101}) became a cultural space within which a \textit{lived} metaphysics—a
heightened experience of transcendence within the midst of the everyday—was inextricably
linked to a \textit{lived} sense of profound \textit{embodiment}. Within this context, many Black bodies
resisted\textsuperscript{102} disciplinary regimes that confined them, discursively and non-discursively, to a
passive piece of property. Blacks asserted their “right to use their bodies beyond their needs for
subsistence alone.”\textsuperscript{103} Hunter:

\begin{quote}
The complex rhythmic structure and driving propulsive action endowed
participants with a feeling of metaphysical transcendence, of being able to
overcome or alter the obstacles of daily life. If the sung word was more powerful
than the spoken or written words, then the danced song was even more mighty
than singing alone. It was the symbiotic relationship between music and dance
that made their combination a complex and rich cultural form. Workers used them
for personal gratification, to reclaim their bodies from drudgery and exploitation,
and actually changed, momentarily, their existential condition.\textsuperscript{104}

“Hidden transcripts,” as mentioned earlier, are powerful means by which Black resistance
can be enacted. Robin Kelley writes:

\begin{quote}
Despite appearances of consent, oppressed groups challenge those in power by
constructing a “hidden transcript,” a dissident political culture that manifests itself
in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices. One
also finds the hidden transcript emerging “on stage” in spaces controlled by the powerful, though almost always in disguised forms. The submerged social and cultural worlds of oppressed people frequently surface in everyday forms of resistance—theft, footdragging, the destruction of property—or, more rarely, in open attacks on individuals, institutions, or symbols of domination. Together, the “hidden transcripts” that are created in aggrieved communities and expressed through culture and daily acts of resistance and survival constitute what [James C.] Scott calls “infrapolitics.”

Kelley, in stream with James C. Scott, describes the notion of “infrapolitics” as suggestive of infrared light that goes beyond the visible spectrum. Such “infrapolitical” forms of resistance were designed to go beyond the cognitive radar of those (whites) in power. “Infrapolitics” is indicative of the ability of Blacks to project one set of meanings while dialectically intending a completely different set. Keeping the reality of accommodation before us, many Blacks have engaged in micro-acts of resistance, incremental ways of disrupting and periodically shifting the table of power. Describing this process in the Jim Crow South, Kelley writes:

For southern blacks in the age of Jim Crow, politics was not separate from lived experience or the imagined world of what is possible. It was the many battles to roll back constraints, to exercise power over, or create space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominated their lives.106

Kelley argues that labor historians have failed to locate sites of working-class opposition that
were not defined as “public action and formal organization.”

For example, the act of wearing certain clothes might be seen as a process of “infrapolitics” to the extent that this form of actionable resistance was not necessarily the result of formal organization and contained a meaning contrary to public (white) perception. Like Madison Henderson’s preference for flamboyant dress, the idea of dressing in style for Jim Crow southern Blacks was a form of aesthetic resistance to the dominant image of Blacks as workers. Newly post-bellum Black women would wear starched dresses to redefine their bodies in ways contrary to their having been defined as field workers for so many years. Many whites thought that the idea of Black women “dressing up” went against the status of Black women who belonged to the working class. Seeing oneself and others ‘dressed up’ was important to constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work.

As has been shown on antebellum plantations, Blacks in the Jim Crow South also engaged in “infrapolitics” at the level of breaking machinery, industrial sabotage, work slowdowns, and feigning illness. Such acts of resistance—of re-conceptualizing the possible—within the workplace allowed Blacks the space to take a modicum of control over their labor. Such agential practices were also inter-subjectively shared between workers. For example, “Black women household workers in the urban South generally abided by a code of ethics or established a blacklist so they could collectively avoid employers who had proved unscrupulous, abusive, or unfair.”

North Carolina tobacco workers also cooperated in interdependent acts of resistance as a mode of solidarity:

When black women stemmers had trouble keeping up with the pace, black men responsible for supplying tobacco to them would pack the baskets more loosely
than usual. Among black women who operated stemmer machines, when one worker was ill, other women would take up the slack rather than call attention to her inability to handle her job, which could result in lost wages or dismissal.\textsuperscript{111}

And like Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, who stole his electricity from Monopolated Light & Power,\textsuperscript{112} Black folk who needed to, because their utilities had been shut off due to their inability to pay them, “stole fuel, water, and electricity: they appropriated coal, drew free electricity by tapping power lines with copper wires, illegally turned on water mains, and destroyed vacant homes for firewood.”\textsuperscript{113} Clearly, Blacks living in Jim Crowed spaces belied the imago of the shiftless and helpless Negro within oppressive work environments. They found viable “infrapolitical” modes of resistance, forms of agential opposition that have served Blacks since living on antebellum plantations.

Some Blacks more openly exercised their agency to work for themselves. To avoid sexual overtures and harassment, Black women were able to take control over the space within which their labor was performed, creating a more dignified and protected space. Even the idea of wearing a uniform to work—re-performing the Black female body—carried with it a certain stigma. “White employers often required black domestics to don uniforms, which reduced them to their identities as employees and ultimately signified ownership—black workers literally became the property of whoever owned the uniform.”\textsuperscript{114} Not wearing the company uniform, that is, dressing up in their own preferred clothes, Black women were able to defy the assumptions that they were live-in maids as opposed to day workers.\textsuperscript{115} In short, clothes can function as a powerful medium of semiosis through which one’s public persona gets reconfigured against the grain of white racist assumptions.
Living within the context of Jim Crow politics, Black people had to find ways of “transgressing” so-called white sacred norms that defined Black spaces of being and working. Large scale organized resistance ought to be seen as constituting a continuum of resistance, a continuum that shades into “infrapolitics.” After all, both are forms of agency that Black people have had to perform in order to make sense of themselves as agents within contexts of enslavement, oppression, dehumanization, and white *mythos*. As Kelley argues, “we need to recognize that infrapolitics and organized resistance are not two distinct realms of opposition to be studied separately and then compared; they are two sides of the same coin that make up the history of working-class self-activity.”

*Black people are indeed not what they seem.* Black working people have had to re-narrate themselves and re-negotiate their identities as workers and human beings, husbands and wives, laborers, wage earners, and people who have a need for their own cultural space of identity and pleasure. To understand Black people in relationship to their variegated labor history is to understand the humanity of Black people; it is to come to terms with Black resistance. It is to disrupt forms of knowledge where some have only seen an ersatz form of Black behavior - idle, dependent, and agent-less. To see Blacks through this imago is to distort what it means to be Black in America. As Jenkins concludes, “Any conception of African Americans that fails to see them as engaged in exercising their human agency—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—cannot hope to grasp what they are about.” Hence, to recognize the historical reality of Black resistance is to affirm dynamic forms of Black embodiment that belie the historical legacy of white lies.
Notes

2 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114.
4 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 140.
7 African-American philosopher Alain Locke knew the importance of scrapping white fictions. He notes: “The day of “aunties,” “uncles” and “mammies” is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on, and even the “Colonel” and “George” play barnstorm roles from which they escape with relief when the public spotlight is off. The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts.” See Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1997), 5.
8 The point here is that contrary to white racist myths, African’s were not forced into the “New World” context without their own religious, aesthetic, epistemological, and ontological articulations of their identities.
9 It is here that Caliban has undergone a critical moment of de-Calibanization, exercising his agential capacity to reject Prospero’s ideology.
10 Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest*, Translated by Richard Miller (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002), 61–62. I think that it is important to note that when Caliban refers to crushing the world of Prospero, he is not simply referring to the crushing and crumbling of the destructive imago. Rather, his resistance suggests the crushing and crumbling of white hegemony, systemic structural forms of white power, as well as white racist epistemic ways of constructing the Black body.
11 The reader will note that “passing for white” can/did function as a form of resistance. For example, take Walter White who was, from 1931 until his death in 1955, executive secretary of the NAACP. As an effort to gather empirical evidence of the horrible practice of lynching Black bodies so as to more forcefully make a case for creating federal laws against lynching, he would blend in with lynch mobs. Undetected as a Black man, he would use this evidence to strengthen the case for the NAACP’s anti-lynching efforts. I would like to thank John McClendon for discussing the importance of this example with me.
18 I use the term “re-cognition” because it conveys the epistemological and ontological dimensions of disrupting, of refusing to accept, the stereotypes projected from the white imaginary that have attempted to hold the Black body prisoner/frozen.
19 According to Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, “Counter-memory enabled the slaves and their descendants to construct a different kind of history, a different kind of knowledge, a different kind of body that is outside the control of the dominant history and knowledge production.” See “The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror.” 321.
20 Think here of Gabriel Prosser (c. 1775–1800) whose plan to launch a massive revolt by enslaved Blacks in Richmond, Va. failed because two enslaved Blacks did not want their masters to be killed. Also, think of Denmark Vesey (1767–1822). Vesey, who purchased his own freedom, managed to organize thousands of free and enslaved Blacks to revolt against Black enslavement. It is said to be the largest planned insurrection in America. It failed because of an enslaved Black who informed his “master” of the plan. Both Prosser and Vesey were executed. What
is ironic, of course, is that Prosser and Vesey were empowered with the same (or even greater) burning desire for freedom that many Americans desired during the American Revolution.


26 The sense of “workable” and “unworkable” explicitly moves one away from a correspondence of theory of truth to a language steeped in a pragmatist orientation where the emphasis is placed upon whether or not a particular narrative actually works or not. Whether or not it works depends upon various presuppositions, aims, values, norms, etc. Indeed, the criterion of what is workable and unworkable is linked to a certain level of comprehension regarding how one understands one’s identity, how that identity has been damaged, uplifted, etc. That a certain narrative is workable dispenses with the conception of a fixed identity. Moreover, it also dispenses with a fixed goal. While I might find a particular narrative workable, this does not mean that that narrative is forever fixed qua meta-narrative goal. Sure, there is a sense in which it has a structure within which I make decisions, critical judgments, and within which I critique anti-Black narratives, but the goal is not fixed, that is, as if there is a single and unchangeable telos that directs my life. In short, the framework can shift and accommodate other elements, which then become part of a narrative gravitational core, but, again, not a meta-narrative with a fixed end.

27 I would like to thank philosopher Clevis Headley for his insights regarding the relationship between identity and narrative as a philosophical approach that avoids the problems associated with conceptualizing identity as a fixed entity having a one-to-one correspondence to a “true” representation.


29 Birt, “Blackness and the Quest for Authenticity,” 270.

30 Birt, “Blackness and the Quest for Authenticity,” 270.

31 The content of that existential project has indeed been shaped through acts of resistance and accommodation. It has involved solidarity and conflict. What is important to note, however, is that the content of that existential project is protean; it involves and should continue to involve a continual hermeneutic reassessment of who and what Black identity means and what the social, political, cultural, and existential implications are. Black homogeneity does not and should not define the content of that lived project. And while heterogeneity is important to our survival, a profound sense of inclusive solidarity should not be feared. Given the multiplicity of audible voices in our history—a history that has been shaped by contending political philosophies, power struggles, deeply conflicting recommendations for political praxis, aesthetic clashes concerning how best to represent the Black body, cultural difference, color, class, sex, religious, and gender complexities—does not mean that we should forget what we have in common and abandon ourselves to a “postmodern playground,” to use philosopher Susan Bordo’s turn of phrase. Of course, it is not always self-evident what we have in common. Like a single life, there are aspects of that lived experience that can be centered or marginalized depending upon the plot. But this does not mean that we create narrative plots willy-nilly. Black bodies, after all, did historically suffer, sustain tremendous physical and psychological pain, and were subject to centuries of oppression. This is a major experience of profound narrative implications. Genealogically, we are linked to that history. Of course, as we re-narrate that history, as we defined ourselves through a collective memory of that history, as we penetrate and expand its meaning, we are in turn expanded by it. The pulling together of diverse aspects of that history need not lead to a Black meta-narrative that is oppressive and hegemonic. But who says that we can’t struggle in the name of our Blackness? This, after all, need not mean that we struggle in the name of a Black racial essence, or without any cognizance of our class, sex, and gender differences. Of course, nor does this mean that we should struggle in the name of an abstract “proletarian” identity at the exclusion of how our “raciated” and gendered identities impact, inter-penetrate our identities as workers. Contrary to Sartre’s observations in “Black Orpheus,” although he is referring to the Negritude Movement, Blackness need not function as an antithesis, a mere antithetical value to white supremacy, the resolution of which is to be achieved in the realization of a race-less society. Black people, on my view, do not represent a minor moment of a larger dialectical progression. The rejection of the category of race does not entail the rejection of an identity interpreted through the historical struggle and affirmation of our dark bodies. To think that Black people will only
one aspect of their being-in-the-world smacks of a misguided conception of identity politics. To discursively and non-discursively embody our Blackness as an existential project is not an enclosed limit, but a source of expansion.

32 bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” in The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-constructing a Postmodern World, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 122. Hooks’ emphasis upon Black identity as being constituted in the experience of exile and struggle points to what that identity can become. The history points beyond itself to “strands of possibility,” as opposed to a new essence. I would like to thank philosopher Fred Evans for this last point.

33 African-American philosopher Kal Alston does warn against the way in which “Black is beautiful” can function as a site of capitalist interest. She writes: “Certainly in the industrialized West, hegemonic power structures are fantastically adept at converting deep expressions of self-love and valuing into banal and commodified presence in the market place: for example, the challenge of the Panthers to American history converted into the sales of Afro-sheen, dashikis, and distorted nostalgia for ‘Motherland.’ Those new commercial values do not necessarily translate into social/ethical value.” See “Knowing Blackness, Becoming Blackness, Valuing Blackness,” in White on White / Black on Black, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 305.

34 For more on the conceptualization of the “oracle voice” as opposed to an interplay of voices, see Fred Evans, Psychology & Nihilism: A Genealogical Critique of the Computational Model of Mind (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993).


36 This is by no means to suggest that behavioral or mechanistic views of human behavior are racist.

37 Jenkins, Turning Corners, 7.

38 The reader will note that Jenkins does not philosophically engage in a discussion of the ontological status of intention. For example, as a mental act (“I intend to do x”), how does Jenkins understand the ontological and epistemological status of first-person psychological attitudes? Given the importance that he attributes to the subjective sphere, it would follow that first-person psychological attitudes are not reducible to third-person psychological descriptions. This reductionism is a fundamental philosophical move of Skinnerian behaviorism and one that is supported by traditional logical empiricists. My point is that it would be interesting to get a sense of how Jenkins conceptualizes his form of humanism, aspects of which I find philosophically significant, within the context of a broader discussion of some of the salient philosophical issues in the philosophy of mind.

39 Jenkins, Turning Corners, 9.

40 Jenkins, Turning Corners, 9.


43 Jenkins, Turning Corners, 10.

44 Jenkins, Turning Corners, 16.

45 Although the examples of resistance that I explore in this chapter are significant and germane to my overall philosophical efforts, Black resistance in the U.S. alone is an incredibly complex and extensive history. One need only think of the multitude of incredible efforts by individuals, institutions, organizations, and mass movements. Black resistance in the US has been a model that has shaped the efforts and strategies of Black people throughout the Diaspora and beyond. The following, though in no particular order, does not even pretend to come close, but the acknowledgement is consistent with the African-American tradition of giving credit where it is due: the Black bodies that threw themselves overboard rather than remain captured, the Amistad Mutiny, Celia, Jupiter Hammon, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, the Underground Railroad, Sojourner Truth, Thomas N. Baker, Gilbert H. Jones, Charles L. Hill, W.E.B. Du Bois, the American Negro academy, William Scarborough, Carter G. Woodson, Anna Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, David Walker, Marcus Garvey, J. Max Barber, Booker T. Washington, Ida Bell Wells-Barnett, Dred Scott, Richard Allen, Ralph Bunche, Crispus Attucks, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, Paul Robeson, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, Asa Philip Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), the Black Arts Movement (BAM), the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, the Civil Rights Movement, Thurgood Marshall, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Kenneth and Mamie Clark, the Black Power Movement, Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam, the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Fannie Lou Hamer, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Student Nonviolent Coordinating
Committee (SNCC), the Deacons for Defense, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Wallace Thurman, John Hope Franklin, Toni Morrison, and others.

46 Many of these examples, or so I would argue, can also be theorized as acts of resistance within our contemporary moment. Besides African American modalities of dance, music, dress, expressive language, particularly in terms of coded language, more work needs to be explored in terms of how the informal economy functions as a site of resistance for those who have been economically marginalized.

47 It is important to note that although social historians have provided many historical descriptions of Black resistance vis-à-vis work activity (the “who did what when”), they have left under-theorized a conception of Black resistance and agency.

48 I hyphenate “existence” here in order to emphasize the rich etymological sense of “standing outside of oneself” (ex= out of, from + sistere=to stand). In this way, to exist suggests the sense in which we are not bound by our circumstances.


52 White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* 77.


54 White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* 79.


56 White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* 80.


58 White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* 79.


60 White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* 80.

61 White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* 76–77. Also, the reader should not forget the efforts of Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner.


66 Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, xi.

67 Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, xi.

68 Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 5.

69 Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 5.

70 Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 32.


76 Jenkins, *Turning Corners*, 35.

The reader will note that the Black body, through the modality of dance, is not only resisting the imago, but is also resisting the dehumanizing conditions of capitalism.  


Buchanan, “Rascals on the Antebellum Mississippi,” 801.

Buchanan, “Rascals on the Antebellum Mississippi,” 806.

Buchanan, “Rascals on the Antebellum Mississippi,” 798.


The cult of true womanhood was a nineteenth-century phenomenon that consisted of living according to certain values within the context of middle and upper class white women’s lives. Such women were expected to embody piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. My sense is that white working class women, like Black working class women, would have been excluded from this form of life. Nevertheless, this did not mean that Madre, as well as white working class women, were prohibited from striving to embody such values and ideals. Regarding Black women and the cult of true womanhood, Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, note: “From its inception, the cult [of true womanhood] was essentially a white-only club, but this fact did not necessarily decrease its influence on black women, whether they fruitlessly sought entrance to its precincts, battled against its proscriptions, or protested against its efforts to dismiss their bodies as irretrievably other. Even as the cult waned in the early twentieth century, it still exerted a strong force on African American women either as a model of the demurely covered body or as a challenge to efforts to explore the sexuality of (to uncover) the black female body.” See Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, “Introduction,” in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women* eds. Michael Bennett and Vanessa D, Dickerson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 6.


“Womanist” or “womanism” describes a Black woman who is characterized as outrageous, audacious, and courageous.


Hence, not only were whites invested in controlling and defining the resistant Black body, but so were middle class Blacks. Hunter notes: “The controversy over dancing occurred as a modern black bourgeoisie asserted its claims to define and direct racial progress. The black elite sought to impose its own values and standards on the masses, to obliterate plebian cultural expressions that, in its view, prolonged the degradation of the race. While the black elite asserted its paternalism through the language of morality, law and order, and the Protestant work ethic, the white elite exercised its powerful and repressive will through the mechanisms of state power as well as through language. White Southerners had even more at stake in controlling black leisure and dancing, since they continued to make claims for reaping the benefits of black labor power long after African Americans had been divested as literal commodities.” See Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 186
The reader should also keep in mind that every dancing Black body was/is not necessarily a case of a *resisting* Black body. Like singing the blues, playing jazz, dancing has its aesthetic dimensions that some may appreciate precisely for that reason alone.


Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South.” *Journal of American History*, 80 (June), 1993, 77.

Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 78.

Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 83.

White, *Arn’t I A Woman?* 173.

Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 86.

Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 89.

Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 90.


Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 90.

Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 99.

Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 99.

Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem,’” 111.

Chapter VI

Exposing the *Serious* World of Whiteness through
Frederick Douglass’s Autobiographical Reflections

Trained from the cradle up, to think and feel that their masters are superior, and invested with a sort of sacredness, there are few [enslaved Blacks] who can outgrow or rise above the control which that sentiment exercises.

—Frederick Douglass

Being “highly pigmented,” as the sociologists say, it was our Negro “misfortune” to be caught up associatively in the negative side of this basic dualism of the white folk mind, and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience and consciousness.

—Ralph Ellison

Blacks are often confronted, in American life, with such devastating examples of the white descent from dignity; devastating not only because of the enormity of white pretensions, but because this swift and graceless descent would seem to indicate that white people have no principles whatever.

—James Baldwin

Through the lens of his *lived* embodied experience of white oppression, Frederick Douglass’s socio-politically and existentially rich autobiographical narratives, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, not only expose the discursive and non-discursive impact of whiteness upon the Black body, but expose the *perniciousness of the ideology of whiteness to whites themselves*. To get a sense of the Black body as undergoing processes of white racist disciplinary control, in this chapter I will discuss how the Black body was subjected to what I call a “technology of docility” during the Middle Passage, a modality of shaping the dark body to internalize its being as fixed. Of course, this technology of docility is inextricably linked to the American slave system’s bourgeois material interests and investment in methods of material productivity.¹ Continuing with this theme of racist disciplinary control, I will show how the Black body became marked and mapped...
by various “authoritative” voices (philosophical, scientific) that functioned to discipline the
Black body even further. These “authoritative” voices are ideological constructions that worked
to sustain the serious world of whiteness. Hence, rather than immediately focusing on
Douglass’s lived experience of the serious world of whiteness, and how he challenges this
serious world, my larger aim is to provide a sketch of the Middle Passage and a delineation of
some of the powerful philosophical and scientific discourses “justifying” the “inferiority” of
Black bodies. In other words, this broader framework reveals that the oppressive social reality
that Douglass inherited was always already in the process of being constructed to give the
appearance of necessity, and, hence, perpetuate the illusion that racist values are not existentially
founded, but ontologically “given.”

This propaedeutic move to consider the process of white mystification before turning to
Douglass’ lived experience of white oppression is similar in spirit to The Second Sex where
Beauvoir takes the reader on a historical, scientific, and philosophical journey, in volume one,
revealing how women have become who they are through the discursive practices of men. In
conceptualizing the serious world of whiteness, I draw from what Simone de Beauvoir terms, in
The Ethics of Ambiguity, “the serious man.” I argue that whiteness is fundamentally predicated
upon a world within which whites understand their being white (and the ethical, aesthetic, and
legal benefits that accrue) as an “unconditioned” state of being. On this score, acts of performing
whiteness are interpreted both as forms of flight from agency or alternative ways of
conceptualizing or narrating one’s being-in-the-world and as ways that whites construct
themselves as subjects vis-à-vis those (in this case, Black bodies) who are thereby constructed as
“things.” I will also draw from Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, pointing to some insightful parallels
between how she conceptualizes women under androcentric hegemony and the ways in which the Black body is denigrated under white hegemony. Important here is the fact that Beauvoir was influenced by the phenomenological and politico-praxic work of Black novelist Richard Wright.\(^2\) The issue that immediately arises is the relevance of Beauvoir’s work to understanding Douglass’ existential situation and, indeed, its relevance to the Black experience, more generally.

It is here that the rich historical and interpretative insights of philosopher Margaret A. Simons’ work, who takes up Paul Gilroy’s challenge to read Wright intertextually with Beauvoir, demonstrates that Beauvoir is philosophically indebted to Black novelist Richard Wright. Hence, I will at times read Douglass’ existential situatedness through the philosophical lens of Beauvoir, who was reading sexism on the model of racism as theorized by Wright.

Simons’ interpretation of Beauvoir demonstrates how Wright was an important figure who had an impact on moving Beauvoir from an exclusive concern with metaphysical problems to issues involving concrete political concerns. Simons aims to “uncover evidence of Wright’s influence on . . . Beauvoir’s philosophy, specifically in providing her with a theory of racial oppression and liberation that she utilized as a model in constructing the theoretical foundations of radical feminism in The Second Sex.”\(^3\) In America Day by Day, Beauvoir describes how Wright impacted the development of her thinking about race, mythopoetic images of Blacks that satisfy the needs of whites, and Black self-definitional agency as a means toward socio-political praxis. “The narrative portrays Wright as Beauvoir’s teacher,” as Simons writes, “guiding her understanding of race as a social construct.”\(^4\) Pointing to three major conceptual influences on Beauvoir, Simons argues:
Wright, as the intellectual heir to W. E. B. DuBois, introduces Beauvoir to the concept of the “double consciousness” of blacks under racism, which serves as a model for Beauvoir’s concept of woman as the Other in *The Second Sex*. Wright’s phenomenological descriptions of black experience of oppression provide a methodological alternative to both [Gunnar] Myrdal’s objectifying social science methodology and the economic reductionism of Marxist orthodoxy. Finally, Wright’s rejection of white-defined essentialist views of racial difference allied with an affirmation of the salience of race in the lived experience of blacks under oppression, and its strategic usefulness when defined by blacks in the interests of liberation, provide Beauvoir with a model for an anti-essentialist but militant liberation politics.¹⁵

In *The Second Sex* where Beauvoir discusses how women have come to accept a form of epistemic violence, coming to know themselves as inferior, she references Wright’s work. Beauvoir writes:

> What Bigger Thomas, in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, feels with bitterness at the dawn of his life is this definitive inferiority, this accursed alterity, which is written in the color of his skin: he sees airplanes flying by and he knows that because he is black the sky is forbidden to him. Because she is a woman, the little girl knows that she is forbidden the sea and the polar regions, a thousand adventures, a thousand joys.⁶
As Simons points out, Beauvoir, when describing difficulties confronted by young girls under the metanarrative voice of androcentricity, relies on an analogy with racism. Pointing to the psychological phenomenon of young girls coming to discover that their “inferiority” is deemed an essential property, Beauvoir writes:

It is a strange experience for whoever regards [herself] as the One to be revealed to [herself] as otherness, alterity. This is what happens to the little girl when, during her apprenticeship for life in the world, she grasps what it means to be a woman therein. The sphere to which she belongs is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated, by the male universe . . . . This situation is not unique. The American Negroes know it, being partially integrated in a civilization that nevertheless regards them as constituting an inferior caste.  

At this juncture, I will provide a larger historical framework within which to conceptualize the white epistemic regime into which Douglass was born and through which his “Black” body (and the “Black” body, more generally) was discursively and non-discursively marked.

**The Middle Passage**

In the name of early European capitalist modes of production, its cultural assumptions, and its elaborate moral, scientific, and philosophical rationalizations, African bodies were torn from their land, family ties were severed, and their bodies were confiscated and brutalized.  

This
began the physical process of becoming “Black” qua inferior, bestial, animal-like. The point is that the subjugation of African bodies for material profit is inextricably tied to its “representation and regulation in discursive fields.”

During the triangular trade of human flesh, Africans (Ashantis, Mandingoes, Ibos, Fulanis, and others) were subjected to tight forms of spatialization. Although Michel Foucault did not have Black bodies in mind, I would agree where he says that “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space.” The African body, on this score, was subjected to white power relations that seized it, that invested in it, marked it, tortured it, and trained it to carry out various tasks, to perform various rituals and to emit certain signs.

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf notes that “the history of the middle passage and slavery is a history of endless assaults on bodies; of bodies forcibly subjected, in order to be transformed into productive and reproductive bodies,” but also to be transformed into subhuman animals and hyper-sexual savages. The Middle Passage was itself a regime of “truth,” a regime that involved the production of the Black body’s “truth” as chattel, bodies to be herded into suffocating spaces of confinement. This was not an issue of how many people could be comfortably accommodated, but how many things, owned property, could be stuffed into spaces of confinement. The Middle Passage, with its pernicious by-product of grammar (“breeder,” “chattel,” etc.), helped to shape Africans into “objects.”

The reader will note that there is nothing ontologically mutually exclusive about Africans and Europeans. Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, I do not read the self-Other problem as ontological, that is, that conflict must inevitably emerge between the self and the Other in virtue of the fact that one solipsistic consciousness is seen as confronting another solipsistic consciousness, both engaged in a mutual dance of sadism and masochism. This does not deny the phenomenon of
xenophobia. However, even here, fear of Others, or suspicion of Others, presupposes some type of differential social grouping such that one inhabits a (non-solipsistic) social space from within which another, who properly does not have a social standing within that same social group, is “seen” as Other. Even within the same social group, the self is certainly purchased as a result of some form of differentiation and the recognition of difference. This differentiation and the recognition of difference, however, need not take the specific form of a mutual attempt to hold the other in my gaze as the other attempts to hold me in his/her gaze, a dynamic process resulting in violent conflict.

With regard to whiteness, my view is that the (white) self and (Black) Other problem is socio-historically contingent in its origin. The Black body became the very site of evil. Hence, as Fanon notes, “Jean-Paul Sartre has forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.” The Black does not simply suffer on the basis of a self-Other conflict. Indeed, it is a problem created through violent acts that are linked to material forces which are further linked to exclusionary tactics that call into question the existential, ontological, aesthetic, and cultural legitimacy of Black people. Moreover, on my view, the white gaze/“look” must be historicized within this context in order to grasp its capacity to pose a violent threat to Black subjectivity. As Charles Johnson notes:

The experience of the black-as-body becomes, not merely a Self-Other conflict, nor simply Hegel’s torturous Master-Slave dialectic, but a variation on both these conditions, intensified by the particularity of the body’s appearance as black, as “stained,” [and] lacking interiority.
Moreover, there was nothing *ontologically problematic* about the epidermis of Africans that would have led to the “historical necessity” of their enslavement/colonization. It is not the color of the epidermis that founds values. Rather, the “Blackness” of African bodies vis-à-vis white bodies assumed the historical character that they did (as “evil,” as “stained”) because white European values were conferred upon both groups. On my view, there must first exist some material-cum-axiological/epistemological framework that “justifies” the valorization and sovereignty of whiteness, and, by extension, the denigration of Blackness. The so-called ontology of racial differences is actually a socio-historical ontology of differences, though deployed as “natural” through an ideology of whiteness. Creating such differences as “natural” functions to conceal the reactive-value creating hegemony of whites. In other words, whites are able to assess the “differences” between themselves and Blacks based upon “objective” criteria that is believed to be independent of anything that they do, as existing outside of their sphere of responsibility. What in reality has become a phantasmatically constructed African body, a fantasized object, instead is “seen” by whites as *given*, and thus not the result of any processes of rationalization, projection, ejection, or denial on the part of themselves. Hence, whites are able to mask or deny their dependency upon the fabrication of the phantasmatic object. As Bibi Bakare-Yusuf also notes, referencing the work of Michael Taussig, the white enslaver and victimizer desperately “needs the victim to create truth, objectifying fantasy in the discourse of the other.”¹⁷

Constructing the Middle Passage as a space of rupture and trauma, Spillers notes:

Those African persons in the “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for
undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all. Inasmuch as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally “unmade,” thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that “exposed” their destinies to an unknown course.\textsuperscript{18}

One might say that the African was made into the “unmade.” If one thinks of subjectivity as a transversal relationship constituted through familiar and familial connections, then the Middle Passage was designed to throw into disarray any sense of subjectivity and destroy any sense of cultural teleology. The objective was to create a culture-less \textit{thing}, an object that was defined within the same context as other commodities. In this way, the very process of positioning Black bodies within the slave ship functioned as a disciplinary technique to produce an obedient, \textit{docile} Black body. This technology of docility had both the effect of fashioning a strong work force, fashioning Black bodies whose telos it was to labor, but it also reinforced the status of the enslaver as an active force, as a “driver” of animal flesh.

As the human face of the enslaver was reinforced through his/her dominion over the African body qua animal of the field, working in tandem with the power to \textit{name} the African, the humanity of the African was placed under constant erasure. Chained together like subhuman animals, the African body, as early as the Middle Passage, was being marked and defined, disciplined to begin the process of “seeing” itself as thing-like, of undergoing the
phenomenological process of returning to itself as that which is not free, but owned by another. The process was not simply to enforce the cruel practices of physical subjugation, but to get the enslaved to *appear* to him/herself as an object,¹⁹ to embody and instantiate those projections created by white racists themselves. Hence, the subjection of Africans was also an act of de-subjectification.²⁰

The captured African in the eyes of the enslaver became a tool, devoid of reason, devoid of human feeling, and devoid of will. The “will of the captured” was the will of the white captor. Soon, this African body would become subjected to white legalese that sanctioned its status as chattel. Whiteness as law vis-à-vis the African body would become whiteness as *divine* law and whiteness as the law of destiny, theology and evolutionary science intertwining to create an “objective” discourse designed to mask the horrors perpetrated upon other human beings by white enslavers. Keep in mind that it was not the objective of enslavers to kill the enslaved, though millions of Africans died en route to the “New World” due to the diseased conditions of the enslaver ships, to say nothing of those Africans who threw themselves overboard,²¹ who would rather die than to be enslaved or eaten²² by the ghost-like strangers. As Bibi Bakare-Yusuf notes:

> To destroy the body in pain would have been tantamount to economic and ideological suicide. For how could the slave system perpetuate itself if the enslaved population was destroyed? The violent subjection of the slaves was a way of transforming their bodies into an entity that could produce and reproduce the property necessary for accumulating wealth.”²³
Think of the dissonance, the doubleness, as the African body was returned to itself as an unfamiliar thing chained deep down in the belly of slave ships, undergoing processes of redefinition by its brutal treatment, its spatial confinement. Spillers notes:

Everywhere in the descriptive document, we are stunned by the simultaneity of disparate items in a grammatical series: “Slave” appears in the same context with beasts of burden, all and any animal(s), various livestock, and a virtual endless profusion of domestic content from the culinary item to the book.\(^{24}\)

Within the framework of the equation (or regulatory and disciplinary economy) where humans become reduced to cargo, gender differentiation is redefined in terms of quantity and spatiality. Spillers says, “The female in ‘Middle Passage,’ as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies ‘less room’ in a directly translatable money economy.”\(^{25}\) The dispassionate reduction of Africans to cargo or merchandise is illustrated in Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding The Ghosts*, which is a powerful fictional narration of an event that actually took place in 1781. For example, Captain Cunningham, who is in charge of the *Zong*, which is heading back to England, makes the purely calculative decision to throw 131 physically ill Africans (men, women, and children) into the ocean to die. He calculates that if he throws about a third of the infirm Africans overboard he will earn a profit from the remaining Africans who are not (as yet) sick. Cunningham asks his crew, “Are we to make a loss or a profit?”\(^{26}\) Although his crew initially hesitates, with his first mate Kelsal finding the magnitude of his Captain’s plan difficult to absorb, they decide that it is profit that they desire. Referring to the enslaved Africans as “cargo,” they begin to throw them
overboard. As men, women, and children were thrown into the ocean, “Captain Cunningham marked the strokes in his ledger and nodded with satisfaction.”27 As the children were thrown overboard, for profit, anger and heartrending screams came from the deck below:

Mothers shouted to children to show the evil men that they were not sick but healthy; to struggle and scream. Men banged their chains on the decks and shouted in Yoruba, Ewe, Ibo, Fanti, Ashanti, Mandingo, Fetu, Foulah, at the crew to leave the children and take them instead. Mothers pulled out their hair, fell into dead faints, wished for death to take them now, now, now, since life could never mean a thing after this. And cried with dry eyes and hardly a breath left in them.28

The reader will note the contrast between Captain Cunningham who marks in his ledger and nods with satisfaction, as if he were tallying up discarded inanimate objects, and the lived African bodies that wailed with sorrow, angst, pain, horror, and powerlessness. These bodies were not just sites of white re-presentations or discursive distortions, but sites of powerful trauma, torn flesh, broken hearts, and psychological madness.

Further illustrating Foucault’s understanding that discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space, Africans were packed into very tight spaces on slave ships. On the slave ship Pongas, for example, 250 women, many of whom were pregnant, were forced into a space of 16 by 18 feet. Feminist and cultural theorist bell hooks writes:
The women who survived the initial stages of pregnancy gave birth aboard the ship with their bodies exposed to either the scorching sun or the freezing cold. The number of black women who died during childbirth or the number of stillborn children will never be known. Black women with children on board the slave ships were ridiculed, mocked, and treated contemptuously by the slaver crew. Often the slavers brutalized children to watch the anguish of their mothers.\textsuperscript{29}

An Africa slave trader tells of 108 boys and girls who were packed into a small hold:

I returned on board to aid in stowing [on the slave ship] one hundred and eight boys and girls, the eldest of whom did not exceed fifteen years [old]. As I crawled between decks, I confess I could not imagine how this little army was to be packed or draw breath in a hold but twenty-two inches high.\textsuperscript{30}

Molefi Asante captures the terror of the Middle Passage where he writes:

Imagine crossing the ocean aboard a small ship made to hold 200 people but packed with 1,000 weeping and crying men, women, and children. Each African was forced to fit into a space no more than 55.9 centimeters (22 inches) high, roughly the height of a single gym locker, and 61 centimeters (24 inches) wide, scarcely an arm’s length. There were no lights aboard the ships, little food, and no toilet facilities.\textsuperscript{31}
The reader should keep in mind that the trip lasted 35 to 90 days, contingent upon the weather. Moreover, the decks where Blacks were held were infested with lice, fleas and rats. Diseased, dead, and dying, Black bodies were all chained together. My point here is that the sheer non-discursive confinement of Black bodies/selves within these tight spaces, filled with the putrid smell of death, sickness, blood, urine and feces, was an exercise in discipline. The “Black body” vis-à-vis the European imaginary was in the process of being created and produced, a docile and self-hating body. On this score, whiteness, as a site of concentrated power, is productive. As Foucault maintains:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.32

**Myth Making and the Preservation of White Normativity**

Upon their arrival in the New World, Black people were sold from auction blocks, defined and treated like chattel. Standing naked on the auction block, witnessed by both white men and white women, the Black body was gazed upon and checked and assessed like a valued animal whose sole function was to be fit to work the land. This form of examination and the objectifying dimensions of the white gaze are part of the overall function of the white episteme. The white gazer “sees” what he/she is not. It is not that the physiology of the eye does not send proper
neurological and chemical signals. Rather, between the white “seer” and the Black “seen” or the Black “unseen,” there is an invisible/imperceptible “construction” that occurs simultaneously with the process of white gazing. This construction does not involve “seeing” the dark body and then extrapolating that it is inferior. The drama and spectacle of the auction itself, the commodity exchange dynamics of the context, the bidding, the physical turning of the naked bodies, checking the teeth, the asymmetrical power relations embedded within the physical context of separating the gazers from the gazed upon, the unquestioned power to separate children from their parents, the ideological norms informing the white self as all seeing and all knowing, forms the larger unthematised socio-visual epistemology that disallows for any slippage between “seeing” and “knowing,” at least with respect to the enslaved African body.

In The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Related by Herself, from which I will draw upon later, Prince describes the process of being sold from an auction block as involving a white ritual performance in terms of which the black body, in this case, her Black female body, became discursively marked as that which was merely usable, expendable, and sexually exploitable. At the auction block, for example, Mary Prince notes, “I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words—as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts.”

Gazing upon the Black naked body, the white gazer assumes the position of knowing subject. The Black naked body becomes the gazed upon known object. Within the white buyers’ racist saturated field of visibility, the Black does not appear as fully human. The entire economic, cultural, epistemological, and anthropological apparatus of white domination
collapses into a narrow aperture through which the Black body and the white body emerge as
taxonomic differences. Hence, the Black body became a flesh and blood text upon which whites
could project all of their fears, desires, and fantasies without the agony of guilt. The exoticizing
of the Black body involved the process of scripting it as bestial and sexually promiscuous. It is
through the creation of the Black phantasmatic object that whites are able to conceal their
historical practices that have created the phantasmatic object. The Black as inferior, ugly, bestial
are ejecta, that is, negative material thrown out from the white body onto the Black body. To
justify and sustain the enslavement of Blacks, one only need manufacture the Black body as an
“objective state of affairs.”

Theorizing whiteness in ways that are consistent with what I take to be ideology
exposure, Crispin Sartwell notes:

Oppression is released by the oppressor into an “objective” realm, where it is not
anyone’s doing in particular, but just a feature of the external facts. While the
oppressed person takes it in, the oppressor eliminates it, gets rid of it, makes it a
feature of objective conditions, blames the victim, or blames the economic
situation, or simply denies its existence.\footnote{35}

Although I will say more about this shortly, Sartwell understands, and I think correctly, that
whites have been able to deal effectively with their white lies regarding themselves and the
Black body in terms of what he terms “ejected asceticism.”\footnote{36} On this score, whites created/create
fantasies regarding the Black body as sullen and immoral so as to stabilize, dialectically, their
own fantasized identity as clean and moral. Whites project “their hate [of Blacks and other non-whites] into the “objective” realm of laws and institutions (and “values” and “sciences”) and then [fail] to experience themselves as haters. This movement into the objective displays the ghost-white self writ large.” What becomes clear is that not only is the Black a ghost, a fantasy, but the white is also a ghost, a fantasy. What we have is the unique case of a “white spook” manufacturing a “Black spook.” As Sartwell notes, “Whiteness is the color of ghosts.”

With the advent of nineteenth century white racist biological theories, the Black body was further discursively marked and produced. Whites were fascinated by the alleged large and “exotic” genitalia of Black people. The objective was to confirm “scientific truths” both about the (“normative”) white body and (“deviant” and ape-like) Black body. Again, such “truths” about white and Black bodies were deemed discovered, not constructed. White power networks, consisting of norms, knowledge-claims, etc., helped to produce the myth of the “Negro rapist.” In 1903, for example, Dr. William Lee Howard argued that Negro males attack innocent white women because of “racial instincts that are about as amenable to ethical culture as is the inherent odor of the race.” The physiological basis of the problem of the “Negro rapist” had to do with the enormous size of his penis and that therefore “the African’s birthright was ‘sexual madness and excess.’” Indeed, so it was maintained, the Negroes, by their very nature, are morally retrogressive, physically dirty (a trope of Blackness), and morally unclean. In 1900, Charles Carroll supported the pre-Adamite beliefs of Dr. Samuel Cartwright by describing the Negro as an ape and the actual “tempter of Eve.” Stuart Hall notes:
The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said’s “Orientalist” sense, were we constructed as different and other within categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as “Other.” Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet “power/knowledge.”

The sciences of physiognomy and phrenology, with their emphasis on the prognathous jaw of Negroes, was said to clearly support the primitive nature of African people. Examining the so-called Negro anatomy, the French physician Pruner-Bey observed:

The intestinal mucus is very thick, viscid, and fatty in appearance. All the abdominal glands are of large size, especially the liver and the supra renal capsules; a venous hyperaemia seems the ordinary condition of these organs. The position of the bladder is higher than in the European. I find the seminal vesicles very large, always gorged with a turbid liquid of a slightly greyish colour, even in cases where the autopsy took place shortly after death. The penis is always of unusually large size, and I found in all bodies a small conical gland on each side at the base of the fraenum.
The Black body was also believed to be a site of disease, and, hence, a site of avoidance. Again, William Lee Howard argued: “There is every prospect of checking and reducing these diseases in the white race, if the race is socially—in every aspect of the term—quarantined from the African.” In addition, Blacks were believed to be prone to moral and sexual retrogression. Such beliefs where held to be true by white evolutionary theorists. Dr. Paul B. Barringer, for example, drew from the Darwinian stress on heredity. According to Fredrickson, Barringer argued:

The inborn characteristics of the Negro had been formed by natural selection during “ages of degradation” in Africa and his savage traits could not have been altered in any significant way by a mere two centuries of proximity to Caucasian civilization in America.

Also theorizing within a Darwinian framework, the historian Joseph A. Tillinghast states: “The Negro character had been formed in Africa, a region which supposedly showed an uninterrupted history of stagnation, inefficiency, ignorance, cannibalism, sexual licence, and superstition.” Of course, given the complexity of Egyptian culture, it was imperative to separate Egypt from Africa. Through craniological investigations, the Egyptian skull was found to differ from that of the Negro, providing the needed rationalization for the so-called immutable primitive culture of Negroes. Dr Samuel George Morton, by 1840, “was confident that the brains of the five races he had classified (Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, [Native] American, and Negro) were successively smaller, thereby proving the general superiority in intelligence (and hence civilization) of the
Furthermore, speaking to the American Social Science Association in 1899, Walter F. Willcox maintained “that the liability of an American Negro to commit crime is several times as great as the liability of the whites.” As has been shown, constructing the Black body involved the deployment of biological, phrenological, physiological, and evolutionary “truths” designed to regulate and discipline the Black body, stigmatizing the Black body with certain predictable patterns of hidden “truths” such as uncontrollable sexual and criminal habits. In this way, the white gaze came to “see” the “truth” of its own “superiority,” presumed unencumbered by prejudices. In doing so, however, the alterity of Black people was eradicated.

Adding to the list of “authoritative” discourses regarding the inferiority of the Black body were those made by prominent European philosophers and intellectuals. With Emmanuel Levinas, I think that it is plausible to argue that “Western philosophy [at least with Hume, Kant, Hegel, et al] coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, in manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity.” In his “Of National Characters,” David Hume maintains:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negro as a man of learning; but ‘tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.
What is interesting is that Hume appears willing to “commit to the flames” any views that challenge his view regarding the superiority of whites over non-whites. It is not true as some argue that Hume was simply speculating out of sheer ignorance. The Scottish poet and philosopher James Beattie, who was Hume’s contemporary, argued against Hume’s views regarding the inferiority of non-whites:

The empires of Peru and Mexico could not have been governed, nor the metropolis of the latter built after so singular a manner, in the middle of a lake, without men eminent both for action and speculation. Every body has heard of the magnificence, good government, and ingenuity, of the ancient Peruvians. The Africans and [Native] Americans are known to have many ingenious manufactures and arts among them, which even Europeans would find it no easy matter to imitate.  

Although Beattie implies a certain privileging of Europeans where he says, “even Europeans would find it no easy matter to imitate,” his view empirically challenges Hume’s. Given Hume’s response to Beattie, he appears not to have thought that Beattie’s counter-evidence was sufficient to undermine his belief in the superiority of whites. Philosopher Clarence Johnson notes that Hume simply made a minor change in phrasing. Instead of saying that there “never” was a civilized nation other than white, Hume deletes “never” and replaces it with “scarcely ever.”  

Concerning this slight rephrasing, philosopher Naomi Zack notes:
There is empirical restraint in this formulation. Still, having forgone the constant conjunction of dark skin shade and cultural inferiority, and having ruled out environmental causes of culture, Hume has no basis for a causal connection between skin shade and culture (in either direction) and no evidence for the existence of a third factor that could cause both skin shade and culture.54

Although Kant attributes to Hume having awakened him from his dogmatic slumber, on the issue of whiteness vis-à-vis the Black, Hume seems to have lulled Kant back to sleep. In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant writes:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color. The religion of fetishes so wide spread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature. A bird feather, a cow’s horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it
becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and invocation in
swearing oaths. The Blacks are very vain but in the Negro’s way, and so talkative
that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashing.\textsuperscript{55}

Moreover, in reply to advice that a Black carpenter gave to Father Labat, Kant commented, “And
it might be that there was something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in
short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.”\textsuperscript{56}
The reader will note that Kant deduces the Black man’s stupidity from the fact that a \textit{Black}
person \textit{ipso facto} means a stupid person.\textsuperscript{57} Also, note that Kant says that the man’s Blackness
functioned as “proof” of his stupidity. Kant’s use of the concept of “proof” complicates the
familiar line that Kant was simply a product of his time. “Proof” suggests the establishment of
the validity of a claim based upon reasoning, not simply upon the uncritical acceptance of
cultural prejudices.

It is important to note that Kant, like Hume, was also not philosophizing about the
inferiority of Blacks in a cultural vacuum that did not challenge his racist beliefs. Tsenay
Serequeberhan argues that “Kant was well aware of the faulty character of the empirical travel
literature and information about non-European peoples that was available to him.”\textsuperscript{58} Indeed, as
Serequeberhan notes, in his review of Johann Gottfried Herder’s “Ideas for a philosophy of the
history of mankind” (1785), Kant acknowledges:

\begin{quote}
[W]orking with a mass of descriptions dealing with different lands, it is possible
to prove, if one cares to do so . . . that [indigenous] Americans and Negroes are
\end{quote}
relatively inferior races in their intellectual capacities, but on the other hand, according to reports just as plausible, that their potentialities are on the same level as those of any other inhabitants of the planet. 59

So, why would Kant continue to maintain his racism in the face of “reports just as plausible”? Serequeberhan suggests that Kant turns a blind eye because of the importance that he attributes to the making of “natural distinctions” and “classifications based on hereditary coloration . . . [and] . . . the notion of race.” 60 Of course, this only serves the colonial adventures of Occidental hegemony. Serequeberhan concludes, “It is calculative “rational control” that, unlike the Tahitians’ pursuit of “mere pleasure,” is the true and proper embodiment of “the values of existence itself.” 61

John Locke’s racism is also evident. Indeed, his racism triumphed over his philosophy of natural rights and liberalism vis-à-vis Blacks. Ironically though, Frederick Douglass used Locke’s theories to declare his self-ownership. With cutting irony, philosopher Charles Mills notes that this was “the same John Locke who was an investor in the Atlantic slave trade and author of the Carolina Constitution which—in seeming contradiction to his later prescriptions in the Second Treatise—enshrined hereditary slavery.” 62

Although Thomas Jefferson waxed and waned on the issue of Black enslavement, “owning” Black bodies of his own, in his Notes on Virginia, which was written in 1782 and 1783, his belief in the superiority of whiteness is evident. Jefferson was respected as a learned man and scientific in his outlook. Despite his famous five words, “All men are created equal,” Jefferson perpetuated myths regarding the Negro type:
Their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions and unemployed in labor. An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect must be disposed to sleep of course.\textsuperscript{63}

Jefferson also thought that “in imagination they [Negroes] are dull, tasteless and anomalous.”\textsuperscript{64} The Black astronomer and mathematician Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806) sent to Jefferson, then Secretary of State, a copy of his \textit{Banneker’s Almanac} as evidence to counter the myth that Negroes were not endowed with intelligence. Jefferson sent Banneker’s ephemeris to the Marquis de Condorcet. Apparently, Jefferson sent it with an enthusiastic letter.\textsuperscript{65} According to Earl Conrad, however, “Later, in private correspondence, he belittled the mathematical and intellectual gifts of the almanac-maker.”\textsuperscript{66}

And we must not forget Hegel’s distortion of Africa. Hegel writes:

Negroes are to be regarded as a race of children who remain immersed in their state of uninterested \textit{naïveté}. They are sold, and let themselves be sold, without any reflection on the rights or wrongs of the matter. . . . They do not show an inherent striving for culture. . . . There [in Africa] they do not attain to the feeling of human personality, their mentality is quite dormant, remaining sunk within itself and making no progress, and thus corresponding to the compact, differenceless mass of the African continent.\textsuperscript{67}
On this score, Africa is a site devoid of any Geist. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze writes:

It is clear, then, that nowhere is the direct conjunction/intersection of the philosophical and the political and economic interests in the European denigration and exploitation of Africans so evident and shameless as in Hegel. Since Africa, for Hegel, “is the Gold-land compressed within itself,” the continent and its peoples become, all at once, a treasure island and a terra nulla, a virgin territory brimming with natural and human raw material passively waiting for Europe to exploit and turn it into mini-European territories.68

Concerning the issue of aesthetics, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe writes:

We venture, however, . . . to assert that the white man, that is, he whose surface varies from white to reddish, yellowish, brownish, in short, whose surface appears most neutral in hue and least inclines to any particular and positive colour, is the most beautiful.”69

Moreover, certain that there was a correlation between beauty and the power of intelligence, the German philosopher Christoph Meiners maintained that people who were light in complexion were superior and beautiful. Darker people were “deemed both ‘ugly’ and at best ‘semi-civilized’.”70 Charles White, a British surgeon who argued for the aesthetic superiority of white women, deemed blushing to be a mark of beauty (which he believed to be a feature exclusive to
white women). In a similar manner, White asks, “[w]here, except on the bosom of the European woman, [shall we find] two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipt with vermilion?” Enlightenment thinker Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, known as the father of physical anthropology, Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, Arthur de Gobineau, French naturalist Comte de Buffon, Robert Knox, and others, further developed and shaped the discourse through which Black bodies came to be “known”/“seen.” Blumenbach reiterated the “universal” dimensions of white beauty. He linked the universality of white beauty to his belief that whites were the progenitors of humanity, occupying the apex on the great chain of being. As Fredrickson notes:

He was the first to trace the white race to the Caucasus, and he did so because of the reputed beauty of its inhabitants. He then went on to hypothesize that those he dubbed “Caucasians” were the original human race from which the others had diverged or degenerated. They were, he affirmed, “the most handsome and becoming,” having “the most beautiful form of the skull.”

From the above, it is clear that these thinkers believed their claims to be true and descriptive of the Black body as such. Hence, claims differentiating Black bodies from white bodies were deemed unconditioned, natural distinctions waiting to be “discovered” and “accurately” described. These thinkers, after all, represented some of the “best” minds in Europe. How could they be incorrect? Europe is the “all seeing-eye of truth,” disinterested and objective. However, the “Black” body qua docile, perverse, and inferior, is a product of the white
imaginary. On this score, in stream with Simone de Beauvoir, I would argue that from a historical, discursive perspective, one is not born, but rather becomes “Black,” that is, where “Black” denotes and connotes that which is impure, savage, immoral, stupid, dull in imagination, ugly, the white man’s burden, evil, simian, child-like, and naturally fit to serve whites.

**Black embodiment within the serious world of whiteness**

I am cognizant of the fact that post-structuralism has placed the category of experience under erasure. However, the power of Frederick Douglass’s narrative voice is precisely grounded in his *lived embodied experiences* under the American institution of slavery. While I recognize philosophically that “experience” is never simply and purely there, this does not negate the fact that the oppressed are capable of speaking from the authority of their own experiences. While it is true that Douglass *interprets* his experiences under slavery, it is not the case that his experiences can be “reduced to linguistic effects.” I would argue that Douglass’s experience under slavery exceeds the “various possible and actual discursive representations of that experience.” To reject the metaphysics of presence, which, on my view, actually comes through the backdoor of positivism, does not negate the significance of how the (non-discursive) *lived experiential* physicality and materiality of white oppression inform the interpretive dimensions of the Douglass’s enslavement. Although Douglass predates the requiem sung to the “death” of the modern subject, the viability of meta-narratives, and the metaphysics of presence, it is ironic that when Blacks and other minority and subaltern voices begin to speak that they often find themselves in the midst of some new “post-paradigm” that appears to undercut their efforts at self-authorship, self-voicing, articulating, and demonstrating the significance of the lived
experiential and personal dimensions of existence as political.

Through the process of narrating his existence, Douglass is challenging the racist assumption that Black people have no perspective on the world. By speaking out against the brutality of American slavery, he is fighting against the “Black” body and its history of subjection to a technology of docility; he is defying and challenging the caricatured myths and normativity of whiteness. He does not begin with an abstract Cartesian “I think,” but with a rich description of an embodied here of subjectivity whose historicity is linked to the Middle Passage. As Lewis Gordon writes, “Without a perspective, I will be an anonymous consciousness without a point of reference. I will be a view, literally, from nowhere.” When Douglass writes about himself from his own perspective, he is engaged in a larger political project that has existential implications in terms of resisting the state of being an object-for-white-Others. His aim is to defend the humanity and the being-for-itself of Black people. He writes:

I see, too, that there are special reasons why I should write my own biography, in preference to employing another to do it. Not only is slavery on trial, but unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial. It is alleged that they are, naturally, inferior; that they are so low in the scale of humanity, and so utterly stupid, that they are unconscious of their wrongs, and do not apprehend their rights.

As the earliest form of Black protestational autobiography, it is through the modality of the slave narrative that Douglass attacks the inhumanity of whites. Douglass is writing to reveal
his pain and the collective pain of Black people. He is engaging in self-representation, one that is counter to white re-presentation. He is exposing to the world structures of power within a particular domain that often go unrecognized. He is demonstrating his humanity and the humanity of Black people. He is revealing the hypocrisy of whites. And, he is exposing both how enslaved Blacks become duped into thinking that they are fit for oppression and how white oppressors construct ways of rendering their acts of oppression invisible.

Under the epistemic regime of whiteness, Blacks bodies came to think of whiteness as the property of great souls and great minds. Beauvoir would argue that women have come to think, under the epistemic regime of androcentricity, that only men have great souls, thoughts, dreams, and perform great deeds. Whiteness, like androcentricity, is a specific historical position that masquerades as universal, as that which exists external to a set of embodied practices. For Beauvoir, “The serious man gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned.”78 One strategy used to maintain the veneer of “unconditionedness” is that whiteness does not speak its own name. As Russell Ferguson writes:

In our society dominant discourse never tries to speak its own name. Its authority is based on absence. The absence is not just that of the various groups classified as ‘other’, although members of these groups are routinely denied power. It is also the lack of any overt acknowledgement of the specificity of the dominant culture, which is simply assumed to be the all-encompassing norm. This is the basis of its power.79
Constituting itself as *the* site of universality and absolute presence, whiteness functions as an epistemological and ontological anchorage. As such, whiteness assumes the authority to marginalize other identities, discourses, perspectives, and voices. Raising the issue of white identity as a form of *ressentiment* vis-à-vis the Black as Other, indeed, as the negated Other, Lewis Gordon observes:

> It is clear, then, in a wickedly ironic way, that perhaps the world would have been more just if their [whites’] identity had not emerged since their identity is fundamentally conditioned by hating mine. And why should anyone continue to defend any identity that is premised upon being the primary agent of hate?^{80}

Given the above definitions of the “Black” body as framed within the meta-narrative sovereignty of white ideology, with its procrustean tendencies, it is clear that African people (the Other in this case) are constructed as *things* trapped within an economy of exchange value, alienated from themselves and from the rest of the civilized world, that is, “civilized” as defined by whiteness. It is within this socio-historical theatre of whiteness that Douglass’s body *becomes* an essential thing of nature. Beauvoir insightfully notes that “one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one can not revolt against nature.”^{81}

As he begins to narrate his own experiences within the context of his historical facticity, Douglass is always already coded and narrated, deeply scripted by pre-existing racist assumptions. He is born into a social reality where everything, as Beauvoir might say, confirms him in his belief in white superiority.^{82} Douglass writes, “By far the larger part of the slaves
know as little of their age as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant.”

To inquire about one’s age was judged an act of “impudent curiosity.” For the system of enslavement to function, the enslaved should be focused only on the role for which nature made them: to serve, not to ask questions of their own existence. This strategy of avoiding such questions allowed the white enslaver to flee his responsibility for treating the enslaved with at least a modicum of dignity.

Parents are also torn away, prohibiting any sense of connectedness. As Douglass says, “Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves.” Douglass realizes that the practice of separating children from their mothers and fathers “is in harmony with the grand aim of slavery, which, always and everywhere, is to reduce man to a level with the brute.”

White power relations shape the Black body into that which is history-less. Terms like sister, brother, father, and mother are nominal only. According to Douglass, slavery obliterated the structure of family life amongst the enslaved, and, thereby, robbed “these terms of their true meaning.” On the plantation, “the order of civilization was reversed here.” Within the context of the slave system, it was not motherly affection that mattered. What was important is that the enslaved mother “adds another name to a master’s ledger.”

Therefore, the reproduction of mothering has radically different meanings for free white women and enslaved black women. For white women reproduction enables them to define themselves as human subjects since they are able to birth the next generation of the human subject even though they are excluded from full participation in the public realm of citizenship. For the enslaved woman,
constituted as property, her reproductive capacity did not free her, in fact it reinstated her role as property. In this instance reproduction is not a reproduction of mothering but of property, because she transmits her unfreedom to her offspring.\(^91\)

This is Douglass’ situation, it is his objectivity, which involves “the quality or state of being an object.”\(^92\) Beauvoir notes that women have been reduced to a womb, an ovary.\(^93\) The Black has been reduced to an animal, to his/her genitalia. Notice that Douglass mentions horses. Horses are deemed brutes of the field. Time or meaningfully lived existential temporality, seizing one’s life as a protensive project, a felt movement of historical \textit{becoming}, is irrelevant to horses. Comparable to a horse, Douglass’ existence is assigned a purpose by another, a white oppressor. With horror and dread, Douglass is aware of the ontological chain of being within which he has been assigned an inferior role. He writes:

\begin{quote}
We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination.\(^94\)
\end{quote}

Ranked on the same ontological scale as other subhuman animals, the objective was to get Blacks to “see” themselves as \textit{naturally} occupying the same rung as beasts of burden. The more Blacks were able to so identify with this racist categorization, the more they became the mimetic
reflection of white projections. Beauvoir compares this type of existence to a state of vegetation and maintains that “life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing and if this surpassing has no other limits than those which the subject assigns himself.”

Through this method of keeping enslaved Black people ignorant of their birth dates, parents, etc., many came to experience their lives as purely given without any sense of subjectivity regarding historical movement marked by existential significance. One’s birth date is not marked and recalled as a significant existential emergence in-the-world. Douglass describes this entire process of keeping him ignorant as leaving him “without an intelligible beginning in the world.” On a phenomenological or lived level, the Black body is returned as that which has always been, always is, and always will be fit for slavery. Within such a context, Blacks internalize their identities along an “atemporal” axis. They and their enslavers are presumed locked in an eternal dominated-dominator dynamic. “‘The eternal feminine’ corresponds to ‘the black soul’ and to ‘the Jewish character,’” according to Beauvoir. In other words, the eternal feminine, like the Black soul, is deemed an immutable thing, an essence. But unlike Blacks, at least white women were shown levels of respect in virtue of being mothers, wives, sisters, etc., of white men.

Within the narrative, it is clear that Douglass has a sense of himself as dejected, a brute, a thing, and as an abomination before God. His knowledge that his father was possibly a white man further solidifies his identity as a dejected thing, a reminder of his owner’s lust for (and possible rape of) the female Black body that has been deemed subhuman and lascivious. Douglass notes that the biological father “may be white, glorying in the purity of his Anglo-
Saxon blood; and his child may be ranked with the blackest slaves.” The presence of the mulatto on a plantation was clear evidence of the powerful ideological workings of the slave system. After all, the enslaved mulatto was white in phenotype, and, yet, deemed “Black.” All that was necessary is that “the child be by a woman in whose veins courses one thirty-second part of African blood.” By the one-drop rule, no matter how light, the child was still “tainted”/“stained” Black and therefore less than human.

The ideology of the one-drop rule no doubt made it easy for white males to turn a blind eye to their children, to flee from the anxiety possibly caused by the blatant contradiction of enslaving their own children. Moreover, the ideological framing of the Black female body as always sexually available, indeed, hyper-sexed, would have served to obscure the fact that the “hyper-sexed” Black female body was a fantasy created by whites themselves. In short, as argued, the Black body becomes the phantasmatic object of the white imaginary. In this way, the white enslaver is able to disclaim responsibility for his actions, maintaining that the Black female body is the site of seductive dark mystery, a seductiveness that white men are incapable, because of Black female seductive trickery, of resisting. Thus, the white enslaver is able to objectify his own perverse practices to be outside of his control. The Black female body, then, becomes a distorted object, which is projected out from the inner workings of the sexual rapaciousness of the white enslaver himself. She became the seductive “Jezebel Negress,” while he became the honorable white Southern gentleman. This served both the function of “justifying” the brutal rape of Black female bodies, and of providing a moral basis upon which to privilege the civilized sexual modesty of white women. In a powerful observation, Douglass writes, “Women—white women, I mean—are IDOLS at the south, not WIVES, for the slave women are preferred in
It is important to keep in mind, though, that the projection of the Black female body as hypersexual is also fundamentally tied to economic ends. As Joane Nagel notes:

Ideological hegemonies do not exist in a material vacuum . . . . Enslaved women were especially likely targets of sexual abuse since their rape was rewarded by the possibility of pregnancy, and thus could increase a slaveowner’s holdings. This incentive increased in importance after 1808 when the importation, but not the reproduction of slaves was outlawed in the United States. For the next fifty-seven years until slavery was ended in 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, a slaveowner’s holdings could only be increased by “breeding” slaves. Enslaved black women thus labored for slave owners in all senses of the word—as productive workers in slaveowners’ houses, businesses, and fields, and as reproductive workers whose pregnancy, childbearing, and childrearing increased slaveowners’ “stock” of slaves.

Douglass witnessed the sadistic sexual practices of white male enslavers as a young boy. He mentions an enslaved woman named Esther who lived with his old master. Douglass notes that “this was a young woman who possessed that which is ever a curse to the slave-girl; namely, - personal beauty.” It is clear that Douglass’s old master wanted her for himself; for he forbade her to see Ned Roberts, another enslaved Black whom she loved. Upon finding out that she disobeyed his orders, he tied her wrists and stood her on a bench with her shoulders and back exposed. Douglass:
Behind her stood old master, with cowskin in hand, preparing his barbarous work with all manner of harsh, coarse, and tantalizing epithets. The screams of his victim were most piercing. He was cruelly deliberate, and protracted the torture, as one who was delighted with the scene. Again and again he drew the hateful whip through his hand, adjusting it with a view of dealing the most pain-giving blow.  

The process of the lynching of Black male bodies comes to mind here. The entire scene is serious. As Beauvoir might say, during a lynching of a Black body, whites are “led to take refuge in the ready-made values of the serious [white] world.” There is the spectacle of the scene, the ritualism of getting dressed for the occasion, bringing children as if it were a family picnic. And then, of course, there is the slow hanging, and the heightened sadistic and frenzied moment of castration, of severing the fantasized, hypertrophied Black penis. Within the context of this “den of horrors,” what is it about the smiling white faces as they gaze upon the mutilated Black body? Clyde Taylor suggests that the smiling faces are indicative of people having experienced an event that was pleasurable. One should not overlook the homoerotic elements played out in the spectacle. In removing the Black penis, in “white men embracing . . . the same penis they were so over-determinedly driven to destroy, one encounters a sadistic enactment of the homoerotic at the very moment of its most extreme disavowal.” Consistent with this theme of perverse eroticisation, Sartwell notes:
First of all, perhaps the dirtiest secret of white racism is its eroticisation of dominance: its sexual sadism. If we cannot acknowledge the fact that we get off on brutalization, and that our ancestors associated orgasm with the whip and the threat of the whip, then we cannot penetrate to the heart of whiteness. Very few people will acknowledge to themselves, much less to others, still less to their victims, that cruelty is pleasurable, but the whole history of American race relations is incomprehensible without that acknowledgement.¹⁰⁹

On my view, the white enslaver is invested in an ideological world-picture or what Sartwell refers to as “the technology of appearance.”¹¹⁰ The point here is that the ideological world-picture is necessary; for it provides whites with a powerful means for moral elision. If this technology of appearance were not in place, whites would realize their inhumanity, their brutality toward those whom they have deemed inferior Others. However, the ideological framework is needed to maintain their understanding of themselves as superior. As Sartwell notes, “We [whites] construct our pure moral agency by the exclusion of what we construct you [Blacks] to be: particular, appetitive, passionate, incapable of reason, incoherent.”¹¹¹ However, it is precisely Douglass’s story about Esther, the spectacle of lynching, and the rape of Black female bodies by white men who where protected under laws that denied Blacks the legal right to testify against them in a court of law that reveal unreason, incoherence, and perverse appetite at their worst.¹¹²

The reader will note that there are family resemblances between the dynamics of white ideology that I expose, Sartwell’s conceptualization of the technology of appearance, and
Beauvoir’s conceptualization of the serious world. All three approaches aim to reveal a form of profound dishonesty, a form of eliding one’s responsibility through the establishment of values that are deemed fixed and universal. As Beauvoir would say, the white enslavers have become blind and deaf, sub-men, hiding behind a world that they take to be ready-made. In this way, as Douglass says, they can be “indecent without shame, cruel without shuddering.”  

Characterizing the serious man, Beauvoir is worth quoting in full:

Dishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of his choice, he pretends that the unconditioned value of the object is being asserted through him; and by the same token he also ignores the value of the subjectivity and the freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the thing, he persuades himself that what he sacrifices is nothing. The colonial administrator who has raised the highway to the stature of an idol will have no scruple about assuring its construction at the price of a great number of lives of the natives; for, what value has the life of a native who is incompetent, lazy, and clumsy when it comes to building highways? The serious leads to a fanaticism which is as formidable as the fanaticism of passion. It is the fanaticism of the Inquisition which does not hesitate to impose a credo, that is, an internal movement, by means of external constraints. It is the fanaticism of the Vigilantes of America who defend morality by means of lynchings.
Returning to Douglass’s early life, he did know his mother but only for a brief time. He writes of the time that she walked twelve miles to see him despite the threat of being whipped like a beast of the field if caught. It is this encounter that disrupts his state of “atemporality.” She disrupts his condemnation “to mark time hopelessly.” 115 She provides him with a sense of heritage and a consciousness of history. Douglass notes that he was “not only a child, but somebody’s child.” 116 The recognition that he is somebody’s child militates against his simply being somebody’s property. No longer just a homogeneous thing, undifferentiated from other disposable Black bodies at the hands of whites, Douglass is differentiated in his being as somebody’s child. Being somebody’s child, in Douglass’s situation, creates the conditions necessary for self-recognition as someone who is loved. Being loved opens up a dynamic self-reflective moment: I am valued in my person; I am other than how I have been depicted vis-à-vis whiteness. As such, a dynamic subjective world is opened up to Douglass through the recognition of the other. In this case, the other, his mother, does not collapse his world, but expands it. Indeed, there is a mutual “we-expanding” between mother and child, an expansion that is constantly under erasure under enslavement. Having no doubt received hostile and cold gazes from whites, his being-for-his mother “can be a comfort and encouragement to the self.” 117 This can set in motion a phenomenological return of Douglass’s dark body as that which is admired in the eyes of another. Her presence, her embodied acts of love and sacrifice, validates Douglass’s humanity and his historical and genealogical continuity. After all, as Beauvoir states, “it is not as single individuals that human beings are to be defined in the first place.” 118 Douglass’ mother provides a sense, though brief, of parental fellowship (Mitsein). Douglass’ mother is willing to risk possible death to show him love, to lie down with him until he falls to
sleep at night. This is a political act. Indeed, her willingness to risk death to see her son 
undermines the “absolute” anti-Black value system that attempts to define her identity as a non-
maternal, non-nurturing breeder. (The irony, of course, is that enslaved Black women were used 
precisely for purposes of nurturing white infants, serving as wet nurses, allowing white infants to 
suckle from Black breasts, taking in the “white” milk.) She enacts a form of existential resistance 
that recognizes that the power of whiteness as a regime, and its institutional prohibitions and 
myths regarding Blacks, is a human creation that can be disrupted.\textsuperscript{119}

In many ways, in the above context, Douglass is treated as less than an animal. At least 
an adult animal would have been allowed to raise its young. It was not long after a few brief 
encounters with his mother that she fell ill and died. He writes:

\begin{quote}
The heartless and ghastly form of slavery rises between mother and child, even at 
the bed of death. The mother, at the verge of the grave, may not gather her 
children, to impart to them her holy admonitions, and invoke for them her dying 
benediction. The bondwoman lives as a slave, and is left to die as a beast; often 
with fewer attentions than are paid to a favorite horse.\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

As argued throughout this project, whiteness is deemed Absolute, the essential, and the 
center. According to Beauvoir, however, “universal, absolute man exists nowhere.”\textsuperscript{121} Blackness 
is deemed the inessential. While young and enslaved on the plantation, Douglass was almost 
 naked, suffered from hunger, and whipped by his so-called white master. According to Douglass, 
“The great difficulty was, to keep warm during the night. I had no bed. The pigs in the pen had
leaves, and the horses in the stable had straw, but the children had no beds.”

Through sheer neglect, Douglass was being taught to “see” himself as lower than an animal. He began to recognize in his situation “several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I.”

Douglass reveals that he was so often “pinched with hunger, that I have fought with the dog—‘Old Nep’—for the smallest crumbs that fell from the kitchen table, and have been glad when I won a single crumb in the combat.” The objective of the plantation was to stabilize Douglass, and other enslaved Blacks, as objects, to relegate him to a state of immanence. As Beauvoir says, “Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the ‘en-soi’—the brutish life of subjection.”

Pertinent here is Sartre’s description of an object. He writes, “An object is what my consciousness is not and what has in itself no trace of consciousness.” From the perspective of whiteness, one might say, “Blackness is what my consciousness is not and what has in itself no trace of consciousness.” If “Being-for-itself (pour-soi) is coextensive with the realm of consciousness, and the nature of consciousness is that it is perpetually beyond itself,” then enslaved Blacks were no doubt considered sentient (like a pig or a cow), but deemed not to possess a dynamic form of consciousness, one capable of projecting toward the future and always ahead of itself.

The point here is that Blacks were not believed to be frustrated in their transcendence. Many whites were convinced that Blacks were happy in their state of servitude. They saw what they wanted to see: genuine “happy darkies” fixed in their being and satisfied with their lot. “What we want,” according to Sartwell, “is grinning, dancing idiots, so we simply manufacture them. We then notice that these folks seem to be grinning, dancing idiots, and justify our racism out of our own invention.”
Douglass’ narrative repudiates this myth and clearly demonstrates what it means for Blacks to be profoundly frustrated in their transcendence. In existentialist terms, whites saw Blacks as ontological plenums, they were deemed simply there—an essential thing which does not grasp itself through a process of being and nothingness. Sartre writes that transcendence is “the process through which the for-itself goes beyond or surpasses the given in pursuing its project.”

Black reality was not deemed a projective reality; the Black was a being for whom his/her essence precedes existence. Blacks were born into the world ready-made and devoid of “the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance.” On this score, freedom is a form of distance that the for-itself (pour-soi) takes toward its own being. Under slavery, Blacks were defined as an ontological positivity without any value except for that conferred upon a “thing.” For Sartre and Beauvoir, at the heart of being human is nothingness. Human being “is a lack of being, but this lack has a way of being which is precisely existence.”

For Sartre, “‘Nothingness’ does not itself have Being, yet it is supported by Being. It comes into the world by the For-itself and is the recoil from fullness of self-contained Being which allows consciousness to exist as such.” To ex-ist (ex-sistere), which is a mode of Ekstasis, means to stand out, to be distant from one’s being. One might say that to ex-ist is to take a stand regarding one’s being, its direction and destiny. “It means that, first of all, man [woman] exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself [herself].” A thing, however, is confined to “its pure facticity.” Of course, Blacks were not literally regarded as rocks, but they were treated as thing-like. Reduced to their corporeality, made to feel that they were to be slaves for life, many Blacks came to internalize themselves as ahistorical essences, incapable of transcending toward an open future of possibilities.
Although I have touched upon this briefly, it is important to bear in mind that slavery was also reinforced through the use of non-discursive forms of brutality and oppression. The Black body fell prey to the white gaze and the physical disciplinary techniques of “human flesh-mongers,” those that are concerned with mere surfaces.\textsuperscript{135} Douglass tells the story of old Barney receiving thirty lashes on his dark flesh by Colonel Lloyd.\textsuperscript{136} He tells of Demby who disobeyed an order given by Mr. Gore and was shot in the head as a result. Douglass says that “his mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood.”\textsuperscript{137} From the perspective of those whites in power, Demby would not have been missed, though he was probably erased from the ledger. After all, one must keep abreast of one’s financial accounts. The following description by Beauvoir aptly depicts Demby. She writes:

Reduced to pure facticity, congealed in his immanence, cut off from his future, deprived of his transcendence and of the world which that transcendence discloses, a man no longer appears as anything more than a thing among things which can be subtracted from the collectivity of other things without its leaving upon the earth any trace of its absence.\textsuperscript{138}

Douglass gives an account that even while living in the city of Baltimore, he observed a young girl of fourteen, Mary, who was the object, along with her older sister, Henrietta, of the capricious will of her white mistress. Mary’s “head, neck, and shoulders . . . were literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head, and found it nearly covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress.”\textsuperscript{139} Also, there was Douglass’ wife’s cousin, a young Black girl,
who had fallen asleep while watching Mrs. Hick’s baby and was brutalized as a result. Mrs. Hick “jumped from her bed, seized an oak stick of wood by the fireplace, and with it broke the girl’s nose and breastbone, and thus ended her life.” 140 Such brutal treatment further reinforced the epistemic regime of whiteness: to be Black is to be an object of white physical aggression and vituperation; it is to have your teeth knocked out, to be hunted by dogs, to be beaten with sticks, shackled, lynched and burned.141 Indeed, Blacks simply had no rights which any white (man or woman) was bound to respect. Douglass relates how his “brother” Perry was violently attacked by the white enslaver Andrew Anthony. Because Perry was off playing when Anthony wanted him for something of little significance, he grabbed Perry by the throat, “dashed him on the ground, and with the heel of his boot stamped him on the head, until the blood gushed from his nose and ears.”142

Black bodies were continuously subjected to trauma. Many Blacks had to suffer from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As Susan Brison notes:

A traumatic event is one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening. The immediate psychological responses to such trauma include terror, loss of control, and intense fear of annihilation.143

In The History of Mary Prince, Prince narrates how two young boys, Cyrus and Jack, were always beaten until their flesh was ragged and raw. She relates that “they were never secure one moment from a blow, and their lives were passed in continual fear.”144 She writes about how she was
stripped naked and tied to a tree branch by her wrists and to have her flesh beaten with cow-skin. She also relates the story of an enslaved Black known as old Daniel who, because he was lame in the hip and was thereby slow, was stripped and had his flesh beaten with rough briar. “He [Prince’s white master] would then call for a bucket of salt, and fling upon the raw flesh till the man writhed on the ground like a worm, and screamed aloud with agony.” What more could the white enslaver desire than to make the Black body feel helpless, forever standing in fear of non-being, and lacking self-control. After all, they had to be subdued. All savage beasts must be controlled. It was through such acts of violence that the white enslavers were able to rest content knowing that they were simply doing their jobs, training animals how to behave. This allowed them to avoid the recognition of their own animality and vicious brutality. “It is the flesh, so horribly lacerated,” according to Bakare-Yusuf, “that is marked for enslavement, for raw violence and objectification, that serves others’ will-to-power and their becoming beings.”

From the above acts of brutality, I would argue that the white racist “loses himself in the object [whiteness] in order to annihilate his subjectivity.” For Beauvoir, “The serious man’s dishonesty issues from his being obliged ceaselessly to renew the denial of this freedom.” The white racist attempts to deny the truth of his/her existence: freedom. The ideology of whiteness, as a species of the serious man, is a lie. Colonel Lloyd, Mr. Gore, and Mrs. Hick lost themselves in the lie of whiteness. Each is in a state of flight, creating complex distortions that function to blind them to the pernicious role that they play in constructing the Black body as slavish; they have come to avoid the recognition of the degree of choice that they have to refuse to cooperate with the practices of white hatred toward Black bodies. We should keep in mind, though, that freedom is always already situated. Hence, there is something to be said about the fact that the
process of becoming a white racist is partly a matter of being “assigned” a certain role within a heteronomous social and historical context. And yet, white racists cannot be reduced to these social subject positions, even if they appear to have lost all feelings of humanity toward Blacks. Choice still remains. There is always already the counter-white racist position, the counter-anti-Black voice, to be taken up, and pursued. One has the freedom to see through the “rigid training, long persisted in” that reinforces the fixity of values. We must not forget the fact that racist “I-slots” are institutional sites that have been historically constructed. They are not eternal essences that exist external to human practices. Hence, there is always the possibility of dislocating ourselves from one subject position and “leaning” into another. Along with heteronomy, then, there is autonomy. Without the concept of autonomy, we would be forced to claim that the self is no more than the plaything of external forces, a constantly shifting “voice” not of our own. Hence, there is the sense in which the human subject is not a plenum, but always already incomplete, capable of becoming what he/she is not yet (in this case a white non-racist), capable of claiming a voice, though not one created ex nihilo. For the white racist to admit that one is always already becoming what one is not yet calls into question whiteness as an essential category of identity and mode of being. The consequence of this admittance entails coming face-to-face with a profound sense of anguish. In other words, to reject their whiteness as a superior natural ontological kind, whites would be forced to engage in the reflective apprehension of themselves as freedom and realize that nothing relieves them of the necessity of continually choosing themselves. Hence, within the context of Douglass’ life, to choose to lynch a Black body, and to see this as one’s “natural right,” is to choose the ideology of whiteness.

Within the context of his narrative, Douglass begins to face aspects of his “nothingness”
qua freedom after hearing Mr. Auld scold his own wife for attempting to teach Douglass to read. According to Mr. Auld, “if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master - to do as he is told.” In other words, Douglass should not seek self-fulfillment in transcendence; rather, he should seek fulfillment in blindly executing the desires embedded within another’s project. What does Mr. Auld fear? After all, Blacks were believed to be “inferior” by nature. Mr. Auld is clearly a victim of the serious world. As the serious man, Mr. Auld hides from his freedom. He believes that Douglass is by nature a slave and inferior, and, yet, his fear of Douglass learning how to read belies this assumption. This creates epistemic slippage, though “hidden” from Mr. Auld through an elaborate ideological framework. Mr. Auld flees his own freedom by grounding his decision - that is, not to allow Douglass to read - in the law, religion, tradition. In short, Mr. Auld attempts to circumnavigate his choice in the matter of perpetuating American slavery. He does this by rendering invisible his “membership” in a (white racist) community of intelligibility that creates the very conditions that “justify” the inhuman treatment of Black bodies. His fear reveals his knowledge that Blacks are “slaves” (or enslaved) not by nature, but because of the actions of whites. Or, in my own preferred discourse, Mr. Auld reveals that the lived semiotics of whiteness (not white skin) does involve a level of choice, an act of performance sustained and “justified” by individual and institutional practices.

Douglass is aware of the fact that “southern statute books are covered with enactments forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read or write.” Were Blacks really animals, why would there be such fines and penalties? After all, there is no statute book forbidding the teaching of cows to read. Douglass sees through Mr. Auld’s hypocrisy
where he writes, “The manhood of the slave is conceded.”¹⁵⁵ Douglass is resolved to learn how to read.¹⁵⁶ In short, Douglass has undergone a process of existential conversion. “To convert the absence into presence, to convert my flight into will, I must assume my project positively.”¹⁵⁷ Douglass has begun to challenge his existential enslavement, his immanence. Douglass says, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.”¹⁵⁸ Within this context, the process of becoming a man, for Douglass, involves the process of challenging and overcoming the serious world of whiteness that has assigned him a mode of being comparable to that of a pig or a dog. Indeed, it involves the process of disrupting the passive, fixed role in terms of which white myths have confined him.

Douglass’ existential conversion is also exemplified in his fight with Covey; he negates the “unconditioned” values that have depicted him as a passive. It was Covey’s job to break so-called recalcitrant Negroes (like one would break a stubborn animal), to make them devoid of any recognition of their transcendence and their capacity to imagine alternative ways of being. Covey’s tactics are designed to instill in Douglass a set of oppressive norms that continue to work in Covey’s absence. For example, Covey is always on the prowl. He is the quintessential over-seer/over-gazer. Covey became the faceless gaze, symbolic of “thousands of eyes posted everywhere.”¹⁵⁹ As with philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, which was proposed as an effective means of imprisonment and control, Covey’s white gaze is everywhere. The dynamics of seeing occurs without being seen. “Covey used techniques of manipulation and camouflage to create a sense of his omnipresence.”¹⁶⁰ The objective was to get the Black body to internalize the white oppressive gaze. As Sartwell notes, “For even the internal life of the slave could, finally, be contaminated by seeing, so that one became the watcher of oneself.”¹⁶¹ In this way,
the enslaved Black body would behave in subservient ways in the absence of actual surveillance by the oppressor. This technique created an effective form of double consciousness where the enslaved began to discipline his/her own Black body under the internalized regime of the power of the white gaze. The theological implications here are fascinating. The white gaze became god-like. This no doubt forced many Blacks to believe that there was no place to hide from the all-seeing eye, perhaps eliciting feelings of guilt and fear in those Blacks who contemplated freedom or escape. Douglass is fully aware that this strategy was deployed to break the enslaved Black body. He writes:

One half of his proficiency in the art of Negro breaking consisted, I should think, in this species of cunning. We were never secure. He could see or hear us nearly all the time. He was, to us, behind every stump, tree, bush and fence on the plantation.\textsuperscript{162}

Under the gaze and the brutal treatment of Covey, Douglass underwent epistemic violence. He suffered both in body and in spirit. He became the victim of the constant defeating thought that “I am a slave—a slave for life—a slave with no rational ground to hope for freedom.”\textsuperscript{163}

One day in the field, Douglass became sick, felt dizzy, and could not stand. Covey kicked him in the side commanding him to stand. He could not. Covey then picked up a hickory slab, hitting Douglass in the head “which caused a large gash, and caused the blood to run freely.”\textsuperscript{164} Douglass manages to escape and makes it to Master Thomas’s place, who had given Douglass over to Covey to be \textit{broken} in the first place. Douglass thought that if he could not be protected
as a man, then perhaps Master Thomas would be willing to protect his own property from the abuses of Covey. Unfortunately, for Douglass, “the guilt of a slave is always, and everywhere, presumed; and the innocence of the slaveholder or the slave employer, is always asserted.”

Master Thomas believed that Douglass’s dizziness was really a case of laziness and an attempt to get out of work by feigning sickness. “The charge of laziness against the slaves is ever on their lips, and is the standing apology for every species of cruelty and brutality.” Hence, the power of the stereotype cancelled out any lenience that Master Thomas, a “religious” man, was capable of showing. In the end, he believed that Covey was justified in beating Douglass. After all, Covey too was a “religious” man. Douglass refers to Master Thomas’ response to him as “fairly annihilating me.” In short, Douglass’s subjectivity has been erased. From the perspective of Covey’s “justified” actions, Douglass has no voice, no position, no perspective, no interiority; he is annihilated.

Douglass was highly critical of the hypocrisy of religious practices performed by white enslavers. Sartwell points out, however, that the epistemic structure of this situation is more than simply hypocrisy. “For the master not only claims to be what he is not; he claims the slave to be what he (the master) actually is.” In other words, the “master” claims to be truly merciful, respecting the lives of others, and compassionate, but his actual behavior belies this claim. The enslaved, however, is accused of being what the “master” really is, hateful, brutal, and godless. Hence, the white master was able to hide behind a false religiosity, particularly given the fact that he was “convinced” that he was given the “divine right” to protect, paternalistically, the savage Black body from itself, the same savage Black body that he has constructed/projected. He was the white “savior” whose duty it was/is, as argued earlier, to bring light where there is
The enslaver is thereby capable of masking any guilt in the name of the divine father. This allowed the white enslaver to construct what happened to the Black body under slavery as something foreign to his (the white enslaver’s) agency. Beating and brutalizing a Black body was not an act of freedom, but an act of necessity, something that had to be done over and above choice.

It was not the African who was the savage. It was not the dark body that was evil. Rather, it was the act of constructing (and investing in) the fantasized “Black” body, which was really the act of constructing (and investing in) the fantasized white body, which led to acts of savagery and evil. It was through the process of rendering the Black body hyper-visible that the white body became invisible. “The master was civilized, Christian, and so forth, precisely in relation to the slave.” Douglass was aware of the sham of the prevailing religious practices. He writes that between the Christianity practiced by white enslavers “and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference – so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked.” Douglass is worth quoting in full:

I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of
prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families,—sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers,—leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate.173

On this score, I would argue that the ideology of whiteness (not phenotypic “white” women or men) is idolatrous and anti-Christian. When whiteness is believed to be an absolute marker of superiority, and when, in the name of whiteness, non-white bodies are colonized, brutalized, murdered, raped, and, oppressed, then the ideology of whiteness is indeed anti-Christian.

After returning from Master Thomas, who threatened to beat Douglass if he did not return, Douglass faces his last flogging from Covey. It is important to keep in mind that Douglass had been under the oppressive rule of Covey for six months and had six more to go. Under the cruel practices of Covey, Douglass questioned whether there was a God. He felt that he had indeed become transformed into a brute. He felt like taking his own life and that of Covey’s. After Douglass returned “home,” Covey, because it was Sunday, pretended as if all was fine. Douglass:

His religion hindered him from breaking the Sabbath, but not from breaking my skin. He had more respect for the day than for the man, for whom the day was
mercifully given; for while he would cut and slash my body during the week, he
would not hesitate, on Sunday, to teach me the value of my soul, or the way of life
and salvation by Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{174}

On Monday morning, having ordered Douglass to go into the stable to feed and prepare the
horses for the field, Covey attempted to subdue Douglass. In a pivotal passage, Douglass writes:

The fighting madness had come upon me, and I found my strong fingers firmly
attached to the throat of my cowardly tormentor; as heedless of consequences, at
the moment, as though we stood as equals before the law. The very color of the
man was forgotten.\textsuperscript{175}

It is important to note that while fighting Covey, Douglass says, “the very color of the man was
forgotten.” Of course, the color of the man is white. In that moment, for Douglass, whiteness
ceased to function as the transcendental signified; its superior status was forgotten. In that
moment of refusing to yield to white power, it was placed under erasure.

Unlike in the situation involving Mr. Auld’s refusal to allow Douglass to read, Douglass,
in his own historical parlance, \textit{claimed his manhood/humanity}; it was not just conceded. In his
fight with Covey, Douglass was not only resisting further potential physical brutality, but he was
resisting the entire ideological structure upon which whiteness was constructed. Not only does
Douglass assert the materiality of his body, but he reclaims his body in the name of freedom and
self-definition, refusing to be fixed by a philosophical anthropology that profiled him within the
framework of a set of intended meanings that collapsed his dark epidermis upon itself. He became conscious of his body as an active force, a moral site of resistance. In resisting Covey, in seeing through the sham of whiteness as sacrosanct, he sees whiteness as a cultural artifact, a power bloc held together through processes of collective and individual human choice.

Describing how Douglass forgot Covey’s whiteness, Gordon insightfully writes that “the existential dimension of the situation was such that it collapsed reflective, conceptual reality. It broke through the saturated composition of skewed, racist reality.” And although in the end Douglass wins the fight, he realizes that he is still institutionally enslaved. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 guaranteed this. Yet, Douglass speaks of his freedom. He says that “however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed when I could be a slave in fact.” Through his act of challenging Covey’s white authority, Douglass is living the existential credo that one becomes a human being. Douglass has come to realize that the price of the social expression of his ontological freedom is death; for he refuses to be treated as a thing. He refuses to wrap himself within the security of the serious world, but to risk. Beauvoir realizes the price of freedom where she writes, “Whatever the problems raised for him, the setbacks that he will have to assume, and the difficulties with which he will have to struggle, he must reject oppression at any cost.” Douglass has resolved to embrace and affirm agency. He is now face-to-face with his own anguish, feeling the open textuality of his being-toward the future, grasping the weight of the counter-white racist narrative subject positions that have opened to him. He has become “a being of the distances, a movement toward the future, a project.” Douglass experiences the upsurge of the ontology of his freedom, though still a slave de jure. To have not resisted Covey, Douglass would have reduced himself to a state where “living is only not dying.” He has
succeeded in demystifying his situation; he realizes that it is a situation imposed and sustained by white men/women, and institutional structures. Indeed, the act of fighting Covey was an act of Douglass surpassing himself; it was an act of war against the continuity of the normativity of whiteness. As Beauvoir reminds us, “Revolt is not integrated into the harmonious development of the world; it does not wish to be integrated but rather to explode at the heart of the world and break its continuity.”

Douglass realizes that he is not a thing fixed according to nature. He is meta-stable and trans-phenomenal. As the for-itself, he is always more than he appears to be. “Yet the for-itself is. It is, we may say, even if it is a being which is not what it is and which is what it is not.” Moreover, he is a significant and undeniable point of moral worth. “The freedom of a single man must count more than a cotton or rubber harvest.” Capturing his own sense of self-possession, Douglass says that “I am myself.” This does not mean that Douglass now sees himself as an enclosed “monadic” consciousness. The point here is that he knows the truth of his existence; he knows that he is not the “brute” seen through the aperture of the white gaze. He knows that “[his] freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future,” a future that he must claim. Douglass says, “I was my own master.” And while he realizes that his body can be placed in chains, he knows that this does not mean that he is ontologically a slave. He realizes that being a “slave” is not a natural category, but one that is predicated upon the existence of “masters,” just as the superiority of whiteness is inextricably linked to the inferiorization of Blackness. Having rejected the “natural right” of whites to enslave those deemed as dark Others, Douglass has rejected the mythopoetic institution of North American slavery. Through his lived epistemic standpoint, and because of his iconoclasm against the images portrayed of
“happy” and “cheerful” darkies living on plantations, Douglass makes known to the world the atrocities of slavery and renders visible the ideology of whiteness.

Notes

1 I make this point so as to counter the possible criticism that my analysis of the oppressed Black body, how Douglass experienced his own body under existential duress, is limited to the lived, phenomenological dimensions of Black oppression. On my reading, the larger material systemic factors involved in the enslavement of Black bodies is a necessary and essential part of characterizing Douglass’s situation, but not sufficient.

2 The reader should note that Jean-Paul Sartre was also influenced by the work of Richard Wright. As Robert Bernasconi notes, “Wright, as read by Sartre, not only gave Whites a glimpse of certain select aspects of Black life: he showed the oppressors how the oppressed regarded them. What Wright could do, over and beyond anything Sartre could accomplish, was not just write about the experience of being subject to racism, but also complete Sartre’s project of showing the oppressor to himself.” See Robert Bernasconi’s “Sartre’s Gaze Returned: The Transformation of the Phenomenology of Racism,” *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 18 (2), 1995, 207.


8 The reader will note that there were some African chiefs who participated in selling other African bodies to white enslavers. They did this for various trinkets of “value.” Although the few African chiefs who participated in this ought to be held accountable, it is not always clear that they fully knew the fate of those sold. During tribal warfare between Africans, there were those who were taken as “slaves.” But this was not the same as the selling of Black bodies for capitalist/industrial profits. Indeed, the “enslaved” in Africa were given the opportunity to ascend within the new tribe. Moreover, a captured African could even eventually marry into the chief’s family. In the case of white enslavers, Black bodies were reduced to chattel, discursively and non-discursively constructed as intrinsically inferior according to their dark and physiologically perverse bodies. The “gaze” of the African chiefs was not structured according to a racialist/racist framework predicated upon the superiority of skin color. The “enslaved” African body by other African bodies was not believed, according to manifest destiny, to be fit for a lifetime of degradation and enslavement. These bodies were not aimlessly murdered, lynched, ritualistically castrated for viewing pleasure, etc.


10 The ships left European ports, made violent incursions into Africa, captured and enslaved Africans, traveled to the so-called New World to deliver their goods, their “objects” of great financial value, and then sailed back to Europe.


11 If one thinks of the panopticon here as a site of control, not only were those imprisoned bodies that were seen made to internalize images of themselves as objects that were always seen/seeable, even if not being watched, the “lookers” were also limited and controlled by the panopticon. One might say analogously that just as the enslaved African bodies came to internalize themselves as the always “seen” and “looked at,” and thus began to internalize the white enslavers’ look, so too were the enslavers controlled. They became prisoners of their own hegemonic gaze. After all, they damaged any possibility of a fundamentally radical form of relationality the moment that they closed themselves off to the world, to the non-white Other.
13 The act of choosing death over enslavement is a profound instance of African self-consciousness and human agency. After all, sub-human animals do not kill themselves. As Lewis Gordon notes, “Blacks, it was believed, were incapable of committing suicide because, supposedly like the ‘rest’ of the animal kingdom, they lacked enough apperception or intelligence to understand the ramifications of their situation. This reasoning was based on the supposition of what a ‘true’ human being would do if treated as blacks are treated.” See Lewis Gordon, “Introduction: Black Existential Philosophy,” in his edited book *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
14 There were some Africans who actually feared that they would be eaten, for they had not seen people with white ghost-like skin before. The reader should also keep in mind that enslaved Africans did attempt to resist their captors in the form of physically fighting for their freedom. Think here of those Africans who took control of the *Amistad* in July 1839. Sengbe Pieh or Joseph Cinqué led the resistance. And though he ordered Spaniards to return him and the other Africans back to Africa, they deceived him. Eventually, he and the other Africans were recaptured, stood trial, and were freed in 1841.
25 Prince’s narrative is seminal in that it represents the voice and epistemic standpoint of the first Black British woman to have her experiences under slavery actually published. For Prince, like other Africans, the African diaspora, that space of rupture, dispersion, and displacement, forms the crucible in terms of which the experiential specificity of Black men’s/women’s lives took shape.
26 Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Related by Herself*, edited with an introduction by Moira Ferguson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 62. It is interesting to note that one presumably does not get an erection while looking at a cow that one is thinking about purchasing. And, yet, one can imagine that this is what occurred during the buying of Black female flesh, a category deemed less than human, and, in some cases, non-human. One wonders whether or not this resulted in a state of deep moral and cognitive dissonance felt by the white purchaser.
29 Sartwell, *Act Like You Know*, 99. The reader will note that there is no suggestion here that whites somehow have a “natural” pre-disposition toward hating Blacks or non-whites. White hatred, within this context, functions as a way of dealing with aspects of the self that one feels have become threatened. As an orientation toward the world, whiteness constructs the Black as a hated referent within a world where whiteness is deemed superior, pure, and as
the site of humanity. In this way, the white creates an “inside” and an “outside.” Those on the outside are deemed “Others.” The construction of the Other helps to reinforce the need to police the inside and outside boundary. The Other becomes a site of anxiety and fear. The Other becomes hated as the extraneous source that is deemed capable of disrupting the “natural” order of things. On this score, hatred comes from whites themselves who have constructed fantasies about themselves that they then find necessary to protect and defend at the expense of hating, in this case, Blacks, even if it means the death of the “polluting” dark Other. One might ask, “But why hate if Blacks are tabula rasa?” I would argue that the depiction of Blacks as blank slates is part of the projected dimensions of the white imaginary. It is psychologically and politically empowering to whites to “demonstrate” that Blacks were/are cultureless. In this way, whites are able to claim responsibility for civilizing Blacks. Of course, Blacks are not blank slates. From the perspective of whiteness, Blacks are blank slates because they are said to be devoid of intelligence, historical consciousness, and culture, etc. However, Blacks are not blank slates when it comes to attributing to them various primitive attributes, sexual perversions, etc. On this score, whether as blank slates or as biologically primitive, whites have controlled and policed these constructions. Hence, Blacks have been hated because of their presumed primitive and criminal natures, and have also been hated because of their history of being the white man’s burden, a burden that some whites have come to resent. Indeed, some whites would be content with the non-existence of Blacks. For more on creating and policing “inside” and “outside” boundaries and what this means in terms of the white and the Black Other vis-à-vis the dynamic of projective identification, see Simon Clarke’s “Splitting Difference: Psychoanalysis, Hatred and Exclusion,” in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 29(1), (1999), 21–35.

38 Sartwell, *Act Like You Know*, 98.
39 Bergo writes: “Black ‘genitalia’ get doubled by the ‘castrated’ Jew. The European, or German, imagination called the clitoris ‘der jud,’ so that masturbation was called ‘playing with the Jew,’ in a deliberate reference to a truncated penis. In short, the binarism is at play, even if at times in a sort of inversion relative to Black bodies and ‘souls.’” Personal Communication.
48 Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 53. The reader should also note that according to European racist mythology it was masculine domination that was a clear marker of advanced civilization. Wiegman insightfully notes, “In this way, the binary structure of race—that rigorously defended emphasis on the incommensurabilities between black and white—took on, through anatomic analysis, a double ideological function: the European male’s brain evinced not simply a racial superiority, but a quintessentially masculine one as well. Blackness, in short, was here feminized and the African (-American) male was disaffiliated from the masculine itself.” 54.
53 Johnson, *Cornel West & Philosophy*, 159.


57 Philosopher Clarence Sholé Johnson, although critical of Kant’s position, insightfully formulates Kant’s view regarding a Black person and the quality of being stupid in the form of a syllogism. See his book, *Cornel West & Philosophy*, 157.


60 Kant, “Review of Herder’s ideas for a philosophy of the history of mankind,” 47.


64 Conrad, *The Invention of The Negro*, 74. In their significant book *White Racism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Joe R. Feagin and Hernan Vera note: “Negative images of African Americans were accepted by the framers of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Prominent European Americans in the early history of this nation were slaveholders, including the southerners George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson. In an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson attacked slavery but was careful to blame it on England’s King George. However, because of slaveowners’ opposition, Jefferson’s anti-slavery language was omitted from the final version of that founding document. Despite his indictment of slavery, Jefferson himself was a slaveowner with racist ideas. Writing in *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson argued that what he saw as the ugly color, offensive odor, and ugly hair of African American slaves indicated their physical inferiority and that their alleged inability to create was a sign of mental inferiority, 68–69. Given Jefferson’s alleged relationship with Sally Hemings, one of his enslaved Black females, who is said to have given birth to seven of his children, the hypocrisy cries out.


66 Conrad, *The Invention of The Negro*, 75. Note that the claim that Blacks/Negroes are by nature stupid is held to be true regardless of counter-empirical evidence. Despite the Jamaican poet, the Black carpenter’s advice, and Banneker’s scientific and mathematical work, Hume, Kant, and Jefferson, respectively, continued to hold onto their racist beliefs. On this score, their views about Blacks are empirically empty. For example, take the statement $S$ knows that $P$ about $Y$. However, the assertion is empirically empty where $S$ continues to assert that $P$ about $Y$, that is, refuses to claim $\neg P$ about $Y$. When presented with significant countervailing evidence against the claim that $P$ about $Y$. The point here is that white racist claims about Black people appear compatible with whatever happens in the world. Through the use of ad hoc explanations, denial, etc., white racists continue to hold onto their racist lies and myths about Blacks.


73 Fredrickson, *Racism*, 57.


75 Alcoff, “Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience,” 266.

81 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 83.
82 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 43.
87 This sense of being “history-less” is dialectically linked to the white self as historical. Toni Morrison notes, “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.” Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 52.
94 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 64.
95 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 83.
98 My point, however, is by no means to deny the history of oppression shown toward white women within the context of white male hegemony. Black women were not shown the kind of “respect” shown toward white women. However, the “respect” shown toward white women was not in virtue of being deemed equals to white men. As feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye notes, “. . . a woman who is chaste and obedient is called . . . ‘respectable.’” Of course, Black women were deemed by nature not chaste. Frye is critical of the view that being white automatically grants raced white women political leverage over white men. She is also aware of how white women who have not critiqued the ways in which their “whiteness” functions fail to form political alliances with non-white women, and how white women become partners in the oppression of non-whites, and define themselves as possessions of white men. Nevertheless, she is cognizant of the benefits of being a raced white woman over being a raced Black woman in a context where white men occupy positions of power within a larger context of white racism. She notes: “Racism translates into an aspiration to whiteness. The white girl learns that whiteness is dignity and respectability; she learns that whiteness is her aptitude for partnership with white men; she learns that partnership with white men is her salvation from the original position of Woman in patriarchy. Adopting and cultivating whiteness as an individual character seems to put it in the woman’s own power to lever herself up out of a kind of nonbeing (the status of woman in a male-supremacist social order) over into a kind of Being (the status of white in white-supremacist social order). See Marilyn Frye, “White Woman Feminist” in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, eds. Linda A Bell and David Blumenfield (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 116.
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), a powerful narrative of the life of Harriet Jacobs, is particularly revealing in terms of its first-person account of what it meant for an enslaved Black woman to exist under circumstances where she becomes the desired object of her white “master,” Dr. Flint. The language that Jacobs used to describe the white system of slavocracy is insightful. When referring to white males she uses such words as “fiends,” “devour,” “predatory,” “vile monster,” “plague,” etc. It is Dr. Flint who is the white male predator par excellence. He seems not to quit. What is he after? Clearly, he has the “institutional right” (a very odd and specious thing indeed) to do whatever he wants. He has the physical strength. So, why does he not simply take Jacobs sexually? This is a very important question. It seems that he wants her to want him. He wants her to be for him, to be an object that nevertheless expresses love for its abuser. How is this possible? Is love not given in freedom? What Dr. Flint wants is something not even approximating love. His desire is sadistic and he wants her to assume the position (no pun intended) of masochist. It is as if he cannot gain sexual pleasure from her unless she sees herself as property. Perhaps Dr. Flint is really afraid of Jacobs’s existental freedom. He cannot bear to sexually dominate that which cannot be dominated in spirit. He cannot “get off,” as it were, in the face of Black female freedom. Asymmetry of power fuels Dr. Flint’s sexual desires. In short, he wants a body that is a mere thing to him, completely non-resistant and silent.

In Melton A. McLaurin’s Celia, A Slave: A True Story (New York: Avon Books, 1993), Robert Newsom, a white wealthy “owner” of Black bodies, who lived in Callaway County, Missouri, bought Celia, a Black enslaved teenage girl as he bought a piece of land. He owned her by law. She eventually bore him children. Celia lived within an ideological space where whiteness was the normative rule of the land. It was Newsom’s raciated status as white that guaranteed—as if sanctioned by nature—his “right” to possess the young black female body. It was this white supremacist political rhetoric that constituted the institutional background against which Celia was eventually hanged for killing her “master,” for exercising her agential capacity as a Black woman to defend herself against her white male predator, one whose actions were protected by (white) law and order. Wanting a sex partner, Newsom chose young Celia, though he could have had his pick of eligible white women. Any moral anxiety experienced by Newsom’s “ownership” of another human being was no doubt mitigated by the belief that the institutional practice of enslaving Black bodies was justified by divine and man-made laws. Think of the young Celia. From the moment that Newsom purchased her, he raped her. Think of her young body as a site of sustained trauma, penetration, and violent entry.

Note that it was Douglass’s Aunt Katy who was cruel to him, who often did not feed him. The point here is that some enslaved Blacks were given a “higher” status (for example, being assigned to do work in the house as opposed to in the field) and used this in horrible way toward other enslaved
Blacks. In an environment where there is very little or no opportunity for expressing one’s frustrations and anger toward those whites in power, one will often misplace that aggression, making those “underneath” one’s assigned social station suffer the most.

126 Steller, *To Freedom Condemned*, 17.
128 Sartwell, *Act Like You Know*, 34.
129 Steller, *To Freedom Condemned*, 127.

135 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 41.
136 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 49.
137 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 52.
139 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 41.
140 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 53.
141 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 144.
144 Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, 66.
151 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 800.
152 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 57.

Taking up the issue of whites forbidding enslaved Blacks to read, Sartwell is insightful: “Thus we get a very small epistemic loop: the system is bent on producing the facts that justify it. For example, it was a crime, bemoaned in many [slave] narratives, to teach a slave to read; there was a concerted attempt to manufacture stupidity. But true stupidity cannot be manufactured without, say, psychosurgery; forbidding slaves to read could only make intellectual activity more difficult to achieve. Thus the slavemaster attempted to force an appearance of stupidity out of the slave, an appearance that the slavemaster tried to produce for his own sake, so that he could describe the slave as animalistic, and hence justify the slavemaster’s power. This forces the intelligence of the slave into concealment. When the master “discovered” that the slave was a childish dolt who needed “protection,” he discovered an appearance forced out of the slave by the master’s own technologies of oppression,” *Act Like You Know*, 29.
153 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 143.
154 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 143.

What is important to note is that Douglass had to develop sophisticated ways of resisting early on. In order to learn how to read, he had to deploy strategies that escaped the radar of the white gaze of Mr. and Mrs. Auld. Douglass notes, “Seized with a determination to learn to read, at any cost, I hit upon many expedients to learn to accomplish the desired end. The plea which I mainly adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of using my young white playmates, with whom I met in the street, as teachers. I used to carry, almost constantly, a copy of Webster’s spelling book in my pocket; and, when sent on errands, or when play time was
allowed me, I would step, with my young friends, aside, and take a lesson in spelling. I generally paid my tuition fee to the boys, with bread, which I also carried in my pocket.” My Bondage and My Freedom, 155.

158 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 75.
159 Foucault, Discipline & Punish, 214.
160 Gordon, Existentialia Africana, 55.
161 Sartwell, Act Like You Know, 46.
162 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 216.
163 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 221.
164 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 225.
165 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 233.
166 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 230.
167 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 231.
168 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 229.

Note that there were Black thinkers (for example, Bishop McNeal Turner, and Reverend Alexander Crummell) who endorsed the view that it was a form of providential inevitability that “darker,” “backward” people were to be “civilized” by those Europeans who had achieved “greatness.” The argument, or so it would seem, was never that Africans should continue to suffer under slavery, but that the slave trade was providential as a means toward extricating Africans from their lived barbarity in Africa. This view, however, concedes the intellectual, religious, and moral superiority of Europeans over Africans. It also concedes that Africans ought to imitate Europe’s understanding of what constitutes “humanity” and “civilization.” The view also implicates “divine intention” in the historical brutality of African people. Even assuming that the religious exegete maintains that it was never God’s intention to prolong the suffering of Africans, but only to raise them up to the level of civilized humanity, it is reasonable to ask, “Why any suffering at all?” This raises the complexity of the philosophical and theological issues that revolve around the problem of theodicy. Does the death of one small innocent African infant, to say nothing of the millions of Africans that are said to have actually died during the trans-Atlantic slave trade alone, justify Africans having learned to speak and write in various European languages, to read, to embrace a religious worldview that was used to justify their enslavement, to become part of a “civilized” and “spiritual” world that has developed its identity upon immeasurable quantities of spilled blood, cruelty, vicious wars, corrupt morality, and misanthropic barbarity? To use the discourse of divine providence, justifies the enslavement of Africans. Indeed, such discourse renders the actions of the white enslavers immune to critique. After all, or so one could argue, they were not acting freely, but according to a larger teleological scheme that was actually sanctioned by divine decree. Hence, they were blindly carrying out a purpose greater than themselves, a purpose that pulled them along through the stream of historical inexorability. It should be noted that the above comments are not designed to sidestep the racial, theological, and political complexity that Black thinkers (both men and women) had to grapple with during the nineteenth century as they theorized their place in the world. Of course, Black people continue to grapple with issues of existential meaninglessness/meaningfulness. Historically, “the Black experience” in the so-called New World is shaped by the whip and by the cross. Many Blacks have continued to suffer, though they maintain religious, political, and existential fortitude in the face of incredible acts of brutality toward their right to be. Making sense of this long journey of pain and fortitude continues to be a necessary narrative endeavor, an endeavor that requires a discourse yet to be fully articulated.

170 Sartwell, Act Like You Know, 38.
171 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 235.
172 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 105.
173 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 105.
174 Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 240.
176 Gordon, Existentialia Africana, 58.
177 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 79.
178 Gordon, Existentialia Africana, 46.
179 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 96.
180 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 102.
Philosopher Bernard R. Boxill has written insightfully about Douglass’s fight with Covey, and the larger issues around Douglass’s transition from being a pacifist to believing in violent resistance. Boxill notes, “One explanation of his change from pacifist to advocate of violent slave resistance is that while he was always clear that the slaves had a right to resist their masters violently, before 1849 he warned against violent slave resistance because he believed it would delay the abolition of slavery and have bad consequences overall: after 1849 he changed his mind and began urging violent slave resistance because he believed it would hasten the end of slavery.” See “The Fight with Covey” in Gordon Existence in Black, 274.

Note that within the institutional practices of American slavery a few Black families also financially benefited from owning enslaved Black bodies. The point here is that when it came to making profits, class positionality and bourgeois values became the central organizing principle. In short, those few Blacks who financially benefited from slavery shared similar class values to those elite whites who benefited from slavery. Such bourgeois Blacks were invested both in the accumulation of wealth and protecting their material interests, even if this meant upholding the continued enslavement of “fellow” Blacks. However, it is my sense that these bourgeois Blacks would have rejected the myths regarding the natural inferiority of African bodies as based upon the latter’s dark epidermal constitution. Were this not the case, this would have placed such elite Blacks, despite their wealth, within the same negative ontological frame of reference as those Blacks who were caricatured as dumb animals fit for the field. Of course, light skin also functioned as a marker of the Black aristocracy. Indeed, Black abolitionists who were light in complexion and against the continued enslavement of Black bodies still looked down upon those masses of (dark complexioned) Blacks who were uneducated. The reader should also keep in mind that some Blacks were even disappointed by efforts to dismantle Jim Crow laws. The existence of such laws provided some Blacks, those who owned small stores and businesses, with the opportunity to exploit fellow Blacks who were legally prevented from shopping at “white only” stores.
Chapter VII

Desiring *Bluest Eyes*, Desiring Whiteness:
The Internalization of the White Gaze and Being Double

In a racially imperialist nation such as ours, it is the dominant race that reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily aware of their racial identity. It is the dominant race that can make it seem their experience is representative.

—bell hooks

All lists of the moral connotations of white as symbol in Western culture are the same: purity, spirituality, transcendence, cleanliness, virtue, simplicity, chastity.

—Richard Dyer

Historically relegated to the auction block instead of the pedestal, the black female body has been constructed as the ugly end of a wearisome Western dialectic: not sacred but profane, not angelic but demonic, not fair lady but ugly darky.

—Vanessa D. Dickerson

In this chapter, I expose a paradigm case of Du Boisian double consciousness generated through the power of whiteness. As a manifestation of pathology, double consciousness will be exposed and theorized within the context of Toni Morrison’s fictional text, *The Bluest Eye*. Given the fact that Morrison is also engaged in the process of exposing whiteness and its impact upon the Black psyche, this chapter functions as a form of “double-exposure.” Unlike Fanon, Ellison’s invisible man, Malcolm X, and Du Bois, Pecola Breedlove, the young and innocent protagonist of Morrison’s text, does not manage psychologically to survive having her Black body “confiscated” and phenomenologically returned back to her as that which is problematic, ugly, wretched, and worthless. Indeed, she comes to fully internalize the “thrown back image”; she only “sees” her Black self as “seen” by the (white) One. Consequently, she comes to desire the
attributes of the One. For want of the bluest eyes, she undergoes a psychological split that is so massive that she comes to imagine that she in fact has the bluest eyes.

As I have shown, whiteness is to good as Blackness is to evil. Blackness is ugly. It is dirty. It is uncivilized. Within the *episteme* of whiteness, “Darker peoples,” as Du Bois argues, “are dark in mind as well as in body; of dark, uncertain, and imperfect descent; of frailer, cheaper stuff.” ¹ Pecola Breedlove has fully internalized the myths of whiteness, particularly the myth of white beauty. She has come to see her dark skin, her non-blue eyes, as composed of “cheaper stuff.” In Morrison’s text, within the semiotic space of whiteness, blue eyes signify universal beauty. Pecola has so internalized the standard of whiteness that her twoness, her doubleness, no longer appears to be something that she can recognize. The internalized “white voice,” as it were, that speaks to Pecola as being a dark problem, as something aesthetically disgusting, does not appear to take place within a soul of “two warring ideals.” There appears to be only one voice, the voice of the white demi-god. When she looks inside herself, there appears to be only one soul, one thought, a single striving, one ideal: to be white, to possess blue eyes. Pecola only sees herself “through the revelation of the other [white] world.”² She has learned to measure herself by the bright eyes and white pure innocence of little Shirley Temple. She has internalized all the cultural images that visually speak to her of her degradation and she has found her Black body/self seriously wanting. Within the process of becoming “double,” her fragile psyche could not sustain the constant warring, so her little dark body was “torn asunder.”

As will be shown, Pecola is a tragic figure. In the text, she has completely *bleached* her identity “in a flood of white Americanism.”³ Unlike Emma Lou Brown, the
Black female protagonist in Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*, Pecola never gains a sense of “mental independence.” As Thurman writes, “Not that she minded being black, being a Negro necessitated having a colored skin, but she did mind being too black.” As mentioned before, from the perspective of whiteness, even if someone only has one-drop of “Black blood” one is still *too* Black. And although Emma insisted upon using “an excess of rouge and powder” to whiten her *too* Black face, at the end of the text she comes to accept her Black skin, ceases trying to be what she is not, and learns how to fight “not so much for acceptance by other people, but for acceptance of herself by herself.” Pecola, however, never comes to accept “herself by herself.” She finds salvation in blue eyes. The “salvation” of having bluest eyes, however, turns out to mean the psychological death of Pecola. In possessing the bluest eyes, she becomes the “bluest I,” which indicates Morrison’s powerful pun on the title of the book.

In terms of the historical emergence of critical whiteness studies, it is important to note that before Toni Morrison’s seminal text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, from which critical whiteness theorists frequently quote and in which Morrison explores how the literary white imagination is parasitic upon various literary configurations of Blackness, there was *The Bluest Eye*. Although written over thirty years ago, the text is powerful in terms of its location, exposure, and interrogation of the semiotic spaces of whiteness. It is a crucial text that clearly demonstrates the psychological price to be paid for bleaching the Negro soul in a flood of whiteness.

Like *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* critically exposes the white
imaginary. As the title suggests, Morrison refuses to “play in the dark,” but is interested in exposing “the serviceability of the Africanist presence”\(^\text{10}\) in white literary works. Highlighting the significance of *Playing in the Dark*, Robert Gooding Williams notes that Africanist racial representations “were constituted through the ascription of multiple purposes and functions to individuals racially classified as black.”\(^\text{11}\) One such ascription is that of an enabler. Morrison:

> Africanism is the vehicle by which the American [white] self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.\(^\text{12}\)

Morrison uses the term American Africanism to describe “denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these [Black] people.”\(^\text{13}\) On this score, in the white literary imagination, Black people have been treated as “standing-reserve,”\(^\text{14}\) raw material just waiting to be used, exploited, spoken for, and validated by and through whiteness. Morrison asks, “What does positing one’s writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail?”\(^\text{15}\) It entails the presumption of universality. It presumes that whiteness does not mediate one’s vision or imagination. Indeed, such a white (read: unraced) writerly self is deemed normal, typical, superior, the standard, and the measure.
Whiteness, as unraced, normative, and autonomous, has no need of recognition through the “Black gaze.” After all, or so the racist assumption goes, there is no Black gaze, for this would imply a form of Black subjectivity, which would further imply a Black perspective, a view upon the world. However, as I have shown throughout this project, given the racist assumption that Blacks are like animals, beasts of burden, their raison d’etre is inextricably tied to the aims and purposes of those (whites) in power. As Morrison makes clear, however, the ascendancy and formation of white American identity is dialectically linked to the denigration and deformation of Black American identity. Morrison:

I want to suggest that these concerns—autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power—not only became the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and area for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.¹⁶

For example, in Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Morrison shows how that text carries the weight of America’s economy of racist discourse concerning Black women. It is the character Sapphira whose very existential liveliness is dependent upon her need to denigrate the Black enslaved Nancy (imaginatively and possibly physically through the use of her nephew, Martin). Within a typical motif in North American
history, one discussed in the preceding chapters, not only were Black men thought to be bestial, but Black women were also thought to be oversexed and always sexually available. The trope of the oversexed Black woman, allows Sapphira to endow herself with value, virtue, and self-worth. Also, regarding Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Morrison wants to move beyond the interpretative framework that stabilizes the text within a sentimental nostrum about the innocence of Americanness. 

The text “becomes a more beautifully complicated work that sheds much light on some of the problems it has accumulated through traditional readings too shy to linger over the implications of the Africanist presence at its center.” For example, Morrison argues that the construction of the character Huck’s identity is inter-textually linked to the status of Jim as a “nigger.” She exposes that “the agency, however, for Huck’s struggle is the nigger Jim, and it is absolutely necessary . . . that the term nigger be inextricable from Huck’s deliberations about who and what he himself is—or, more precisely, is not.”

As a Black literary figure, Morrison brings a critical subjectivity (a kind of returned “gaze”) to bear upon those who have for so long constructed Blacks as incapable of critical thought and subjectivity. Although the textual foreground of *The Bluest Eye* explicitly portrays the deformation of the Black body/self of Pecola, the text “pecks away,” according to Morrison, “at the [white] gaze that condemned her.” Hence, prior to *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison demands (in this case, by uncovering the secret of Pecola’s “ugliness,” psychopathology) that we turn our critical gaze toward the constituting activities, discursive field, and racist imaginary of whiteness. As has been shown, making whiteness visible is an important goal of critical whiteness studies. The metaphor of “pecking away” at whiteness suggests that it is concealed and concealing. It
is Morrison’s objective to “peck away” at the powerful edifice of normativity that whiteness has constructed, to “deconstruct” and reveal how whiteness’s normativity is predicated upon the dynamics of power and hegemony.

Through *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison engages in a form of textual exposure of whiteness as a historically contingent set of practices. In this way, Pecola is not deemed a site of Black pathology resulting from a culture of poverty. Rather, Pecola’s “wretchedness” is an effect of white racist power. On this score, whiteness, as critical whiteness theorists have pointed out, occupies a particular social, historical, material, and cultural position within a larger set of relationships. Those who are not white within these larger social relationships experience various degrees of pain, angst, and suffering. What is often masked, however, is the extent to which whiteness creates and sustains various social inequalities that are inextricably linked to the suffering of nonwhite people and the privileging of white people. Hence, the process of examining whiteness as a site of “non-raced” power and agency is an important critical strategy of interrogating whiteness. Both Morrison and critical whiteness studies theorists examine whiteness from this same point of strategic embarkation.

Whiteness gets performed through what Du Bois refers to as “darker deeds.” Pecola did not ask to be born within a society that held up a mirror to her that exclaimed, “You are ugly and of ‘lower grade’.” It is Pecola’s *returned* (negatively epidermalized) Black body, objectified and negatively reconfigured by the normalizing white gaze, which becomes the source of her existential and ontological contemptibility. I am reminded of African-American artists and photographer Carrie Mae Weems’ photographic work entitled “Mirror, Mirror,” where a dark skinned women looks into a
mirror only to be faced by what looks like a pale, older white woman. Beneath the photograph reads:

    Mirror, Mirror on the Wall
    Who’s the Finest of them All?
    Snow White, you black bitch,
    And Don’t You Forget it.²²

Morrison characterizes the structure of the white gaze, revealing its power to reconfigure Black bodies, during a moment in the text where Pecola goes into Mr. Yacobowski’s Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store to buy some candy. Mr. Yacobowski is one of those whites, as Du Bois notes, who was taught “to believe that white people were so inherently and eternally superior to blacks, that to eat, sit, live or learn beside them [or even to sell them candy] was absolute degradation.”²³ As an immigrant in America, Mr. Yacobowski had “paid the price of the ticket. The price,” according to James Baldwin, “was to become ‘white’.”²⁴ He has seized the opportunity to become white; to partake of America’s ideal of white identity. Mr. Yacobowski’s gaze, his surveillance of Pecola (the surveilled), is linked to the power to define. Dialectically, his immigrant status is diminished and the investment in his whiteness as property is increased to the extent that he defines in negative terms this “poor Black thing” that stands before him. Operating from this site of white identity construction, Mr. Yacobowski has learned how to deny the active part that he plays in constructing Pecola. His distorted construction of her body at the level of the imaginary—a body that he
mistakes as ontic—only reinforces the illusion that he lives his own white identity/his body as real and stable. Intra-psychologically, his interaction with Pecola, which is really a relationship that he has with a fantasized object that he has projected outwardly from himself, is predicated upon the introjection of a false self that conceals its own instability, fears and anxieties. As a performance, his gaze possesses the power to call forth, as it were, that which it “sees.” Morrison writes:

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes.²⁵

Within this encounter, Mr. Yacobowski’s blue eyes are devoid of curiosity. This suggests that the little Black girl who stands before him is always already known. Her presence does not elicit interest, surprise, or inquisitiveness. Pecola’s uniqueness, her individuality, is passed over. In his gaze, there is a vacuum that renders her of no particular interest. She might be said to be nondescript. To be “nondescript,” however,
implies belonging to no particular class or kind. The reality is that Mr. Yacobowski does in fact recognize Pecola as belonging to a particular racial classification or kind. She belongs to the *Black kind*. He does not “see” her as a social kind, but as a natural *racial* kind. Pecola’s Blackness registers her anonymity. She is “recognized” and yet unrecognized, visible in her invisibility. As Black, she constitutes the anonymous *they* of Blackness. She is every Black who has ever come into the store, a mere instantiation of Blackness. Indeed, she is every Black that Mr. Yacobowski has ever seen and been told about. The details of Pecola’s life are irrelevant. It is enough that she is Black, typified, pure and simple. As Morrison writes:

> Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see.\(^{26}\)

Pecola, within the anonymous space of typification, does not even receive the respect that might be shown to a stranger. At least the stranger might loosen the cement of social typification in virtue of his/her not being from the same neighborhood. His/her strangeness has the potential of triggering at least a dialogue. Moreover, a stranger (or at least the non-Black stranger) would no doubt elicit the act of human recognition on the part of Mr. Yacobowski. Pecola has become the ersatz human being. Note that the emphasis is not placed upon Mr. Yacobowski’s look in terms of how it might be shaped along an axis of gender. The structure of the social encounter has very little if anything to
do with the fact that he is a grown man and she is a little girl. The encounter appears primarily shaped and mediated by Yacobowski’s whiteness. Morison locates part of the problem at the site of the physicality of the eye, at the bottom of the lid. Distaste is said to reside there. In fact, Pecola is said to be aware of this scopic distaste in all white people. She concludes that the distaste must be for her Blackness. Her Blackness is a signifier of distaste, dirtiness, aversion, and discontent.

From a first-person phenomenological or lived perspective, Pecola is “flux and anticipation.” She is trans-phenomenal and meta-stable. She possesses a sense of her being-toward-the-future. She is always already more than she is at any particular moment. As flux and anticipation, she exists as a *possibility*. It is her Blackness that is said to be “static and dread.” Hence, her Blackness is facticity, a thing to be feared, that which is the negation of values. Her Blackness is the embodiment of nihilism. Like Ellison’s invisible man, Pecola no doubt aches with the need to convince herself that she does in fact exist in the real world, but she does not strike out with her fists, curse, or swear to force Mr. Yacobowski to recognize her. After leaving the store, she does feel angry. Indeed, the surge of anger that she feels has a humanizing dimension. After all, the white gaze has rendered her ontologically worthless. Her feeling of anger confirms that she experiences the world from an existential *here*. Her anger functions as a kind of a posteriori proof that *she is*. I’m angry, ergo I am. Like Ellison’s invisible man, who often feels the need to bump people back, or Bigger Thomas, the protagonist in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, who actually and symbolically “slays whiteness,” anger functions as a conduit through which some level of recognition is gained. As Morrison notes, “Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness
of worth." Mr. Yacobowski’s gaze is part of a larger accretion of white social forces that come to bear upon the denigration of her Black body/self, thus eradicating the space for a dialectics of recognition.

From what I have theorized regarding the notion of whiteness and the phenomenon of sameness, it is not Pecola’s Blackness as such that causes the problem. “Blackness,” after all, vis-à-vis the white gaze is a myth of whiteness. As she eagerly waits to purchase some candy, Pecola is not “seen” at all. However, she is visible just enough that “he hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand” as she holds out her hand containing three pennies to buy some candy. This is how the Black body, Pecola’s body, gets produced. Within this highly white mediated semiotic space, his hesitation to touch her hand returns a negative racial epidermal schema back to her. What is fascinating here is how the power of whiteness gets performed through something as apparently benign as a hesitant reach for money from the hands of a Black little girl. This hesitant reach, though, embodies the larger white world that is even hesitant to grant (as if they even had the power to “grant”) the humanity of Blacks. This example is just one more site of white power and how it impacts Pecola’s corporeal schema. In her painstaking narrative detail of Pecola’s identity, Morrison is operating within a genealogical space of critique that “painstakingly exposes the tiny influences [refusing to touch Pecola’s hand for example] on a body that, over time, not only produce a subject of a certain sort [self-hating], [but] a subject defined by what it takes to be knowledge about itself and its world [that Black people were born inferior and ugly].”

The problem is located in Mr. Yacobowski’s white gaze. It is his gaze, which has been shaped by the everyday, quotidian practices of whiteness, which generates and
produces Pecola’s Blackness as static and dread. In other words, consistent with what I have argued thus far, it is his gaze, which is both a site of white racist power and its vehicle of expression, that accounts for and creates the emptiness edged with distaste in his eyes. He does not see the flux and anticipation of a little girl. He does not see Pecola’s Otherness as Other. Rather, he sees Pecola’s Otherness as sameness. She is learning to “see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people.” As Fanon would say, the glance of others fixed her, sealing her “into that crushing objecthood.” Even after Pecola leaves Mr. Yacobowski’s store, she feels a dart of affection that leaps out for some dandelions that she notices. Morrison is quick to note that the dandelions (like Mr. Yacobowski’s white narcissism) “do not look at her and do not send love back.” Hence, the initial dart of affection is squandered and Pecola is unable to see the beauty in the dandelions; she is filled with Mr. Yacobowski’s negative reactive value-creating force, his hatred of her. Thus, she begins to feel shame and self-loathing.

Carrying the weight of internalized white racism and the white gaze, Pecola has come to “know” the deficits of her Black “lived body” all too well. As will be shown, moving in and out of white racist semiotic spaces, Pecola will learn to relate to herself as inferior, dirty, limited, and somatically uglified. Unlike the idyllic (read: white) Dick-and-Jane reading primer that the reader encounters at the very beginning of the text – a narrative which Morrison brilliantly collapses into a maddening stream of sentences without punctuation – the reader becomes immediately aware of significant familial and ontological fractures in Pecola Breedlove’s life when he/she encounters Pecola for the first time within The Bluest Eye (narrated by Claudia, one of the central characters in the text, and an omniscient voice):
Cholly Breedlove [Pecola’s father], then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail.34

The Dick-and-Jane reading primer tells the story of a house that is green and white. The Mother, Father, Dick and Jane reside therein. There is a dog and a cat. There is much happiness and laughter. The Father is strong and the Mother loves to play with her children. And Jane is said to have friends who love to play with her. Opening the text with this Dick-and-Jane reading primer creates an artificial narrative text against which Pecola and her family are to be contrasted. The words in the primer, as Theresa M. Towner writes, “scream their [white] simplistic morality, and their normalcy.”35 The primer creates the familiar Manichean divide that has been encountered throughout this project. As Elliott Butler-Evans notes:

_The Bluest Eye_ depicts the struggle between two warring factions. The Dick-and-Jane frame has as its referent not only the primer but the cultural values of the dominant society. It is read and deconstructed by the lived experiences of the Breedloves. Juxtapositions of the two narratives not only reinforce the dominant theme of the novel but illuminate the novel’s textual processes. Contrasts between the Dick-and-Jane world and the
“real” world of the Breedloves are structured around several sets of binary oppositions: White/Black, affluence/poverty, desirability/undesirability, order/chaos, valued/devalued.\(^36\)

Adding to an already dismal set of circumstances, Claudia adds, “She came with nothing.”\(^37\) In the Dick-and-Jane primer, the entire family appears to want for nothing. The familial space is replete with beauty, stability, cleanliness, safety, and wholesomeness. For Pecola, existentially speaking, she is just there, solitary and destitute. And like the flowers that Claudia later describes as having failed to grow, Pecola is also unyielding and barren. But what is also significant is the reality that Pecola had been put “outdoors.” Within the text, being put outdoors signals a profound sense of having been ostracized. Indeed, it constitutes “the real terror of life.”\(^38\)

Capturing the finality of being outdoors, Claudia says, “But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter—like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead. Dead doesn’t change, and outdoors is here to stay.”\(^39\) So, the sense of being outdoors is not just a spatial relationship; it also connotes an ontological stasis, a sense of nothingness. Hence, Claudia’s observation that Pecola came with nothing is itself rich with existential themes of dread and meaninglessness. Claudia goes on to say, “Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership.”\(^40\) In other words, in her state of “nothingness,” which acts as a trope signifying both race and class, Pecola is desperate for something of value, something that she can own, a piece of property. She hungers for something that will provide her with a sense of being, belonging, and self-value. However, as Pecola fully comes to accept,
being Black does not confer value; indeed, Blackness is tantamount to being property-less.

Concerning the point that whiteness is a form of property, the reader will note that Du Bois understood whiteness as a wage that paid handsomely in terms of public deference, psychological uplift, protection from harm, access to public parks, and better schools. Also referring to whiteness as a form of property, Cheryl Harris argues:

For the first two hundred years of the country’s existence, the system of racialized privilege in both the public and private spheres carried through this linkage of rights and inequality, and rights and property. Whiteness as property was the critical core of a system that affirmed the hierarchical relations between white and Black.

Within the context of white greed, Du Bois asks himself why whiteness is so incredibly desirable and answers, “Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!” For Black people, white ownership and greed implies making do within socio-economic, ghettoized spaces of mere survival.

It is important to keep in mind that the novel takes place in Lorain, Ohio, in 1941. Lorain, Ohio is the same place that Toni Morrison actually grew up. Being Black, the Breedlove family, like Morrison’s family, would have been hit hardest by the Great Depression. With descriptive clarity, indicating the degree to which Blacks were subjected to the greedy ways of white landlords, Morrison provides the reader with a
view of the depressive physical environment within which Pecola lived. The Breedlove family is described as “nestled together in the storefront. Festering together in the debris of a realtor’s whim.” The furniture and the spatial dimensions of their living space invoke a sense of aesthetic disgust:

In the center of the bedroom, for the even distribution of heat, stood a coal stove. Trunks, chairs, a small end table, and a cardboard “wardrobe” closet were placed around the walls. The kitchen was in the back of this apartment, a separate room. There were no bath facilities. Only a toilet bowl, inaccessible to the eye, if not the ear, of the tenants.

Concerning the furnishings, there is really no more to be said. The furnishings “were anything but describable, having been conceived, manufactured, shipped, and sold in various states of thoughtlessness, greed, and indifference.” Having received a damaged sofa, which occurred during delivery, one of the white mover’s argue with Cholly, Pecola’s father:

“Looka here, buddy. It was O.K. when I put it on the truck. The store can’t do anything about it once it’s on the truck . . . .” Listerine and Lucky Strike breath.

“But I don’t want no tore couch if ‘n it’s bought new.” Pleading eyes and tightened testicles.

“Tough shit, buddy. Your tough shit.”
Note the implied reference to Blackness as something dirty, as feces. But this is how whiteness fortifies its purity. Whiteness involves “the all-pervading desire to inculcate,” as Du Bois says, “disdain for everything black, from Toussaint to the devil.”

Combining elements of class, race, and theorizing the fundamental dimensions of internalized (white) self-surveillance, Morrison writes:

The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. *They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly.* . . . Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them.

What has created in them the belief that they were ugly? What is it about their Black bodies such that they get “returned” in distorted form? If the ugliness does not belong to them, then to whom does it belong? In a passage rich with figurative language, Morrison provides a glimpse into the origins of this conviction. Relevant here is the argument that the self is *not* prior to the effects of a discursive field. Morrison:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and
they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. “Yes,” they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it.  

In short, the Breedlove’s bodies were disciplined through the regime of whiteness, its values and dictates, which passes itself off, as Morrison says of political ideology, “as immutable, natural, and innocent.”

The point here is that within the context of white racist America, the Black self is always already formed through discourse, through various practices that “confirm” the Black self as ugly, bestial, dirty, worthless. Commenting upon the “ugliness” of the Breedloves, Keith E. Byerman notes the burden of this “ugliness’ is accepted without direct coercion. There are few white characters in the novel to impose the view. The ideological hegemony of whiteness is simply too overwhelming to be successfully resisted.” The reality of whiteness, however, expresses itself in the form of a conglomerate set of interlocking forces. These forces inhabit every nook and cranny of American life, possessing the power to make itself representative. As Morrison implies, no matter how much one looks at the Breedloves, the ugliness cannot be located on the surface of their skin, as it were. Hence, it is their conviction that they are ugly that is the problem. This, of course, only begs the question of which Morrison is fully aware: What is the source of this conviction? The conviction did not emerge through a process of
autogenesis. It is not as if the self comes into the world ready-made, autonomous and the absolute ground of its own meaning. By the time the self becomes critically self-reflexive, it has already become the effect of power such that “certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals.”

Power, then, need not function in ways that are noticeably “externally coercive.” So, by the time that Pecola comes to work through the socio-psychological dynamics of the individual that she has become, though within the text she never reaches this level of critical self-interrogation, the structure of her identity has already been constituted as an individual of a certain type—what she values, how she thinks about her eyes, her dark skin, whiteness, etc. In delineating such details as these, power has already been discerned. This does not occlude, however, the need to address the issue concerning the origin of the conviction that the Breedloves possess.

The (racist) force relations that constitute who the Breedloves are, though systemic and pervasive, have an origin. This raises the issue of Fanon’s conceptualization of the process of socio-genesis. Through various white practices, certain values and representations (like “Blackness is ugly”) have come to appear as though they exist independently of human action. Hence, this sense of conviction is created within the context of white evasion, the serious attitude that reconfigures values as objects in the world. As a master signifier, whiteness deems itself uncaused and unconditioned, that mysterious reality that has the absolute power to define difference. Morrison’s reference to “some mysterious all-knowing master” resonates with my earlier characterization of whiteness as the omniscient One. The historical specificity and particularity of whiteness’s knowledge of itself and “Others” is presumed universal and ahistorical. On
this score, the Breedloves are trapped within a semiotic space of white (“universal”) aesthetical ideals, ideals according to which they are deemed different qua non-white and thereby indelibly stained by the disfiguring mark of Blackness. Instead of values that owe their existence to various cultural practices, the Breedloves have come to accept certain values—through everyday forms of anti-Black racist practices—as material facts of the physical world. They come to believe that their ugliness is not extrinsic, but an intrinsic feature of their very essence. The Breedloves appear unable to cast off the white imposed cloak or veil. They have been split, doubled, through the measurement of their souls by the tape of a world (or by an outside gaze) that says that whiteness is ontologically and aesthetically supreme. Invoking the image of a master, Morrison is aware of the crippling impact of the institution of American slavery. She is cognizant of how deep white colonialism impacts the (dark) colonized, creating a double consciousness in their very souls through the construction of a semiotic space designed to “confirm” their colonized status. Morrison is clearly aware of the circular logic and self-reinforcing structure of whiteness. “You are ugly people,” when applied to Black people, carries an epistemic truth-value within a white discursive field that already comes replete with its own stipulated criteria for what constitutes beauty. As Du Bois was quoted earlier as saying, whiteness comes replete with its own judge and jury and summons its own witnesses.

The mesmerizing power of whiteness, the sheer weight of its normativity and symbolic power, is clear in the novel when Frieda, Claudia’s older sister, brings Pecola a snack:
Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was.56

Why is Pecola so obsessed with Shirley Temple? What does she see in her? What does Pecola not see in herself? Indeed, why does Pecola feel a deep sense of internal vacuity when looking at Shirley Temple? On the view developed thus far, Shirley Temple represents what Pecola is not. Indeed, Pecola’s difference is defined relative to Shirley Temple’s whiteness (as transcendental signified/master signifier). Pecola’s Black body/self is phenomenologically returned to her, reconfigured as ugly vis-à-vis the way in which Shirley Temple’s body has been constructed as intrinsically beautiful. It is not just the image of Shirley Temple that holds Pecola’s attention; it is also the white substance inside the cup. It is only later in the narrative that we are told that Pecola drank three quarts of milk. Milk symbolizes whiteness. It is not out of greediness, as believed by Claudia’s mother, Mrs. MacTeer, that Pecola consumes so much milk; rather, it is out of her need to become white through the very act of consuming the milk. Perhaps the whiteness in the milk will create a metamorphosis, changing her from Black to white, from absent to present, from nothing to something, from ugly to beautiful, from dirty to purity.

This theme involving the ingestion of whiteness is also clear in Pecola’s selection of candy from Mr. Yacobowski’s store. She buys Mary Janes. Even the innocent act of
buying candy becomes an opportunity for racial self-resentment and self-denigration.

Something as presumably benign as a candy wrapper functions as a site of white cultural semiosis. Morrison writes:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.\(^{57}\)

So, even as Pecola is rejected and denigrated by the power embedded within Mr. Yacobowski’s gaze, whose eyes, as I have noted, are blue, she seeks the power of Mary Jane’s blue eyes through a process of “symbolic cannibalism.”\(^{58}\) Blue eyes are both threatening\(^{59}\) and yet signify safety and solace. Blue eyes constitute a metonymy for white hegemony as this is expressed through white cultural aesthetic ideals. Gunilla Theander Kester argues that “blue eyes stand as a \textit{pars pro toto}, a synecdoche for a white little girl whom a racist culture would consider beautiful.”\(^{60}\) Like the whiteness of the milk, the piece of candy is believed to have the power to produce a genuine state of ontological change in Pecola, a change from Black to white, from a state of “racialized somatophobia,”\(^{61}\) to a state of clean somatic comfort and “normalcy.”

Through a process where reality and fiction are blurred, Pecola’s mother, Pauline, is caught within a world of white filmic hyper-reality, which further nurtures Pecola’s
inability to see through the farce of whiteness. Pauline:

The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I’d go early, before the show started. They’d cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I’d move right on in them pictures . . . . Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. I don’t know. I ’member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well, almost just like.62

Like Pecola, Pauline has internalized the fiction that whiteness is supremely beautiful. For Pecola and Pauline, whiteness, in psychoanalytic terms, has become an “object-cathexis,” an “object” in which they have come to invest all of their mental and emotional energy. While at the picture show, Pauline is able to inhabit the filmic space of whiteness imaginatively. She is able to be the luminescent Jean Harlow.

Richard Dyer’s work on the cultural uses of light, through lighting technology, argues that light in film is used to construct white people as individuals. Dyer:

It is at least arguable that white society has found it hard to see non-white people as individuals; the very notion of the individual, of the freely developing, autonomous human person, is only applicable to those who
are seen to be free and autonomous, who are not slaves or subject peoples. Movie lighting discriminates against non-white people because it is used in a cinema and a culture that finds it hard to recognize them as appropriate subjects for such lighting, that is, as individuals.\textsuperscript{63}

Dyer’s point is that even the technological uses of light can involve the exercise of power. The process of lighting becomes a medium of racial structuration, a technology of discipline that privileges white bodies/selves. Pauline is elevated by the medium of light used to enhance the whiteness of the characters on the screen; she partakes in the humanizing [read: white] and privileging powers of white light.

Elaborating on the powerful visual dimensions of Pauline’s cinematic absorption of the value code of white aesthetics, Morrison is aware of the plenitudinous character of white light where she says, “There the black-and-white images came together, making a magnificent whole—all projected through the ray of light from above and behind.”\textsuperscript{64} Within a Platonic world, Pauline is like an artist’s representation of a sensible object, a mere copy of a copy. Gary Schwartz suggests this interpretation where he argues: “Pauline, as the viewer and learner, has absorbed the visions of light and darkness and becomes the engine of their reproduction . . . . Wittingly or otherwise, Pauline not only becomes the Imitation but, in turn, imitates it. She is an imitation of an imitation.”\textsuperscript{65} Living her life through cinematic white images, it is no wonder that Pauline, when Pecola was born, describes Pecola as “a black ball of hair.”\textsuperscript{66} Pauline adds, “But I knewed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.”\textsuperscript{67} Even that pretty hair will eventually give way to “tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb.”\textsuperscript{68} Even at birth,
Pauline has already rendered Pecola’s body problematic. Thus, “Pauline begins to distance herself from her child’s body, identifying it as another strike against her own self, since the issue of her body cannot approximate the likes of Shirley Temple . . . .”

As an ideal servant of whiteness, Pauline plays the part impeccably, superimposing upon Pecola her own self-hatred. Though she neglects her own home, Pauline is obsessed with cleaning the Fisher’s house where she is a housemaid. In the Fisher’s house, she feels in control, happy, responsible, and clean. While working in the Fisher’s home, as when she sits mesmerized in the cinema, she feels a momentary reprieve from her Blackness (read: ugliness and dirtiness). After all, the Fisher’s home has “white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware.” Whiteness also provides Pauline with a false sense of existential meaning and emotional stability:

Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children. Them she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly’s mother’s. Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life.

In a scene where Frieda and Claudia go to visit Pecola at the Fisher’s home, where Pauline is on duty working, Pecola is exposed to her mother’s vigilant obsession
with and protection of the “purity” of whiteness. While waiting for Pauline to retrieve
the wash, a young white girl—the little Fisher girl—came into the kitchen where Pecola,
Frieda and Claudia had been waiting. Anxious, she called for Pauline. Instead of calling
her “Mrs. Breedlove,” the formal address that her own children are required to use, the
little white girl calls for “Polly.” As she called for Polly, Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia
noticed a deep-dish blueberry cobbler near the stove. Pecola decided to touch it to see if it
was hot. As she did so, the blueberry pie fell by accident. The hot blueberries went
everywhere, with most of the juice splattering on Pecola’s legs. As Claudia narrates:

    In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked
her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs.
Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin
with anger, abused Pecola directly and Freida and me by implication.72

Pauline calls Pecola a “crazy fool,” as she worries about the dirtiness of the floor. In the
meantime, the little white girl begins to cry. Pauline immediately turns her loving
attention to the white girl’s pink sunback dress that had gotten dirty by the blackish
blueberries. She repeats, “Hush. Don’t worry none.”73 She soothes the tears of the “little
pink-and-yellow girl,”74 reassuring her that all will be just fine, as “she spit out words to
us like rotten pieces of apple.”75 On this score, the white body is a site of concern, love
and attention. The Black body, however, is vulnerable to insult, blame, and attack.
Vanessa D. Dickerson notes:
Pecola is one instance of the black child robbed of the affirmation of the caretakers of her body. She is one example of the black child whose need for his or her mother is sacrificed to the white child’s pleasure or comfort in a mammy . . . . The little white girls (and boys) take to themselves relations, reflections, experiences, and feelings that ought rightfully belong to the Claudias and Pecolas of the world.76

Capturing the larger mutual exclusivity between Black bodies and white bodies, an exclusiveness based upon an essentialist, racial binary logic that valorizes the latter and de-valorizes the former, Dickerson also notes:

Unlike the body of the Fisher girl, which receives no concrete physical description, Pecola’s is given a solidity and reality that brings it more sympathetically near. Nevertheless, while the narrative represents Pecola’s body as the real, embraceable body and the Fisher girl’s as the specterized and distant body, Pecola’s is socially assaulted, the Fisher’s girl’s held dear. To put it another way, the white child’s body is what Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* would identify as the tidy body, the one associated with culture and civilization; Pecola’s is the unruly body, the polluted or polluting body associated with nature.77

As the three girls leave, they can hear Pauline promise to make another pie for the little white girl. The white girl twice asks Polly who they were. Consistent with her own
self-negation, Pauline refuses to answer. Symbolically, Pauline erases Pecola through the act of not identifying her. The white girl is left to internalize the image of Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia as unnamed and unnamable problems, Black phantoms whose existence is best left unknown and unknowable. Pecola is left to make sense of a mother who cherishes little white girls over Black girls. She is left to conclude that it is whiteness that guarantees love and affection. This is why Pecola sits for hours “looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike.”

Of course, there is no “ugliness” that is intrinsic to Pecola to be discovered. Her “ugliness” is what emerges dialectically vis-à-vis whiteness. Whiteness is that silent norm, the transcendental signified, which manifests itself through her mother, through film, through small gestures and gazes. It has the power to leave its effects without leaving a trace of its origin. Part of its power and strategy is to leave its devastating effects upon the Black body/self while effectively redefining such effects as natural dispositions of the Black body/self.

Even when it appears that Pecola is “recognized,” this only further reinforces her status as denigrated Other. For example, a young Black character named Junior, who is the son of Geraldine, “recognizes” Pecola only to physically and emotionally traumatize her. Like Pauline, Geraldine is obsessed with cleanliness. Unlike Pauline, however, she is a middle-class Black woman who is married to a predictable middle-class Black man, Louis. Geraldine’s family reflects the “clean” and “pure” life depicted in the primer, with the cat and all. Geraldine is the embodiment of the “cult of true womanhood.” She made sure that her son, husband, and cat were given the best comfort that she could provide. She practiced “thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners.” Seduced by a value-
code that was shaped along an axis of both class and race, she was always trying to get rid of the “funkiness” of life. Morrison:

Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair.80

From the above quote, what comes across clearly is a form of pathology vis-à-vis the Black body in particular and embodiedness, more generally. What is also clear is that Geraldine takes her cue from the model of dutiful and well-respected middle-class white women. Geraldine makes a concerted effort at deracinating any trace of funkiness. Funkiness is too “gaudy,” aesthetically or otherwise. “Gaudiness” might be characterized as a “nigger” attribute. Geraldine took the time to explain to her son the difference between colored people and “niggers.” For her, “colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud.”81 Apparently, niggers did not concern themselves with cutting their hair as short as possible so as to get rid of any sign of “wool.” And despite the fact that Junior was light-skinned, she made sure that he received plenty of Jergens Lotion “on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen.”82 Clearly, Morrison is complicating received notions of what it means to be “Black.” She is also exploring how
Black self-perception differs along an axis of class. Thus, in the mouth of Geraldine, there is an anti-Black racist discourse that creates its own binary.

To the extent that Blacks imitate and valorize the behavior, thought, and feeling patterns of whites, is the extent to which Blacks qua coloreds are able to reap the benefits of whiteness: order, cleanliness, respectability, income, stability, and so on. These are the code words, however, that inevitably return with an exclusionary sting. If one does not fit within the confines of these behavior, thought, and feeling patterns, one is then ridiculed for being a nigger, a result of having been characterized and fixed by a (white projected) negative image of what it means to be Black in the first place. Hence, folk like Geraldine end up hating other Blacks that have been stereotyped and marked as disorderly, gaudy, destitute, savage-like, embodied, and emotional. One might say that just as the fabricated Black presence is important to the identity of whiteness, the fabricated presence of the “nigger type” is important to the “colored type.” Whiteness creates a fabricated nigger type, to which the colored type gives credence and from which it differentiates itself, and thereby creates a false and unachievable set of aspirations/goals for the colored type, getting them to behave as if they are substantially different, perhaps closer to being white. The irony here, though, is that the colored type vis-à-vis whiteness never achieves the status of whiteness.

Hence, Pecola becomes the quintessence of all that is negative in the purview of whiteness, a perspective that Geraldine has internalized. It is Junior who tricks Pecola to come to his house. He “recognizes” her to the extent that she is not like him. She is a nigger and is ugly. He displaces his anger onto her, because of his lack of genuine affection from his mother. After inviting Pecola into his house under the pretext of seeing
some kittens, he throws his big Black cat in her face. The cat scratches her face and chest. After attempting to make Pecola his prisoner, and seeing that she has stopped crying and has taken an interest in the Black cat’s blue eyes, he snatches the cat and begins to swing it around. When Pecola tries to stop him, he and Pecola fall, the cat lands on the radiator and then falls behind the sofa. It is at this moment that Geraldine comes through the door. Junior lies saying, “She killed our cat.”

The death of the cat might be said to foreshadow the devastating consequences that await Pecola as a result of being Black and desiring blue eyes. Although the black cat with blue eyes is physically dead, it is *psychic* death that awaits Pecola. After Junior targets Pecola as the source of the problem, a designation that Pecola has internalized as a result of having her very existence positioned as a problem by her family, the community, and other social forces, Geraldine’s gaze fixes on Pecola, taking care to note her matted hair, her Black “stained” skin, dirty socks, old muddy shoes, her “ugliness,” her disorderliness, and her lack of postural refinement. Again, however, Pecola was not “seen.” She was assessed vis-à-vis the ideals of white culture and was found wanting. It is Geraldine’s gaze that has the capacity to “niggerize” Pecola. It is through her own self-hatred that Geraldine hates Pecola. Geraldine then speaks Pecola into existence; she further performs Pecola’s sense of self-hatred through the use of the power of words: “Get out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.” Again, Pecola’s Black body is returned to her. Only this time she does not return simply as the opposite of pretty Shirley Temple or as the object of distaste in the eyes of an older white man, she returns as a *nasty little black bitch*. Indeed, she returns as the very *negation* of Shirley Temple and all that is white and pure.
Pecola is a site of disgust. She is a joke. Even her teachers tried not to glance at her. She is an object to be lampooned, a “nasty little Black bitch” used to solicit anger from young boys. Morrison:

She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, “Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby Loves Pecola Breedlove!” and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused.

She is the object of constant derision. For example, Claudia relates a story where she and Frieda found Pecola surrounded by a group of boys hurling racial epithets her way: “Black e mo. Yadaddsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black emo . . . .” Whiteness is dutifully served. The boys, through their ritual performance of self-hatred, have demonstrated their effective capacity of negative self-surveillance. Although Claudia and Frieda helped to break the circle of this ritual of self-denial, the theme of self-hatred is subtly and symbolically reintroduced through a mulatto character named Maureen Peal. Maureen, who was only passively watching the events unfold, suddenly puts her arm through Pecola’s and walks away as if they had been the best of friends:

“I just moved here. My name’s Maureen Peal. What’s yours?”
“Pecola.”

“Pecola? Wasn’t that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?”

“I don’t know. What is that?”

“The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother ’cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad.

Everybody cries in it.

Claudette Colbert too.”

“Oh.” Pecola’s voice was no more than a sigh.

“Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty. When it comes back, I’m going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times.”

The reader will note the similarity between the name “Pecola” and “Peola,” who played the self-hating mulatto in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*. One significant point here is that the girl in *Imitation of Life* is called Peola, the “c” is absent. Schwartz suggests an interesting line of reasoning: “Pauline puts her own creative imprimatur on this child with a predestined name. The name with the ‘c’ has some suggestion of Latin *peccatum* (mistake, fault, error) while Peola sounds floral.” Through the act of giving her daughter a name that phonetically sounds similar to “Peola,” Pauline has nominally over-determined her. As it turns out, Pecola and Peola share the reality of internalized self-hatred. So, although Maureen is mistaken in terms of the correct pronunciation of the name, she is correct that Pecola is trapped by whiteness and would rather settle for being an imitation of whiteness than being Black. One wonders whether Pauline, by naming her daughter Pecola, wished for her daughter to be like Peola, pretty with “white” skin.
Misnaming Pecola also functions as a form of rejection. As John Bishop notes, “Maureen Peal’s mistake has a larger relevance as well, for in Morrison’s novels the act of (mis)namning signifies the community’s power to deny individual autonomy.” Bishop goes on to note that “they cannot see Pecola because only the pretty, pale Peola is deemed worthy of notice—they do not c the real girl.”

As stated earlier, Pauline’s obsession with whiteness functions as a generative force that enables Pecola’s self-hatred; she reinforced and cemented the belief that whiteness is a mysterious thing of desirability. But it is Claudia’s interrogation of this thing of desirability that provides glimpses of the possible source of Black self-hatred and perhaps, through Foucauldian problematization, provides a glimpse into possible ways of freeing thought in order to think differently. During a heated exchange with Maureen, where she also reveals her own self-hatred, calling both Claudia and Frieda “ugly black emos,” Claudia reflects: “And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us.” It is here that Claudia demonstrates an awareness of the particularity (non-universality) of white beauty. This Thing, this signifier of purity, cleanliness and goodness, is the product of a generative context of white hegemony. This Thing is not an unconditioned reality, but a socio-ontological reality. This Thing is whiteness.

The power of whiteness (this thing) can be called upon in hours of need. Whiteness, on this score, is talismanic and soteriological. The theological implications are quite obvious. When we think of that which is unblemished, sinless and pure, most of us unconsciously think of that which is white, resembling light, possessing luminosity. In
popular movies, for example, we have automatically come to associate things *dark* with things evil. Think of *Star Wars*. The core narrative of the movie is framed within a Manichean divide between the Dark Side of the Force and the Light Side. It is the Light Side that defeats the Dark Side. My point here is that the construction of whiteness functions problematically in popular culture’s imaginary in its relationship to Blackness (and, by association, Black people). Blackness signifies hopelessness, dread, and that which should be avoided. Whiteness, however, signifies hope, possibility, goodness, and has the power to solicit support and empathy. Think of the movie version of John Grisham’s *A Time to Kill*. After his young Black daughter is horribly raped and left probably infertile by two white men, Carl Lee Hailey, who is played by actor Samuel L. Jackson, takes the law into his own hands and shoots them as they are escorted through the courthouse. Because of his justified lack of trust in the justice system in the South, Hailey knew that he had to make the white male rapists pay. So, he kills them. A white lawyer, Jake Brigance, played by actor Matthew McConaughey, takes on his case. As Brigance delivers his closing statements to an all white jury, he asks them to close their eyes. He then proceeds to describe the horrible details of the rape of a young girl, detailing how her body was soaked in their urine, their semen, and how she was left to die.66 Brigance asks the jurors, “Can you see her?” At the very end of his descriptive journey, one that is designed to put a “human” face on the victim, he says, “Now, imagine she’s white.” Hailey is found not guilty, and the movie ends with the Brigance family, his wife and young daughter, making an effort to cross the racial socio-economic divide by going to an all Black side of town to visit the Hailey family and their friends.
The tragedy here is that it is only through the process of imagining Hailey’s young Black daughter as white that the jurors are able to apparently muster “empathy” for the young Black girl. The young girl’s Black body alone, however, would not have justified the acts of Hailey. The imagined young white girl’s body was needed to elicit the necessary emotional response to empathize with Hailey’s actions. If “empathetic understanding begins with an appreciation of that person’s situation,” then the white jurors never really came to appreciate Hailey’s situation, namely his love for his Black young daughter. It would appear that the all white jurors could only truly infer the other person’s emotions (Hailey’s emotions) if the young girl was white. Hence, since the young girl was Black, they could not have predicted that he would have been so angry that he would have shot and killed the white perpetrators. As Black, he had no right to kill white men, even if they brutally raped his daughter. After all, or so the white myth goes, as a Black girl “she is always already ripe for the taking, [and] cannot be raped by white men.” Indeed, the young girl was Black, the “murderer” was Black, and those killed were white southern boys out having a little fun. Instead of finding correspondences with Hailey’s situation, the jurors had to negate an essential feature of his situation: that he was a Black man whose Black daughter was raped. The jurors never really give their verdict of not guilty based upon a Black father’s justified course of action given the rape of his young Black daughter. They gave the verdict of not guilty based upon an imagined raped white girl. Through the power of the imagined raped white girl, and the moral despicableness, pain, and horror that this image induced in the white jurors, the Black girl’s actual rape was erased. Her humanity and inviolability were not conceded, but negated. Hence, in letting Hailey walk free, they really let their own white
selves walk free. At the end of the movie, it is not justice that prevails, but it is whiteness that prevails and saves the day. The movie only gives the pretense that there has been a victory over racism. The reality is that the hegemony of whiteness has been re-inscribed.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola firmly believes in the saving powers of whiteness. During a scene where Cholly and Pauline are having one of their horrendous physical fights, which are fed by long-standing feelings of failure engineered by a society that systematically chisels away at their humanity, Pecola calls upon the “omnipotence” of whiteness. Claudia narrates, “If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.’” Pecola firmly believes that she, that is, her Blackness, is responsible for the irascible and violent behavior of her parents. However, it is the internalization of “epistemic violence” that leads her to believe this.

Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo’s contention that anorexia nervosa is linked to androcentric disciplinary technologies of the body is key here. For like many who suffer from this condition, Pecola is also subjected to her own “ghosts” who speak and confirm her wretchedness and ugliness. She knows herself as the degraded Other, she knows herself as a problem. This knowledge causes her to wish for her own disappearance: “Please, God,” she whispered into the palm of her hand, “please let me disappear.” Pecola’s way of attempting to de-problematize her identity. It is her wish not to be seen as ugly, as Black, but as beautiful and desirable. In short, it is her desire to be seen as white.

The wish to disappear might also be interpreted as a trope of whiteness. As I have argued, whiteness, as normative, deems itself unmarked, invisible, and transparent. So,
Pecola’s rejection of her body functions on at least three different levels. First, she wishes that she could disappear as the “Black cause” of her parent’s turmoil. Second, there is a sense in which she wishes for some form of “corporeal death.” She at least desires to be unburdened of her epidermal racial-schema, a form of embodiment that she sees as having been cursed. Third, her wish to disappear suggests the desire to be “unrecognized” in her normalcy, to “disappear” within a flood of whiteness and thereby lose the stain of Blackness, that which makes her hyper-visible.

Pauline, by example, taught Pecola to deny herself and to deny life. Denying her own Blackness, unconsciously wishing for the love and protection of a man like Clark Gable, trying her best to look like Jean Harlow, and finally learning to be content with the mantle of ugliness that the power of whiteness imposed upon her, Pauline learned to settle. She became a “Black hole,” as it were, the penetration of which came to mark her worth and her closeness with Cholly. In fact, the only time that Pauline seems close to him is when her “flesh is all that be on his mind.”

It is in these moments of bodily objectification that Pauline is made to believe that she is beautiful: “Not until he has let go of all he has, and give it to me. To me. To me. When he does, I feel a power. I be strong, I be pretty, I be young.” Mixed with overtones of masochism, has Pauline come to accept her self-value through being sexually objectified? Pauline is most happy when she is either under the control of filmic white images, dutifully fulfilling the needs of white folk, or being sexually objectified by Cholly. In all three situations, Pauline undergoes a form of erasure.

Cholly Breedlove’s affections are also hermetically sealed off from his children: “Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise
himself, he could not even comprehend what a relationship should be.” Cholly spends most of his time in a drunken stupor, reflecting the pangs of racism and feelings of rejection that he had experienced in his own life. Unlike the father in the Dick-and-Jane primer, Cholly is thrown within a world of rejection, existential malaise, and anti-Black racism. He is the Black father who does not measure up to the Dick-and-Jane primer. Like Pauline, he too undergoes very powerful experiences of erasure. Like Pecola and Pauline, Cholly’s identity is situated within a racial and racist context of unequal power relations. Cholly’s identity is “given birth to,” as it were, within various contexts that do not ever really generate a positive sense of self-definition.

Cholly’s life begins with rejection. When he was only four days old “his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad.” It was his Great Aunt Jimmy who saved and raised him. Indeed, he was not even given a name at birth by his mother. As Aunt Jimmy says, “Your mama didn’t name you nothing.” Thrown out like trash by his mother and left unnamed, Cholly is born into a society within which the power structure is “controlled by traditional white patriarchs.” One can imagine the degree of repression required to fight back memories of being thrown away like junk and being unloved by his mother. Within a society where Blackness is already devalued and rejected a priori, Cholly already has a tremendous burden to carry.

We learn that years later, as told by the omniscient narrator, Cholly undergoes a devastating encounter with whiteness as he experiences his first sexual act. Instead of directing his anger toward the larger white social structure partly responsible for what he has become, Cholly’s anger becomes implosive, impacting all those closest to him. While
attending a gathering in honor of his recently deceased Great Aunt Jimmy, Cholly and a
girl named Darlene clandestinely go off to copulate. As they begin, they are startled by an
“invasive presence”:

There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a
flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it.
Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up all in one
motion. The men had long guns. “Hee hee hee heeeeee.” The snicker was a
long asthmatic cough. The other raced the flashlight all over Cholly and
Darlene. “Get on wid it, nigger,” said the flashlight one. “Sir?” said
Cholly, trying to find a buttonhole. “I said, get on wid it. An’ make it
good, nigger, make it good.”

In the above passage the reference to the effusion of light is reminiscent of
Pauline’s experience at the movie house. Schwartz, directing attention to the
pornographic overtones of this scene, writes, “Flashlight and Spiritlamp, two sources of
white light, looking at what looks most fascinating to them: what is not white. What is
not white is obscene . . . .” The reader will recall that this “attraction-repulsion”
dynamic was played out by French men as they gazed upon the “non-white obscenity” of
Sarah Bartmann’s Black body. Like Bartmann, Cholly had his behind literally exposed,
with the flashlight making a moon on it. Again, within this context, Morrison captures
the significance of the relationship between the performance of the white gaze, power,
and context. With his behind exposed, Cholly feels vulnerable to white penetration,
symbolically and literally. By shining the light on his buttocks, a light that does not
provide greater clarity, but greater distortion, his masculine somatic schema and body integrity is challenged. Through the structure of white male spectatorship, he is reduced to fragments of flesh. After all, he is on top of Darlene, and the white onlookers never demand to see her. Hence, it is Cholly who is reduced to a gyrating “piece of ass.” The implications of mixed race homoerotic desire are prevalent in this scene. One might also argue that the intrusiveness of the white men disrupted Cholly’s sense of generative, sexual agency just as enslaved Blacks were forced to copulate at the behest of whites (“Get on wid it, niggers”) in order to replenish more pieces of property. Cholly became just another indistinguishable Black animal in estrous, performing before the white gaze. Consistent with what was demonstrated in the previous chapter, Shelley Wong makes an important analogy, noting:

This intrusion of the white world maintains a historical precedent in slavery. The slave trade disrupted generative, and genealogical, time by breaking up families and by rendering family members commodities, that is, by reducing the ever-changing, ever-proliferating body to the status of exchangeable homogenous units.¹¹³

The white gaze, as a ritual performance, as I have argued, is inextricably bound up with objectifying, exoticizing, and sexualizing the Black body, inscribing it with myths and codes that function to *ontologize* it, thus *returning* it as that which it is not. Cholly experiences “the degradation of having this very private act of affirming his manhood turned into a sideshow, into a spectacle of two animals rutting in the woods.”¹¹⁴
He and Darlene are symbolically *returned* to themselves as libidinous animals on display in a public zoo. This is indicative, as I have argued throughout this project, of the white gaze’s power of socio-ontological constitutionality. The white gaze reconstitutes the innocence of the sexual act into something dirty through a mode of re-presentation (partly created through verbal and non-verbal white male actions) that renders the sexual performance of the two Black bodies pornographic. Forced by the voyeuristic white onlookers to continue, Cholly could only pretend: “Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it – hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much.” Symbolically, the white gaze has disrupted Cholly’s show of his “manhood.” The white gaze not only sees, but generates Cholly’s impotence. The white male gaze has symbolically emasculated Cholly.

It is also important to keep in mind the very real historical association of Black male sexuality as a threat to white female “purity.” The ritual of castrating Black men can be interpreted as the manifestation of the need for white men to prove their masculine prowess, to protect their women from contamination resulting from the “unnatural” practices of miscegenation, and to possess that large and threatening object (the Black male penis) that they themselves had created through myth. In Cholly’s situation, the two white males have successfully challenged his “masculine” identity where this identity is linked to his inability to protect Darlene and his inability to maintain an erection. Cholly did not direct his anger toward the white gazers. “They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless.” Once again feeling abandoned, Cholly hates Darlene, a hatred that he also feels toward himself. Dickerson observes:
Unable to protect, to fight, to hide, Cholly cannot manifest the patriarchal prowess, benevolence, or obscurity (after all, his backside is literally exposed) that is traditionally associated with maleness and manhood. Like Darlene he is accessible, weak, and naked. And to be thus naked is to share not only the tenderness and the plight of the female, but also to share a role traditionally assigned to her. The naked male is feminized, if not humanized.¹¹⁸

What is interesting is Cholly’s perception that his “masculinity” and “manhood” have been threatened. At one level of analysis, this threat is real, ideologically speaking, particularly in a culture that is so incredibly phallocentric in its values and practices. The concept of “masculinity,” though, is by no means historically stable.¹¹⁹ Given the American context where men prove themselves through their domination of women, Cholly has become the vehicle through which the power of this ideology gets performed. Within the framework of the masculine ideology, the symbol of the erect penis means masculine power. What is significant to note is that once Cholly’s masculinity is challenged and he feels threatened, he re-inscribes phallocentric power through his desire to fuck Darlene “hard, long, and painfully.” Because the white men have exposed his “weakness,” an attribute that male culture has stipulated as “feminine,” which is another unstable concept, Cholly feels the need to regain a sense of male power, a form of power that he thinks is retrievable through the further humiliation and sexual domination of Darlene.

Feeling exposed, weak, and emasculated, Cholly goes in search of his father,
Samson Fuller, in Macon. Only fourteen, Cholly finds his father playing a game of craps. The reader will note that playing craps would not have been an unusual practice for Black men as they were, in large numbers, excluded from the formal economy. As Cholly is shown a man whose name is Samson Fuller, he feels a certain level of affection. As Cholly attempts to identify himself, he cannot recall the name of his mother, a name that he wonders if he had ever known. His father is more interested in the game. Almost as if his father had been confronted with this scenario before, he responds to Cholly with indifference. In an unforgettable and powerful act of rejection, Morrison writes:

> But Fuller had turned back to the game that was about to begin anew. He bent down to toss a bill on the ground, and waited for a throw. When it was gone, he stood up and in a vexed and whiny voice shouted at Cholly, “Tell that bitch she get her money. Now, get the fuck outta my face!”

Initially feeling utterly paralyzed, Cholly finds the strength to run away. Mastering all of his strength not to cry, “his bowels suddenly opened up, and before he could realize what he knew, liquid stools were running down his legs.” Having “soiled himself like a baby,” Cholly assumes the role of an infant, unprotected, and being unable to control basic bodily functions. The theme of infantilism is significant here. Not only was he thrown away on a junk heap by his mother when he was an infant, had his bare behind exposed to white male onlookers, but now, neglected by his father, he soils his pants and runs away only to physically assume a fetal position. Morrison:
Finding the deepest shadow under the pier, he crouched in it, behind one of the posts. He remained there in fetal position, paralyzed, his fists covering his eyes, for a long time. No sound, no sight, only darkness and heat and the press of his knuckles on his eyelids. He even forgot his messed-up trousers.”

As a Black man in America, Cholly is “stripped by his past of the possibilities of material accumulation and of social standing.” Destitute and Black, living in poverty and squalor that was typical and socio-economically and existentially overbearing for Black folk, being sold inferior furniture and then being identified as “shit” for not wanting it, having lost his self-esteem, rejected by his biological parents, violated by the white male gaze, having no sense of positive self-empowerment, and being an alcoholic to boot, which no doubt functions as a crutch to deal with so much pain and suffering in a white man’s world that constantly holds up to him an image that he is not, Cholly is the epitome of the white man’s burden. Perhaps “there was nothing more to lose.” He is described as being “truly free” and without bounds, “alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him.” This “freedom,” however, is only symbolic; it is born of powerlessness. Feeling god-like and omnipotent, which is the inverse reality of his once real and remembered sexual impotence, which also functions as a trope for economic, affective, and parental impotence, he attempts to control everything within his immediate grasp, though with reckless irresponsibility and devastating consequences.

“So it was,” as Claudia sadly narrates, “on a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring [a time of new and joyous beginnings], he staggered home reeling drunk and
saw his daughter [Pecola] in the kitchen.” Reeking with self-doubt, self-hatred, feeling like a failure in the white man’s world, Cholly undergoes a process of implosion, a process which expresses itself inward as well as outward: He rapes Pecola. “No longer merely a site of ugliness,” as Dickerson says, “Pecola’s body has become a vessel of sin.” Pregnant with her father’s child, having dark skin, which symbolically represents evil, having the habit of drinking three quarts of milk, which Mrs. MacTeer says is “downright sinful,” Pecola’s sinfulness is multiplied. Part of the Dick-and-Jane primer opens up the chapter within which Pecola’s rape is described. The words run together in unpunctuated sentential madness:

“SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONGFATHER
ERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANEFATHER
ISSMILINGSMILEFATHERSMILESMILE.”

The powerful irony is that once again, the primer reads like a fairytale/fake narrative vis-à-vis the life of the Breedlove family. The sentential structure of the primer also clearly lacks boundaries, a reality reflected in Cholly’s relationship with Pecola. Unlike the father in the primer, Cholly does not smile, and his act of “playing” with his daughter becomes a site of unspeakable violence, physical and psychological trauma. Pecola needed to be loved, to feel it, to know its gentleness, to know its unconditionality and warmth, to reciprocate it. “Your brown eyes are beautiful, Pecola.” “Now, what kind of candy can I get the beautiful little girl in the pretty dress?” “Pecola, you’re special and your father and I love you so much.” Unfortunately, from the narrative, these words were
never spoken. Then again, Pecola did wonder what love felt like. Overhearing her mother and father copulating in bed, she came to think of love as “choking sounds and silence.”

Describing the horrible experience of Pecola’s rape, the reader is told, “. . . the gigantic thrust he [Cholly] made into her then provoked the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat.” Perhaps Pecola was correct all along. Love was silence (words of parental affection lacking) and choking sounds (having your body invaded, and forced to emit sounds of profound distress). Pecola needed eyes that refused to see her as ugly, that could not possibly see her as ugly. She needed genuine familial affection, and affirmation, but Cholly could only manage to push her legs apart violently and drop “his seeds in his own plot of black dirt.”

Doubly stained (being Black and physically sullied by her father), Pecola’s Black body returns to her as fucked, both literally and figuratively. She has come to learn multiple messages about being embodied. As a Black young female, she learns the pain and terror of not only what it means to live-her-body-as-Black within a culture where the standard of beauty is indelibly marked by whiteness, but she lives her body in a world where the female body always already “makes one prey” within the context of male dominance. Philosopher Susan J. Brison notes, “Those who endure long periods of repeated torture often find ways of dissociating themselves from their bodies, that part of themselves which undergoes the torture.” Pecola’s body is tortured through the process of abusive words, denigrating performative gazes, and redirected self-hatred. Pecola does not appear to resist the inscriptions of white racist discourse, inscriptions with which she has thoroughly identified. Wherever she goes she encounters communicative projective
fantasies that construct her “ugly” dark body as destiny, as a fixed and timeless entity.

Pecola’s rejection of her body has absolutely nothing to do with Platonic metaphysics. It is not pure disembodiment that she desires. Rather, it is white embodiment that she seeks, and, of course, by extension, disembodiment from her Black body. Cholly only quickens her desire to cast off the dark nuisance she calls her body. Philosopher Linda Alcoff provides a phenomenological description of sexual abuse as traumatically experienced by a young child, insightfully referencing feelings of corporeal dislocation:

The child . . . feels shame marked on the body itself, as a thing to be used, a kind of living spittoon. The flesh of one’s own body envelopes and incorporates the dreaded other, with its disregard for oneself and its capacity for psychic or physical violence. No wonder these events often produce a psychic dislocation from one’s own corporeal present and one’s ability to accept inhabiting this body, which is the continued site of the other. One’s body now will forever retain a layer of remembered experience as the colonized space for a monstrous subjectivity.  

Cholly only adds to the profound loathing that Pecola feels for her dark embodied immanence (etymologically, the sense of “remaining in place,” stasis).

On the symbolic order, to be embodied-in-white is to transcend the autochthonous “black static dirt” that she has become. Symbolically, white embodiment is paradoxically a form of disembodiment. Whiteness is beauty transcendent, pure, clean, untainted, brilliance, genius, above and beyond the dirt and filth of the earth. Whiteness is
associated with forms of angelic embodiment typically represented in iconographic
depictions as luminescent “bodies” descending from the heavens. For Pecola, to be
white, to have blues eyes that are the color of the sky is to escape the world of choking
sounds and silence. It is to escape Mr. Yacobowski’s dehumanizing gaze and to be loved
like the young Fisher girl. It is to live a life that actually breeds love. Cholly, of course,
does not breed-love, but hate, fear, trauma, and incest. Similar to the white gaze, he is a
body snatcher. Reminiscent of the 1956 science fiction film Invasion of the Body
Snatchers, both the white gaze and Cholly are invaders of bodies. They confiscate bodies.
After taking possession of them, the bodies are then returned, though reconfigured, alien,
and often monstrous.

Given the tenor of The Bluest Eye, the reader is made to feel sympathy for Cholly
over and above the inexcusable and unconscionable act of raping his daughter. After all,
Cholly has been the object of systemic forces of white racism and profound levels of
parental neglect. However, immediately leading up to the rape, the actual rape itself, and
immediately thereafter, the reader is aware of the stark irony displayed. The entire scene
is filled with contradictions and oppositions such that the reader’s attention and concern
are shifted toward Pecola. Elliott Butler-Evans captures the significance of such irony in
his analysis of the juxtaposition of contradictory terms used during this tragic moment
within the text:

Central . . . is the recurrent use of tender and tenderness in a context that is
clearly intended to be ironic. Cholly envisions “tenderly” breaking his
daughter’s neck, fantasizes about violating her body with “tenderness,”
and wants to “fuck” her “tenderly.” The oxymoronic construction itself undermines whatever sympathies one has for Cholly. The fusion of tenderness with acts of fantasized and real violence is experienced by the reader as a contradiction. Consequently, Cholly’s antiheroic stature is significantly diminished in the text. This is reinforced at the end of the description, when the narrative focus shifts to Pecola: “So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her.”

It would appear that for all of his life Cholly had been “fucked.” What else, then, does he have to offer? White racist society placed him and many other Black males in the position of “fuckees.” Being so placed, perhaps the only logical response is to “fuck” the world out of which they were spawned. Raping his daughter, Cholly has become the very quintessence of the way the white imaginary envisioned the Black body. Cholly is weak, wild, irresponsible, beats his wife and neglects his children. He is economically destitute. He is sexually rapacious and bestial. As noted earlier, Cholly is described as being beyond the reaches of human consideration. He is said to have joined the animals, described as an old dog and a snake. Indeed, before he rapes Pecola, the reader is told that he crawls toward her on all fours.

Although other Black males within The Bluest Eye are poor and struggle to create lives for themselves and their families (for example, Claudia and Frieda’s father, Mr. MacTeer), Cholly’s life stands out as the tragic outcome of living in a society where
Blacks have been systemically bombarded with violence. It is not the “successful” Black males within the text against which we should measure Cholly. This can lead to the simplistic conclusion that Cholly could have done otherwise, that he could have risen above his circumstances. While this is true in theory, and as one should continue to think Cholly’s rape of Pecola morally abhorrent and unacceptable, there is more to be critiqued than Cholly. The process of critiquing and overthrowing the power of whiteness and phallocentric conceptions of masculinity (two central antagonists within the text) is far more significant than leaving the system intact and continuing to expect that someone like Cholly will succeed in spite of the larger systemically anti-Black racist context into which he was thrown.

Having been racially Othered, rejected, uglified, put outdoors and taught to hate herself, and humiliated by people within the community (e.g., Mr. Yacobowski, Maureen Peal, Junior, Geraldine, teachers, students), Pecola’s rape and subsequent impregnation by Cholly decisively broke her fragile spirit, forcing her to seek refuge in bluest eyes, the obtaining of which lead to a complete split in the fabric of her psyche. The Black community in Lorain, Ohio, could not prevent this devastating psychological split. The community also suffered from measuring its soul by the tape of a world that measured whiteness as supreme. “The novel’s central paucity,” as Cat Moses argues, “is the community’s lack of self-love, a lack precipitated by the imposition of a master aesthetic that privileges the light skin and blue eyes inherent in the community’s internalization of this master aesthetic.” Perhaps this explains why it is so easy for Pecola to seek out and find a light-skinned character named Soaphead Church, who is said to be capable of helping the unfortunate to “overcome Spells, Bad Luck, and Evil Influences [read:
Church, like Pecola, hates his Blackness. In fact, he came from an English lineage of “mixed blood” and was instilled with Anglophilia. The entire family is described as having “married ‘up,’ lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features.” The family is described as “hoping to prove beyond a doubt De Gobineau’s hypothesis that ‘all civilizations derive from the white race [and], that none can exist without its help’.” Church felt that he had to do something for this “little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes.”

Ironically, he is also a pedophile, though he never makes sexual advances toward Pecola. Hence, Pecola moves cyclically within a social space of pathology, a space of actual and potential trauma. What is it about a community, indeed, an entire society, such that a young Black girl who had been recently molested by her biological father can only receive help to overcome her “corporeal malediction” through the care and understanding of another pedophile?

At a deeper level, Morrison is raising the issue of theodicy, the problem of how to account for profound suffering and injustice within a universe where God is said to exist. In fact, once Pecola successfully performs the necessary task that will grant her blue eyes (viz., killing a dog that Church despises), it is Church who writes a letter to God, exclaiming: “I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show.” When the reader encounters Pecola again she has become double. Her “body, which has been the vortex of a hateful social prejudice and a devastating paternal love, is reinscribed in a self-reflexive dialogue of italicized and roman print that constitutes a fleshing out of
double consciousness.”

Hence, we find Pecola happily engaged in a lively conversation with herself about her new “blue eyes”:

Sure it is. Can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it? They all try to pretend they don’t see them. Isn’t that funny? . . . I said, isn’t that funny? Yes. You are the only one who tells me how pretty they are. Yes. You are a real friend. I’m sorry about picking on you before. I mean, saying you are jealous and all. That’s all right. No. Really. You are my very best friend.

Why didn’t I know you before. You didn’t need me before. Didn’t need you? I mean . . . you were so unhappy before. I guess you didn’t notice me before. I guess you’re right. And I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes. No, honey. Right after your eyes.

Finally, Pecola has completely undergone a process of psychological transmogrification. She has entered “a twilight zone of being.” She has completely measured herself by a white world that only sees ugliness in Black people. Like a bird longing to fly high and to envelope itself within the blueness of the sky, Pecola can be observed “beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind.”

It is interesting that after Du Bois’ encounter with the tall white newcomer, he also found himself living within a region of blue sky, but it was not “the blueness of the sky” that metaphorically speaks to the fanciful flight of insanity. Rather, after having his
Black body/self negatively returned vis-à-vis the white gaze, Du Bois says, “I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky, and great wandering shadows.” Pecola did not hold what was beyond the veil in contempt. To have done so would imply a certain level of indignation, a certain level of resistance to white power. In her soul, Pecola became white. But in Pecola’s agony and sorrow, where were the Sorrow Songs, as Du Bois says, that breathed hope? Where were those comforting cadences that should have emboldened and enabled her to see that there is an ultimate justice? There was no release from existential angst and despair that resulted in victory, triumph, or confidence marked by inner peace. Du Bois asks, “Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?” Answer: For Pecola, not in this world. Not in this world!

It is important to note that of all of the characters in The Bluest Eye, Claudia is the most resistant to the epistemic regime of whiteness. Although Pecola is the “Bluest I” in the novel, it is Claudia who enacts a blues ontology. She is the one who bears witness in the African-American tradition of testifying to the horrors that have befallen Pecola. Unlike Pecola’s family, Claudia’s family has greater cohesion and order, though there is a paucity of material wealth. And though there were days, like Sundays, that were “full of ‘don’ts’ and ‘set’cha self downs,” there were also days of singing and delight. Claudia says:

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn’t so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself
longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without “a thin di-i-ime to my name.” I looked forward to the delicious time when “my man” would leave me, when I would “hate to see that evening sun go down…” ‘cause then I would know “my man has left this town.” Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet.155

In the above quote, Morrison brilliantly and insightfully has Claudia reference her mother, Mrs. MacTeer, singing lyrics from W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues.”156 Although there is specific reference made to “St. Louis Blues,” Mrs. MacTeer’s blues repertoire could have included songs by Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and others. Songs by these Black women would have provided Claudia with examples of strong Black women who were capable of directly confronting emotional pain—articulating the edges and curves of such pain through song—and mustering the courage to transcend it, if not simply to live with it in all of its complexity, but never to become a prisoner of it. Handy’s piece is filled with pain, but also movement. “St. Louis Blues” opens up with:

I hate to see de evenin’ sun go down
I hate to see de evenin’ sun go down
Cause mah baby, he done lef’ dis town

Feelin’ tomorrow lak I feel today
Feelin’ tomorrow lak I feel today
I’ll pack mah trunk, an’ make mah getaway.¹⁵⁷

Hating to see “de evenin’ sun go down” is just one movement on the rung of existential angst, and intra-personal sorrow. Being linked to a larger process of resistance and movement, the depression experienced by the “evenin’ sun going down” does not constitute stasis. It is only momentary. Anticipating tomorrow the same feelings of angst that she feels today, she knows what she must do: “I’ll pack mah trunk, an’ make mah getaway.” She knows that she must move on and resist the angst. Making her getaway is emblematic of her meta-stability, and her capacity to take charge, make a radical change, and re-direct her life. In other words, the meaning of angst is not fixed, but can be re-narrated over and over again in song “like a certain Derridean notion of ceaseless movement and play.”¹⁵⁸ The message that Claudia receives is that Black women need not accept their lives as a given, but can resist the conditions that attempt to deplete their longing for a better life and for something different. It is through her mother’s musicking that Claudia feels empowered with a sense of infinite possibility.

Theorizing this leitmotif of movement in the blues songs of Gertrude Rainey, Angela Davis notes:

A good number of Rainey’s songs that evoke mobility and travel encourage black women to look toward “home” for consolation and inspiration. In these songs the activity of travel has a clear and precise goal. Travel is not synonymous with uncertainty and the unknown but
rather is undertaken with the aim of bringing certainty and stability into
the women’s life.”

Consider Rainey’s “Lost Wandering Blues.” Davis points out that the first stanza,
“leavin’ this mornin’ with my clothes in my hand,” is indicative of “an absolute rupture
with the old conditions the protagonist is rejecting.” Davis argues that the theme of
getting away and rupturing old conditions is even stronger where Rainey “transforms a
recurring males blues image into one with a specifically female content.” Unlike where
the matchbox is used as a metaphor to indicate both baggage and being poor, Rainey
reconfigures the meaning of the matchbox to fit her precise determination to leave a
troubled situation. Davis cites the lyrics of Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Matchbox Blues” to
make the point of contrast. A verse from “Match box Blues” reads:

I’m setting here wondering will a matchbox hold my clothes
I’m setting here wondering will a matchbox hold my clothes
I ain’t got so many matches but I got so far to go.”

Davis insightfully notes:

However, when Ma Rainey sings, “I got a trunk too big to be bothering
with on the road,” the matchbox emerges as a metaphor for the
protagonists conscious decision to strip herself down to the bare essentials,
leaving behind everything that may have defined her place under former
conditions. What once served as a sign of impoverishment and want becomes for Rainey an emancipatory vehicle."

Thinking about the blues as part of the same African American musical tradition as the sorrow songs, which functioned as sites through which the Black spirit could both sing of its pain and yet move beyond it, listening to her mother sing the blues instilled in Claudia a profound sense of existential hope and indefatigability. This is characteristic of enacting a blues ontology. What is important to this way of being blue is the ability to improvise during moments of pain and sorrow. Singing the blues is a way of making a way out of no way.

My sense is that even if Pecola had been within earshot of Mrs. MacTeer’s “musicking” of the blues she may not have been receptive to the influences of how the blues carried and communicated a motif of resistance, didacticism, and how they could be heard in terms of their functionality to disclose a field of possibility and resoluteness. After all, Pecola was already showing profound signs of self-hatred when she arrived at the MacTeer’s home. Moreover, unlike Claudia, Pecola may have received subtle messages from Mrs. MacTeer that her presence was experienced as an unwanted intrusion, which would have functioned as just one more instance of feeling unwanted, one more experience of having her bodily presence rejected.  

“Although Mrs. McTeer does what Geraldine would never do—she takes Pecola into her home—she clearly experiences Pecola’s body as economically and morally intrusive,” as Dickerson notes. Recalling the magnitude of her mother’s complaints, articulated in dramatic monologues, Claudia says:
My mother’s fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us. They were interminable, insulting, and although indirect (Mama never named anybody – just talked about folks and some people), extremely painful in their thrust. She would go on like that for hours, connecting one offense to another until all of the things that chagrined her were spewed out.\textsuperscript{166}

It is important to note that the blues, like the sorrow songs, jazz, and rap, should be understood as signifying a “nexus of musical pleasure, religious zeal, sensual stimulation, and counter-hegemonic resistance.”\textsuperscript{167} In short, African-American musical forms are multifaceted. It is the counter-hegemonic aspect of the blues that is of interest here. One might say that blues musicking was a form of resilience and identity formation for Black people. The image of the railway junctions signify impermanence, agency; “they symbolize sharecroppers, in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, migrating by trains to the North in search of jobs, safety, and a less racist environment.”\textsuperscript{168} As African-American literary theorist Houston A. Baker, Jr., notes, “The railway juncture is marked by transience,”\textsuperscript{169} a form of transience that is physical, emotional, and existential. Enacting a blues ontology speaks to the subjunctive mode of being, an ability-to-be. This speaks to human reality as Seinkonnen. The blues, then, as a site of becoming, de-paralyzes the spirit. Baker:

Even as they speak of paralyzing absence and ineradicable desire, their instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance,
unlimited and unending possibility. Like signification itself, blues are always nomadically wandering. Like the freight-hopping hobo, they are ever on the move, ceaselessly summing novel experience.

Africans were enslaved and forced to come to the so-called New World, only to recreate themselves through processes of improvisation, movement (physical and psychological), syncretism and bricolage, processes that possess family resemblances. Through a process of bricolage, Claudia appropriated the blues lyrics sung by her mother, which were immediately available to her, and was able to feel the tragic sense of which they spoke and yet was also attentive to the possibility of transcendence of which the lyrics also spoke. Unlike Pecola who was not exposed to blues music, the blues frees Claudia from the stultifying impact of internalized whiteness.

Not only does Claudia realize that the problem has to do with what she calls this *Thing*, that is, whiteness, but she takes a resistant stance against the seductive symbolic powers of whiteness. Given a white doll one Christmas, she relates:

> When I took it to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh—the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands scratched. If, in sleep, I turned, the bone-cold head collided with my own. It was a most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion. To hold it was no more rewarding. The starched gauze or lace on the cotton dress irritated any embrace. I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines,
newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured.¹⁷¹

Unlike so many of the Black children in Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s famous experiments¹⁷² who showed a distinct preference for white dolls over brown ones, Claudia rejects the white doll, preferring to dismember it, to ascertain what makes it so special in virtue of being white. Claudia literally destroyed the white doll by breaking off parts. Of course, adults could not understand why she did this. After all, how could a young Black girl not want to possess a beautiful white doll? Claudia:


Referring to the doll as “a beautiful one,” the adults reveal the core of their longing. As they would cry out their eyes over not having something beautiful (read: white), one gets the impression that they were really crying out their eyes over being Black, the symbolic negation of beauty. They longed for beauty qua whiteness. To embrace the beautiful white doll was an important way of vicariously possessing an aspect of whiteness. “How strong was their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices,”¹⁷⁴ noted Claudia.
Claudia longed for familiar experiences, quotidian joys and pleasures that were achievable within the confines of her own Black family culture. She did not look to that which was extraneous; she did not desire the imposed normative scenes of whiteness. Had they asked her what she desired, she would have been forthright. Claudia:

I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone. The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward.¹⁷⁵

Claudia’s body screams out against the Dick-and-Jane reading primer. She hates milk¹⁷⁶ and moves against the desired “cleanliness” (that is, desired whiteness¹⁷⁷) of Pauline and Geraldine. Claudia “looked with loathing on new dresses that required a hateful bath in a galvanized zinc tub before wearing.”¹⁷⁸ She found herself

. . . slipping around on the zinc, no time to play or soak, for the water chilled too fast, no time to enjoy one’s nakedness, only time to make curtains of soapy water careen down between the legs. Then the scratchy towels and the dreadful and humiliating absence of dirt. The irritable, unimaginative cleanliness. Gone the ink marks from legs and face, all my creations and accumulations of the day gone, and replaced by goose pimples.¹⁷⁹
Note that the “cleanliness” is not just a passing moment of dislike. It is irritable and unimaginative. Bathing feels more like a ritual of bleaching, leaving one as white as snow, simple, clean, cold, chilly, perhaps even scary, leaving her with goose pimples. There is something about “dirt,” which suggests the opposite of being sullen, which gives character to Claudia’s body. She sees something humiliating in being so clean, perhaps so “white.” She would rather the dark ink creations and accumulations to remain, marking her body’s identity with counter-signs that militate against cleanliness (whiteness). To forge an interpretive leap, perhaps this was Morrison’s way of having Claudia engage in her own self-scripting, putting up a fight against the “washed cleanliness” of the Black body as symbolic of whiteness.

Although acknowledging Claudia’s resistance to whiteness, Keith E. Byerman argues that within *The Bluest Eye* “the ideological hegemony of whiteness is simply too overwhelming to be successfully resisted.”180 Byerman argues, “Claudia, the strongest character in the book, cannot defy the myth and is even made to feel guilty for her childhood doubts. Knowing full well that the myth is a lie, she must nonetheless bow before its idol.”181 Byerman points to a passage where Claudia is critical of her own ruminations about causing whites pain by literally pinching their eyes. Claudia:

> When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to
Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to
delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was
adjustment without improvement. 

Contrary to Byerman’s interpretation, however, it is not clear that Claudia has given into
the myth of whiteness. She realizes that such rituals as “worshiping Shirley Temple” and
“delighting in cleanliness” does not lead to any improvement, but only an adjustment.
Perhaps there is something of greater value that Claudia is after, something according to
which a small adjustment might secure. Perhaps it is by coming to worship Shirley
Temple and delight in cleanliness that Claudia feels that she might be even more
desirable to her mother/other Black women. Recall that Claudia witnessed Pauline turn
her loving attention to the little white girl, not to Pecola, during the blueberry pie
incident. Indeed, perhaps there is also a peculiar form of Black mother-daughter
identification formation at play. Concerning this point, Anne Anlin Cheng argues:

> Claudia thus eventually learns to love Shirley Temple, I would argue, not
merely or even primarily as a gesture of social compliance, but rather as a
response to the call of the mother, as a perverse form of maternal
connection. Only by learning to love little white girls can little black girls
be like their mothers.

Claudia’s treatment of white dolls resonates symbolically with one of the
significant objectives of this dissertation project, that is, to see how whiteness is
constituted, to “deconstruct” and dismantle it so as to discover what makes it so special.
Pecola’s tragedy suggests that at the very core of the alleged universal status of
whiteness—and the negative reactive value-creating power linked to whiteness’s
assimilative capacity to reduce the Otherness of the Other to its own sameness—resides
the reality of madness. Whiteness is a form of madness predicated upon defining all
differences against the meta-narrative voice of its self-appointed status as the One.
However, as I have argued, the socially constructed allure, power, and hegemony of
whiteness are passed off as the “natural” order of things. This “natural order,” however,
is maintained through various practices that attempt to conceal whiteness’s historically
contingent status and cultural particularity. For Pecola, even blue eyes were not enough.
She was after the bluest eyes. However, this aesthetic and ontological feat is achievable,
as Morrison makes clear, at the very expense of sanity itself.

As stated, Pecola is a tragic figure. She at once reflects the many existential
realities of everyday Black life and functions as a powerful fictional character through
whom we are able to gain imaginative access\textsuperscript{184} to a life of trauma. Morrison does not
describe an abstract conception of the “self,” delineating the ideal epistemic
circumstances under which all cognitive agents (regardless of “race,” gender, class,
global geography) come to know x in some “objective” fashion. Rather, she provides the
narrative of an embodied, young, raced, gendered, sexed self; a self indexed to a
particular historical, social, and cultural space. Morrison is not depicting abstract and
universal truths, but “accidents of private history”\textsuperscript{185} that philosophically shed light on
what it means to be a self (in this case, a Black female child) that cuts against the grain of
metaphysical speculation regarding the nature of the self as “whatever it is whose
As has been shown, Pecola’s identity does not persist over time. Even Pecola’s memory, another usual philosophical candidate for maintaining personal identity, has been partly destroyed and reconstructed vis-à-vis her experience of trauma, racial degradation, and sexual molestation. Indeed, even her body, at the phenomenological level, is not the same body. Hence, because of the massive rift in her consciousness, that is, through the emergence of her double consciousness, she is no longer that “ugly” Black body. For Pecola, there is a lived or phenomenological “severance” of bodily continuity; she has become someone else. Male gendered language aside, Fanon places his finger on Pecola’s “hallucinatory whitening” where he writes:

If he is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation.  

In an interview describing how she understands her own literary efforts, Morrison says that her “books are about very specific circumstances, and in them are people who do very specific things.” She continues:
But, more importantly, the plot, characters are part of my effort to create a language in which I can posit philosophical questions. I want the reader to ponder those questions not because I put them in an essay, but because they are part of a narrative.\textsuperscript{188}

Within the context of a narrative, as opposed to a philosophical architectonic system, Morrison is able to place the reader into an imaginative \textit{lived} space, a powerful narrative space that is able to articulate modalities of lived existence where bodies are raped, racially brutalized, dehumanized, marginalized, and traumatized. In short, through narrative, Morrison moves the reader through the messiness of the impact of existentially contingent history upon the body. Hence, one might say that Morrison posits philosophical questions that are inextricably linked to narrative. After all, our lives are lived narratives, journeys of pain, endurance, contradiction, death, inter-subjectivity, suffering, racism, sexism, terror, and trauma. Avoiding abstract and non-indexical discourse, Morrison reveals the power of literature to embody the flesh and blood reality of what it means to-be-in-the-world.\textsuperscript{189}

Morrison is also writing out of her own unique \textit{lived} context. Her narrative embarkation toward exposing what it means for a young Black girl to experience profound levels of self-loathing (in this case, desiring blue eyes) is linked to an actual experience. Morrison reflects:

We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what
I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her
voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished
by the desecration she proposed, I “got mad” at her instead.\(^{190}\)

It would appear that it was during this early stage in Morrison’s life that she began to feel
the weight, at least emotionally, of what it would mean for a young Black girl to wish for
blue eyes. One might say that *The Bluest Eye* was the narrative site through which she
came to terms with the deeper philosophical implications of such a wish.

There is a fundamental link between Morrison’s lived experiences and how she
eventually renders such experiences intelligible through her narrative constructions. For
example, she talks about cleaning the homes of white people at thirteen, homes that had
very nice things that her family did not have. She notes:

> Years later, I used some of what I observed in my fiction. In “The Bluest
Eye,” Pauline lived in this dump and hated everything in it. And then she
worked for the Fishers, who had this beautiful house, and she loved it. She
got a lot of respect as their maid that she didn’t get anywhere else. If she
went to the grocery store as a black woman from that little house and said,
“I don’t want this meat,” she would not be heard. But if she went in as a
representative of these white people and said, “This is not good enough,”
they’d pay attention.\(^{191}\)
Hence, it is not only the context of her lived experiences that enables Morrison to expose significant features of whiteness, but her lived context also forms the backdrop against which she creates various plots and characters which function as part of her effort to forge a language in which certain philosophical questions might be posited. *The Bluest Eye* is ripe with an abundance of philosophical questions: What is the nature of the Black self within the context of whiteness? What is the nature of the white self within the context of Blackness? What is the most effective way to combat the semiotics and political power of whiteness? What happens at the inter-subjective and social ontological level when communities fail to protect its young? What is needed when communities are in bad faith regarding the causes of those who suffer? How do we guarantee social justice? In what language do we best describe the experience of rape of women’s bodies? What impact does sexual trauma have on women’s identities and the reconstruction of their identities after the fact? Is the self a metaphysically abstract entity? Or is the self fundamentally an embodied narrative? How does narrative discourse get at the truth of lived experience in ways that abstract philosophical discourse fails? How does society best protect female bodies from male dominance? How do we generate empathy and moral responsibility for those who are victims of racism, sexism, classism? How do we best “deconstruct” the self-Other divide along racial and gendered lines? What are the best strategies to deal most effectively with the white gaze? What are the social, cultural, and political structures that sustain the power of the white gaze and the white episteme?

In my view, it is one thing to pose these questions in the abstract or to respond to them in the abstract. Morrison’s narrative depictions have a way of taking the reader beyond the abstract, enveloping her imaginative characters in flesh and blood, pain, and
sorrow and thereby creating an emotional vortex through which readers are forced “to pose living metaphysical questions to themselves.”

Notes

3 Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 45.
5 With regard to the association of Blackness with being cursed, the reader will note the narratives of the curse of Ham or the curse of Canaan.
6 Thurman, The Blacker the Berry, 21.
7 Thurman, The Blacker the Berry, 210.
8 Thurman, The Blacker the Berry, 217.
12 Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 52.
13 Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 6–7.
14 The use of “standing-reserve” is an expression used by Martin Heidegger in terms of his understanding/critique of technology. The point here is that Blacks vis-à-vis the white imaginary are not conceptualized as instantiations of Dasein, but as things merely present-to-hand, things that are available for exploitation. On this score, it is not Black bodies as such that constitute standing-reserve. Rather, the white imaginary functions as a kind of framework, a world-picture, in terms of which the Black body shows itself, as it were, as that which is usable, and manipulable. The implication is that whites can become so entrapped within white norms that the Black body is not capable of being seen, as showing up, as anything other than standing-reserve. See Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings, 2nd edn, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, California: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).
15 Morrison, Playing in the Dark, xii.
16 Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 44.
17 Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 54.
18 Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 54.
19 Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 54.
27 Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 50.
The omniscient voice is more knowledgeable than Claudia. After all, she is only nine-years-old. The omniscient voice provides information about life and the Breedloves to which Claudia would not have had access.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 34.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 35.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 35.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 36.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 38. (My emphasis)

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 39.


Concerning the sui generis and causi sui status of the settler, Fanon notes that “the settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey. He is the absolute beginning.” See Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 51.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 19.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 50. [my emphasis]


The use of the term “threatening” is to suggest that blues eyes not only constitute beauty and safety for Pecola, but they also carry overtones of negativity, harsh criticism, and degradation. After all, it is not abstract, detached blue eyes that Pecola ever sees. She sees blue eyes within the context of a disapproving face, a demeaning look. In this way, for Pecola, blues eyes carry traces of association with feelings of being threatened. In other words, the blues eyes of Mr. Yacobowski, though desirable, at least for Pecola, are read through his facial expressions, the way he looks with those blue eyes.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 123.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 122.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 124.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 126.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 127.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 128.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 45.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 83.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 83.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 87.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 87.

Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 6.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 91.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 92.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 45.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 46.


Schwartz, “Toni Morrison at the Movies,” 123.


For Foucault, the concept of problematization involves encouraging new forms of subjectivity through the process of interrogating and changing the truths, knowledges, and discourses within which we currently define ourselves. See Prado, Starting with Foucault, 112–115 and 162–164.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 74.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 46.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 46.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 45.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 46.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 130.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 130.
I would like to thank philosopher Linda Alcoff for a counter reading of Pauline’s relationship with Cholly. In a personal communication, she writes, “In the description of Pauline’s sex with Cholly, I wonder if you read this too negatively. She is getting attention, after all, and a kind of positive valuation in his desire for her. Being sexually objectified is not equivalent to rape. Here is where Sartre’s characterization of sexual activity lacks complexity.”

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 132.
Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 133.
Dickerson, “The Naked Father in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye,” 111.

This process of Black male emasculation is not an uncommon experience that Black males have had to deal with within contexts where white male authority could prove deadly. Consider the movie Crash (2005). There is one scene where two Los Angeles police officers stop a Black married couple as they head home. Cameron (played by Terence Howard), who is a Black male television director, and his wife Christine (played by Thandie Newton), who comes across as a Black woman who possesses a sense of social superiority, are told by one of the police officers (played by Matt Dillon) to get out of their vehicle. There is no other explanation for them to get out of their vehicle other than to be harassed. Matt Dillon’s character is a quintessential white racist cop. Despite their cooperation, the fact that they are married, and various markers of social achievement, he instructs both of them, though they clearly pose no threat, to put their hands on the vehicle. He then proceeds to check them for weapons. This plays itself out against the racist presupposition that all Blacks are armed and dangerous. It is clear that his partner, the “good white cop,” does not completely approve of what is taking place. As Christine is being “frisked,” Matt Dillon’s character puts his hands up her dress. We are clearly led to believe that he forces his finger(s) into her vagina. Terence, aware of this, does absolutely nothing. Begging Terence to do something, Christine can only cry in complete humiliation. As with Cholly, Terence’s masculinity, as defined as a male’s ability to protect his woman, is completely erased. Like an enslaved Black male who knows that his wife has just been raped by a white man, Terence remains passive, facing his helplessness. After the event, the blame falls on Terence’s head as not being “man” enough. So, not only is he emasculated by the white cop, but he is further emasculated by his wife. Of course, he could have physically tried to defend her, but this, in all reality, particularly given the history of racism in the LAPD, would have no doubt led to his death. This phenomenon justifiably pushes Terence eventually to take a counter-violent approach toward those who hold the power. Of course, given the reality of the power structure up against which he is determined to fight, he must be prepared to die.

Dickerson, “The Naked Father in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye,” 112.
Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 156.
Dickerson, “The Naked Father in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye,” 117.
Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 25
Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 132.
It is important to note that Pecola’s desire to be white intersects with her desire to be beautiful. Of course, within the context of *The Bluest Eye*, to be white is to embody beauty. Within the context of female gender formation, however, the point here is that the norm of whiteness qua beautiful is not simply established through the ideology of whiteness, but it is also established through the ideology of white male supremacy. After all, the construction of the “little good and pretty white girl” is historically linked to norms regarding respectability, purity, and daintiness, values that are dialectically linked to the power of white males to define women in their own image of what a woman should be. Hence, not only is Pecola trapped within the ideological framework of whiteness, but she is also a victim of white male tyranny.

---

135 It is important to note that Pecola’s desire to be white intersects with her desire to be beautiful. Of course, within the context of *The Bluest Eye*, to be white is to embody beauty. Within the context of female gender formation, however, the point here is that the norm of whiteness qua beautiful is not simply established through the ideology of whiteness, but it is also established through the ideology of white male supremacy. After all, the construction of the “little good and pretty white girl” is historically linked to norms regarding respectability, purity, and daintiness, values that are dialectically linked to the power of white males to define women in their own image of what a woman should be. Hence, not only is Pecola trapped within the ideological framework of whiteness, but she is also a victim of white male tyranny.
137 Linda Martin Alcoff, “Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience,” in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000), 268. This quote is taken from a larger context within which Alcoff critiques Michel Foucault, calling into question his “claim that discourses can alter the experience of events like sexual relations between adults and children to such a degree that they can become ‘inconsequential pleasures.’” See especially pages 266–269.
138 Butler-Evans, *Race, Gender, and Desire*, 79.
139 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 162.
148 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 196. The reader will note that during the conversation with herself, Pecola implies that her father either attempted or actually raped her at least one other time. See pp. 199-200.
150 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 204.
156 The reader will note that Angela Davis is very critical of the 1929 motion picture St. Louis Blues. Davis argues that the film “deserves criticism not only for its exploitation of racist stereotypes but for its violation of the spirit of the blues. Its direct translation of blues images into a visual and linear narrative violates blues discourse, which is always complicated, contextualized, and informed by that which is unbroken as well as by that which is named. St. Louis Blues, the film, flagrantly disregards the spirit of women’s blues by leaving the victimized woman with no recourse.” See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 61. Also, African-American literary critic Houston A. Baker, Jr., is critical of W. C. Handy’s rendering of the blues. Baker writes, “But the autobiographical account of the man who has been called the ‘Father of the Blues’ offers only a simplistic detailing of a progress, describing, as it were, the elevation of a ‘primitive’ folk ditty to the status of ‘art’ in America. Handy’s rendering leaves unexamined, therefore, myriad corridors, mainroads, and way-stations of an extraordinary and elusive Afro-American cultural phenomenon.” See Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 8.
It is interesting to note that Pecola does not feel rejected by the three black whores who resided in an apartment above the storefront where the Breedloves lived. Although China, Poland, and Miss Marie did not play any special role in liberating Pecola from her psychological death, they did offer a sense of temporary reprieve. One might ask: what has happened to the nurturing functions of a larger community when a young Black girl finds delight in the fact that she gains some form of recognition in the eyes of prostitutes?


Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip Hop (Berkeley, California, 2003), 41.


Baker, Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, 7.

Baker, Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, 8.


These experiments were used as evidence that demonstrated that segregation was deleterious to Black children’s self-images. The evidence was used in the Brown v. Board of Education case that proved segregation was unequal and thereby unconstitutional. See Adelbert H. Jenkins, Turning Corners: The Psychology of African Americans (Needham Heights, Massachusetts, Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 27.


Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 22.

Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 23.

African-American writer April Sinclair’s Coffee Will Make You Black is fundamentally shaped, or so I would argue, through the phenomenon of desiring whiteness. On the surface, Sinclair writes a text that traces the psychosexual development of a young Black girl’s coming into awareness of her lesbian identity. Prima facie, this makes for an interesting narrative tale. Even the title suggests that the text might explore the ways in which Blacks have internalized such self-hating sayings as, “I don’t want nothing black but a Cadillac.” However, the title of the text functions as a sign that conceals the discursive direction of the text. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Sinclair has written a text whose protagonist, Jean “Stevie” Stevenson, engages in a dialectics of Black male erasure vis-à-vis her desire for whiteness. Symbolically, Stevie plays the historical role of the white male castrator, wishing that she could diminish or remove the “threat” of the Black male penis. Throughout the text, the reader learns about the details of the many failed relationships that Stevie has had with Black males. It is not that the relationships necessarily fail because Stevie is uncertain of her sexual orientation. Rather, the narrative depicts all Black males as dogs, animal-like, emotionally callous, politically incompetent, sexually rapacious, and as individuals eaten away by silent rage. Hence, it is Black males who are responsible for their despicable ways and are therefore blameworthy. Within the narrative context of this negative portrayal of Black men, which is consistent with prevailing racist assumptions, Stevie finds herself falling in love with a white nurse at her school who is called Nurse Horn (Horny?). When thinking of Nurse Horn, Stevie uses the image of running outside and tasting a “snowflake,” a trope implying her desire to literally taste the female white body with all of the cunnilingal imagery. Even the back cover of the originally published version of the book (1994) speaks to the desire of whiteness on the symbolic sexual order. April Sinclair is photographed as happy and cuddling a white “pussycat,” another trope with profound implications. While Black male bodies occupy a zone of avoidance, the white female lesbian body is desirable, understanding, nurturing, attractive, comforting, reassuring. My point here is that Sinclair’s text is problematically predicated upon a form of Manichean dialecticism, where the valorization of the white female body is at the expense of the devalorization of the Black male body. Hence, her text re-inscribes the racist binary logic of whiteness as desirable and Blackness as undesirable. See April Sinclair, Coffee Will Make You Black (New York, Hyperion, 1994);

178 Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 22.
179 Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 22.
182 Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 23.
183 Ann Anlin Cheng, “Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay on Race, Feminism, and the Aesthetic Question,” Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature, 19 (2), (2000), 200. On the same page, Cheng also provides an insightful spin on Claudia’s claim that this movement toward cleanliness and Shirley Temple was “adjustment without improvement.” She notes: “Beauty for Claudia is a convoluted lesion in desire that, even as it reaches a goal (the new object of desire, Shirley Temple), nonetheless never quite achieves stable meaning. This last claim—‘it was adjustment without improvement’—is also slightly puzzling. Is it a statement mourning the self’s continued inability to assume fully that white ideal; an acknowledgement of the emptiness of such compliance; or even a larger allusion to the nature of social “improvement” in African American communities? The answer can in fact be all of the above, or, at least, the statement’s ambiguity informs us that, for the object of discrimination, it is impossible to disentangle these meanings. Claudia’s relationships to ideal white beauty, to her own self-perception, to other black women, and to the larger African American community bespeaks desire and critique—or desire in spite of critique.”

184 Brison, Aftermath, 25.
185 Brison, Aftermath, 24.
186 Brison, Aftermath, 40.
187 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 100.
190 Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 209.
191 Dreifus, “Chloe Wofford Talks about Toni Morrison.”
192 Holveck, Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Lived Experience, 8.
Chapter VIII

Existential Conversion and
Non-whitely White Bodies

Have you ever felt your sense of self shaken?

—Chris Cuomo

What is helpful is to recall and be reminded of those galvanizing, searing moments where what I assumed to be the truth of a position, the truth about the nature of life, about who I am, was shaken so violently that I could never reoccupy that earlier imagination.

—Gerald Monk

White parasitism must be revealed, _shaken_ and _cracked_ at its core. When the fractures and fissures begin to show themselves, “it’s best to avoid denial . . . wait for new possibilities to emerge. Isn’t that what white folks need to allow? Must we not crack up in order to be something new?”¹ Indeed, “as long as whites are in bad faith and phobogenic constructions of blacks provide needed reinforcements of ego determinations,” according to Paget Henry, “antiblack racism will be with us.”²

White racist embodiment involves a profound, though often invisible, core of fragility. The reader will recall Du Bois’ phenomenological return vis-à-vis the white tall newcomer who refused to exchange visiting cards with him. She refused it peremptorily, as Du Bois says, with a glance. As a basis upon which to give critical attention to ways of disrupting whitely modes of being, I will revisit her phenomenological or lived mode of relationality to her own sense of identity.³

In her refusal, she performed her identity through negation, establishing her space both physically and psychologically. She lived her body in an expansive modality. She lived her identity with epistemic certainty. She lived her body as a pre-delineated
sacrosanct site that “excluded” differences. Of course, it is my contention that her embodiment was itself a site of white racist dramaturgy, an enactment of a role, which actually differentially values and exaggerates differences. However, for the newcomer, she simply acted with an always already sense of “entitlement.” She lived her body “as a corporeal entitlement to spatiality.” As she moved through space, however, she racially carved it up, as it were, distorting it, marking it with her white presence. Embodying space in this raced way, she demarcated her immediate lived space as “civilized,” as pure, as privileged. Her refusal, though clearly disclosed, simultaneously involved a process of concealment. In other words, the concealed background of racist ideology is what rendered her white (territorial) embodied comportment through social space coherent, “justified,” and intelligible. In other words, there is a white racist dominant history of knowledge production that established her white identity as secure.

Having internalized what it means to be “normal,” her identity is sealed, leak-proof; she had become a site of a monadic structure who at least thought that her identity and her whiteness were non-relational. Of course, to remain ignorant of the relational dynamic upon which her white identity is actually predicated functions as the desideratum of whiteness. Indeed, she has come to live her whiteness, her identity, as an “unconditioned” state of being. But her identity is already connected to those non-white identities that she judges abhorrent.

This is precisely how whiteness as the so-called oracle voice functions. Its unquestioned, “non-historically” mediated capacity to speak with absolute authority is a farce created through the subordination of non-white voices. Indeed, the very notion that there is a white oracle voice (or “pure” white voice) is belied by the reality of the socio-
linguistic matrix that human speech acquisition presupposes. Hence, like white identity, whitespeak is fundamentally relational. Whitespeak can never be pure, despite its aspirations to speak as if emanating from the mouth of a god. Its mono-vocal appearance is simply due to its greater saliency, which is purchased through the deployment of various tactics to nullify and relegate to insignificance non-white voices. Hence, whitespeak is an “impure” voice because it is a socially ensconced voice, always already dragging with it the residue of other voices, no matter how inaudible.

On my view, existential conversion addresses not only the “unconditioned” reality of white identity, but also the presumption of the existence of a white oracle voice. Whitespeak and white identity are sites of value-creating forces that deny the historical contingency of such values. Through existential conversion, whites are encouraged to come to terms with the reality that white identity and whitespeak are created through human action, and not grounded in some transcendental source.\(^5\)

As I have argued, it is not necessary that the newcomer is able to articulate her beliefs in the form of propositions. Consistent with my emphasis upon the lived existential dimensions of whiteness, there is a deeper philosophical point here. Self-referentiality is not necessary for the white tall newcomer to enact her whiteness. In short, it is possible to make sense of her racism without reference to her “self-consciousness.” This does not negate, however, that there are self-conscious racists. Furthermore, this is not to say that becoming self-conscious of one’s racism is not important vis-à-vis efforts at white racist transformation. In short, the tall newcomer has become \textit{absorbed} in the world of whiteness. Within the process of “being-in” the world of whiteness, she \textit{lives} its fantasies, psychologically projecting them outwardly and inwardly, all the while being
unaware of how she is both duped by whiteness and functions as an agent of whiteness. My aim here is not to conceptualize her whitely everyday mode of being-in-the-world in terms of what she believes, but in terms of what she does. She animates a white racist script on cue, because she knows how and when to do so. Doing so constitutes a set of practices just as I know how to ride a bike without knowing the specific explanans (that which in fact does the explaining) of the physics that keeps me in motion or prevents me from falling off a bike (the explanadum).

I emphasize the doing of whiteness to underscore the point that fighting against anti-racist ways of being-in-the-world is not simply a matter of becoming cognizant of one’s prejudices, but requires new ways of being-in non-white racist forms of life. According to philosopher Alison Bailey:

> Racial scripts are internalized at an early age to the point where they are embedded almost to invisibility in our language, bodily reactions, feelings, behaviors, and judgments. Whitely scripts are, no doubt, mediated by a person’s economic class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, and geographical location, but privilege is granted on the basis of whitely performances nevertheless.⁶

In the case of the tall newcomer, she has internalized a white racist script that has tremendous implications for how she articulates her body vis-à-vis Blacks. She has learned to enact particular somatic norms of white hegemony. Like the white woman in the elevator, she has become imprisoned through inherited “legitimation narratives”⁷ of
white power that attempt to keep their true historical origins under constant erasure. She lives her body within the framework of a narrative, one that is distal, one that is forever present, and one that projects her forward, placing her ahead of herself,\(^8\) as it were, equipping her with a ready response to all those non-white. Her narrative is structured by an overarching myth that provides the necessary axiological and epistemological frame of reference to make sense of her identity. As she continues to enact her whitely modes of being, ontological effects are generated, giving the impression that the white body is a finished project. This effectively guards against conceptualizing whiteness/white embodiment as a \textit{process}. In short, the tall newcomer has come to inhabit the serious world of whiteness.

The serious world of whiteness functions as a pre-established axiological and ontological cartography that imposes fixed coordinates that all \textit{must} follow. The white order of things appears to place categorical demands on human reality.\(^9\) Growing up in Jim Crow Georgia, Lillian Smith notes:

\begin{quote}
I do not remember how or when, but . . . I knew that I was better than a Negro, that all black folks have their place and must be kept in it . . . that a terrifying disaster would befall the South if ever I treated a Negro as my social equal . . . I had learned that white southerners are hospitable, courteous, tactful people who treat those of their own group with consideration and who carefully segregate from all the richness of life “for their own good and welfare” thirteen million people whose skin is colored a little differently from my own.\(^{10}\)
\end{quote}
For Smith and the tall newcomer, the divide between whites and non-whites is presumed to be out of their control. It is the way things are. “As a consequence,” as Lewis Gordon notes, “the question of what human beings choose to be isn’t important. What is important is determining the ways human beings are already predisposed to act.”

Given that whitely-being-in-the-world is an ideological and historical phenomenon, this raises the issue of the role of historical agency on the part of phenotypic whites to transgress whitely ways of being. Indeed, I would argue that whites ought to transgress whitely modes of being. If whiteness was a fixed essence, the discourse of ought would be immediately belied. The discourse of ought, however, speaks to the condition of lack. This not only raises the issue of whiteness to that of the ethical level, it also raises the issue of whiteness to the existential ontological level. To invoke the ethical and the existential ontological within this context raises the motifs of anguish and anxiety. If whiteness is not an essence, then the reality of choice becomes the pressing issue.

On the other side of whiteness as a serious mode of being-in-the-world is the existentially converted white who recognizes the ideological grounds upon which whiteness is a farce and how whiteness is a site of values that are existentially founded. Existentialist conversion involves the rejection of grounding values in any putative absolutes. “Existentialist conversion,” as philosopher Eleanore Holveck notes, “cancels the grounding of values in any absolute, whether that absolute be a god, a church, a state, etc. By existentialist conversion, one sees that all values refer to choices made by some one who is finite and limited.” Deemed an “absolute,” whiteness provides a space for the serious man/woman to take flight in the face of his/her freedom. In the case of the tall
newcomer, she has come to embody her whiteness as it “permanently confers value upon [her].”13 What is required is “an affectivity which would throw [her] dangerously beyond [her whitely self].” 14

This process of existential conversion involves a profound level of relationality. Not only are phenotypic whites faced with the anxiety of relating to non-whites in terms that render problematic their previous epistemic certainty regarding the non-white Other, but existential conversion calls into question, indeed disrupts, their previous certainty regarding how they understood and valued themselves. Keep in mind that Black people vis-à-vis whiteness were denied their humanity. In fact, white “humanity” was constructed in terms of the distortion/erasure of Black humanity. There is a deeper philosophical issue at stake here. If the “humanity” of whites was constructed upon the erasure of Black humanity, then to disengage the dialectical process of affirming white humanity through the negation of Black humanity requires rethinking the very category of white humanity. Whites, then, are required to think and to affirm a different philosophical anthropology, one that is not ethically bankrupt. The objective is to begin to re-narrate a radically different history, one that aligns itself with those few courageous whites who had, even if not completely cognizant of their existential project, begun to-be-in-the-world-non-whitely. Concerning this point, Alcoff suggests a form of white double consciousness, though different from that of Du Bois’, which “requires an everpresent acknowledgement of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege.”15

The fundamental premise of existential conversion is that one is not condemned to
whiteness. If the newcomer undergoes a process of existential conversion, she would come to terms with the possibility of her being other than she is, refusing to animate those narratives that “renew the denial of her freedom.”¹⁶ She would no longer have need of the empty promises of whiteness to justify her existence. It is through this critical insight that she affirms her agency to “lean into” a counter-metanarrative of whiteness.

At the core of existential conversion, then, at least for the tall newcomer, there is the revelation that whiteness is not an absolute value. In this way, she is able to move from a mode of naïve-being-in-the-world to a mode of taking responsibility for the ways in which she enacts herself whitely. Of course, there is the extremely important question regarding why any white would want to transgress or perform a treasonous act against whitely ways of being. In addition to showing whites how their whitely-ways-of-being-in-the-world negatively impact non-white bodies/subjectivities, there is also the possibility of getting whites to be cognizant of oppression in their own bodies.¹⁷ In other words, the aim would be to get whites to come to terms with the various ways in which they oppressively claim their bodies, value their bodies, and secure their bodies. Within this context, whites would need to become aware of how living their bodies in ways that are normative are really oppressive. After all, it requires work to maintain the white body’s appearance of “superiority,” of its standing in the social sphere as just “a human body.” Think here of how many women live their bodies oppressively vis-à-vis the expectations of men, that is, how they have embraced an oppressive aesthetic that keeps them always cognizant of “getting their bodies just right,” though not for themselves, but for men whose voices speak through them as if these voices were their own.

The answer, at least from my perspective, has to do with choosing freedom,
realizing, of course, that one’s freedom is always already situated. On my view, on the one hand, if one chooses freedom, one must choose against whiteness. On the other hand, if one chooses whiteness, one must choose against freedom. Choosing freedom while choosing whiteness is incompatible. Hence, one has to choose one or the other. Whiteness comes replete as a value that is deemed an unconditioned value for which one must abdicate responsibility and simply accept. On this interpretation of whiteness, to choose whiteness is to choose one’s un-freedom, which has implications for the violation of the freedom of others.

Through existential conversion, the tall newcomer has come to choose freedom and thereby has chosen against whiteness. Whiteness here is not that which functions as a phenotypic marker. Rather, in choosing freedom, the newcomer chooses against acting in the world whitely. In this way, choosing freedom does not mean that one chooses against one’s phenotypic white body. To deny one’s white body is to fall into bad faith. Hence, the newcomer should not reject her body, although it too is non-accidentally linked to broader social norms, “discursive rules and regulations that dictated the biological chain that produced” her white skin. In choosing freedom, she embraces her facticity and also rejects the privilege of exclusive transcendence, a privilege that whites have claimed for themselves. In rejecting her whiteness as exclusive transcendence, since this is dialectically linked to the reduction of Blacks to mere facticity and immanence, she affirms not only the facticity of Blacks, but their transcendence as well. One might argue that the newcomers’ existential conversion enables her to “live in a real world among real people.” In other words, she is not restricted to inhabiting the existentially stilted serious world of whiteness predicated upon a lie. In this way, the newcomer is able to
live her body as a “calling out to the Other” as opposed to foreclosing any and all alternative, non-whitely communicative practices. Thus, she creates cracks within the prison house of whiteness’s sameness, rejecting the ideological structuration of her identity as fixed and “superior.”

As the newcomer develops new ways of socio-ontologically and ethically living her body, calling into question the same/Other dialectic, living a non-whitely semiotics of the body, that is, signifying and articulating her body in ways that do not communicate forbidden sacrosanct “racial” boundaries or that communicate trepidation in the presence of non-white bodies, thus disengaging from whiteness’s narcissism, a space for intersubjectivity and mutual recognition is cleared. Hence, to live her phenotypic white body in freedom is to live her body in ways that facilitate the freedom of other non-white bodies; whereas, living one’s whiteness in the mode of the serious occludes the non-white from speaking and possibly from being. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for whites to answer the appeal of the Black body. This is because “the condition for the appeal is . . . that you can make your voice heard, that there is no silencing.”

Perhaps there is something to be said about the site of friendship as a form of relationality that requires the bracketing, if not the eradication, of whitely-ways-of-being-in-the-world. After all, friendship, by its very nature, requires a suspension of sorts. Indeed, the incipiency and development of a friendship requires “leaping” forward beyond certain presuppositions. As long as the white assumes the position of “superior” subject vis-à-vis the “inferior” Black, the possibility of a genuine friendship is precluded. Friendship is also predicated upon inter-subjectivity. The assumption is that one is capable of learning from the Other, “who can open up a world aspired to by the self. The
Other also provides us with objectivity, not in a hostile sense, but in the sense of correcting the limitations of our own perspective.”23 Of course, there is risk and vulnerability involved here, particularly involving the forming of friendships between whites, particularly those whites who stereotype Blacks, and Blacks who are reasonably justified in their reticence vis-à-vis whites. In the presence of the Black body, as in the case of the white woman in the elevator, the white can seize this moment as an opportunity to be shaken, to be torn away from his/her manner of thinking24 and being whitely. This anti-whitely way of being has the potential of disclosing the Black body in ways that belie the force of the white imaginary. This anti-white way of being also has the potential of disclosing the white body as “Other” to itself. Friendship has the power of expanding one’s vision, of un-concealing possibilities that were concealed/closed off through the myopic horizon of whiteness. Of course, to be committed to this friendship will involve the constant choice of re-claiming this friendship, particularly in the light of the possible multiple levels of misunderstanding that are bound to occur. Nevertheless, “inter-racial” friendships can function as sites of transformation, sites of mutual disclosure of the self, sites that belie important dimensions of bad faith, particularly where the white self hides from itself and the Other through the objectification mistake of thinking that the differences separating whites and Blacks are natural as opposed to socially and historically constructed.

Marilyn Frye conceptualizes non-whitely ways of being as transformative acts of consciousness that have political implications for white women’s perpetuation of white male dominance:
The first breakthrough is in the moment of knowing that another way of being is possible. In the matter of a white woman’s racedness, the possibility in question is the possibility of disengaging (on some levels, at least) one’s own energies and wits from the continuing project of the social creation and maintenance of the white race, the possibility of being disloyal to that project by stopping constantly making oneself whitely.

And this project should be very attractive to white women once we grasp that it is the possibility of not being whitely, rather than the possibility of being whitely, that holds some promise of our rescuing ourselves from the degraded condition of women in a white men’s world.25

For the newcomer, what was once perceived as a privilege as such, that is, her whiteness, begins to be re-interpreted and re-narrated as a site of oppression, not only toward others, but toward oneself. Whiteliness, as power, “cuts across individuals’ lives in a variety of ways that can entail privilege and oppression for the same person in different respects.”26

I conceptualize existential conversion vis-à-vis whiteness as a constant affirmation of freedom. After all, one has to live in the everyday world in which whiteness, despite one’s commitment, continues to be ideologically seductive. Hence, existential conversion, at least with respect to whiteness, must involve a self-reflexive way of being-in-the-world where the newcomer continually takes up the project of disaffiliation from whitely ways of being; there must be a constantly renewed sense of transgressing sites of “entitlement,” sites that threaten the re-inscription of bad faith. Given the complexity of social existence, whites may “lean into” ways of being whitely
in ways that they may not intend. In doing so, they animate ways of being whitely and thus legitimate the normative structure of whiteness. Derald Sue reminds us of the everyday insidious forms of whitely being-in-the-world where he asks, “Would it surprise you, for example, to know that the greatest threat to racial minorities in the United States comes from good and decent White folks, lovers of justice and democracy, and moral church-going people?” And as Noel Ignatiev notes, “The white club does not like to surrender a single member.”

Concerning the insidious forms of whitely modes of being, Alison Bailey’s distinction between privilege-cognizant and privilege-evasive white scripts proves helpful. Within the framework of this discourse, the newcomer must constantly reaffirm her commitment to enacting a privilege-cognizant white script, that is, she must remain cognizant of the ways in which she is privileged (or privileges herself) because of her phenotypic whiteness. According to Bailey, privilege-cognizant whites are race traitors “who refuse to animate the scripts whites are expected to perform, and who are unfaithful to worldviews whites are expected to hold.” In this way, privilege-cognizant whites are committed to “doing whiteness differently.” If “race is constituted through the repetition of acts, verbal and nonverbal, that continue to communicate difference,” then whites must engage in counter-stylized iterative whitely acts.

Edward H. Peeples, who works on issues of violence and white supremacy, shares an experience that he had in Richmond, Virginia around 1976, which is an example of such a counter-stylized iterative whitely act. He recounts going to purchase an African American newspaper that he had not read in several weeks. Furthermore, this particular newspaper was a couple of days old. After attempting to pay the white cashier, he notes:
When the cashier caught sight of the paper I had selected, she stared at me for a moment, as if she was searching for her cultural grab bag for the rules and words needed to advise a fool who is about to violate a natural law. Shortly, she put it all together and proclaimed, “You don’t want that newspaper, [it is] the colored newspaper.”

The reader will note that the white woman quickly animates the white script that she has come to believe that whites are expected to perform. She makes him aware of his racial faux pas, effectively communicating that he does not really know what he has done; he is unaware of the oxymoronic nature of his newspaper selection. It is as if he had mistakenly sat on the “colored only” side of a movie theater, or drank from the “colored only” fountain. In a radical move to de-animate the scripts whites are expected to follow, Peeples’ writes:

Seeing that I had an audience, I turned back to the cashier, who by now was informing me where to obtain the “white newspaper.” I let her finish speaking, and then I said in a loud, crisp voice, “You must think I’m white.”

He then notes her response:

She was startled. But within seconds she came to realize that these simple words represented a profound act of racial sedition. I had betrayed her
precious “white race.” At this moment her eyes wandered beyond me to see, as I could also see, the two black patrons who were apparently amused because their faces had broken into a grin. Upon being discovered, they both sought to cover their faces with their hands. The cashier became furious. But she was clearly at a loss of what to do with this Judas.35

“You must think I’m white” actually functions to undermine the “racial” boundaries presupposed by the white woman. “You must think I’m white” throws into disarray the white woman’s expectations and her desire to construct a shared reality. Peeples challenges the notion that his phenotypic whiteness ipso facto makes him a member of the whiteness club. Through his utterance, his body as racially “given” is suspended, having rendered its white “racial” substantiality dubious. Implicit in her reminding him about the newspaper, she not only names his identity, but she inculcates white normativity. To have agreed with her and thanked her for making him aware of his poor judgment, that is, to have been privilege-evasive, he would have participated in the co-constitution of the white body as the whitely body. But it is precisely his utterance that renders the construction unilateral. This is a very effective way of reconfiguring the meaning of the white body.

This kind of utterance could be effectively utilized in many situations. Consider the scenario where the newcomer is standing around with other “racially” marked white bodies and a racist joke is told. Members of the group/white club begin to laugh, thus collectively giving approval to this type of white social bonding. The newcomer, in the midst of the hilarity could say, “You must think I’m white.” Of course, she does not
mean that she is really Black or that she is only “passing.” The utterance communicates, “You have mistaken me for a member of the club. I might be white, but I’ve learned to rearticulate, rename, and re-perform my body in ways that call into question the historical sedimentation of repeated whitely acts that have taken my whiteness as the appearance of something unconditioned.” I view such efforts as instantiations of what Clevis Headley refers to as “a continuously affirmed refusal to prolong the ontological and existential project of whiteness.”

Although Bailey would recognize the importance of Peeples’ and the newcomers’ traitorous acts to the white club, indeed, she would even acknowledge the fact that other whites may come to ostracize them for such acts, she does not maintain that they now occupy positions on the outside of racial privilege. In other words, through their traitorous acts “they do not exchange their status as insiders for outsider-within status.” Bailey also warns, “Animating a privilege-cognizant script requires more than occasionally interrupting racist jokes . . . . An occasional traitorous act does not a traitor make. Truly animating a privilege-cognizant white script requires that traitors cultivate a character from which traitorous practices will flow.”

While I would argue that the above examples are clear instances in which phenotypic whites have engaged in acts of defying whiteliness, I would not argue that these acts constitute acts of abolishing the white race. According to Noel Ignatiev, cofounder with John Garvey of the journal Race Traitor, “abolitionists seek to abolish the white race.” If by “abolish the white race” they mean a commitment to doing away with whitely ways of being-in-the-world, then I would certainly agree. Although Ignatiev and Garvey make it clear what they do not mean by abolishing the white race, it is not clear
how abolishing or disavowing whiteness is to take place, particularly given the multiple ways in which whiteness positions the phenotypic body regardless of its intentions to the contrary. Opting out of the club of whiteness, which they also advance, is indeed one way of being disloyal to the club. However, even after such an act, one remains white. This is the same problem that emerges after one rejects the absolute values of whiteness through existential conversion. Alcoff notes, “One’s appearance of being white will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways, and to avow treason does not render whites ineligible for these privileges, even if they work hard to avoid them.” In other words, the problem appears to reside in the new abolitionists’ “seeming inability to untangle the difference between whiteness as a social construction and whiteness as a physical marker, or an indelible part of one’s visible identity.” To be fair to the abolitionists, Ignatiev does admit that whites who step outside of the white club “in one situation can hardly avoid stepping back in later, if for no other reason than assumptions of others—unless, like John Brown, they have the good fortune to be hanged before that can happen.” While he does appear to understand the difficulty of stepping outside the white club, he also seems to suggest that one way (or perhaps the only way) of avoiding unwanted privileges is to have the “good fortune” of being killed. Given the historical association that they establish between themselves and the historical John Brown who orchestrated an attack on Harpers Ferry, my assumption is that his language here is not simply hyperbolic. But there are other viable ways of disrupting whitely ways of being without having the “good fortune” of being killed.

Part of the problem with the new abolitionist view has to do with the clarification of what constitutes a white race traitorous act. Of course, there is also the problem of
specifying the needed discourse to describe “white identity” as a phenotypic marker of identity given that the new abolitionists “deny the existence of a positive white identity.” Ignatiev and Garvey write about a time when one of them, because he was unfamiliar with the traffic rules in New York City, made a right turn on a red light, which turned out to be illegal. He was stopped by two police officers and was “released with a courteous admonition.” They note:

Had he been black, they probably would have ticketed him, and might even have taken him down to the station. A lot of history was embedded in that small exchange: the cops treated the miscreant leniently at least in part because they assumed, looking at him, that he was white and therefore loyal. Their courtesy was a habit meant both to reward good conduct and induce future cooperation. Had the driver cursed them, or displayed a bumper sticker that said, “Avenge Rodney King,” the cops might have reacted differently.

While anyone familiar with the phenomenon of “driving while Black” within the context of “racial” profiling will understand how “driving while white” will not typically result in the same consequences for that phenotypic white body, the way in which they envision being a race traitor leads to rather peculiar consequences. After being released with a courteous admonition, one could say, “You must think I’m white.” This may even force the police officers to think, perhaps for a moment, about their motivations for letting him off. What happens, however, if the police officers, not acting from a racist sensibility,
give the abolitionist a ticket because they think that he deserves it? Will the abolitionist praise the officers for being able to see beyond the white racist club? Indeed, will he praise the officers for treating him as they would a Black person? Is it not possible that the abolitionist simply deserved the ticket? What if they let the abolitionist off because they were having a good day and not because they were part of the white race club? Indeed, assuming that they were having a good day, what would happen once the abolitionist cursed them or accused them of being racists, of being members of the white race club that overlooks the illegalities committed by other whites? They would probably then decide to give the abolitionist a ticket. Would the abolitionist then be satisfied because the white officers had seen the white racist error of their ways, became traitors to their race, and decided to give him a ticket? Again, it is difficult to delineate what would constitute a “race traitorous” act in this situation.

Ignatiev and Garvey also deny the existence of a “positive white identity.” The presupposition is that they do not believe that there can exist “positive white identities.” So, all “white identities” are negative identities. But what does a phenotypic white person, then, take up as an identity that is not a white identity? Ignatiev:

When there comes into being a critical mass of people who look white but do not act white—people who might be called “reverse oreos”—the white race will undergo fission, and former whites, born again, will be able to take part, together with others, in building a new human community.48

“Reverse oreos”? But what would it mean to embody Blackness on the inside, as it were,
and yet appear white on the outside? He is presumably not referring to the “wigger” identity. Rather, to be Black “inside” seems to signify some form of white treason, a way of being phenotypically white and yet Black—a trope, in this case, for “angry,” “frustrated,” “indignant” regarding the system of American injustice. In crass consumer terms, to say nothing of the history of colonial desire, is it not presumptive and narcissistic to claim “Blackness” in this fashion? While I recognize the efforts of Ignatiev and Garvey to rethink ways in which to abolish white racism, it is problematic to appropriate “Blackness” as an effort “to disengage with whiteness.” And is it not indicative of “the ultimate in white privilege for any white subject to claim to be nonwhite” as they continue to be socially and “racially” positioned as privileged.

Ignatiev and Garvey also claim that “treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.” However, when the very category of the “human” is defined by whites, would not treason to whiteness be disloyalty to humanity?

There is a great deal to be gained through the encouragement of phenotypic whites to reflectively animate their privileged white scripts. White racist ways of being-in-the-world are divisive, arrogant, oppressive, and misanthropic. A challenge must be waged not only against white supremacists and wealthy whites who animate whitely scripts, but against poor whites who must also reflectively examine ways in which they enact their whiteness. As Marilyn Frye notes:

Many poor and working-class white people are perfectly confident that they are more intelligent, know more, have better judgment, and are more moral than black people or Chicanos or Puerto Ricans or Indians or
anyone else they view as not white, and believe that they would be
perfectly competent to run the country and to rule others justly and
righteously if given the opportunity.\textsuperscript{55}

While I am aware of the historical divide and conquer tactics of the white bourgeoisie
vis-à-vis sustaining divisions and tensions between working-class Blacks and working-
class whites, and how this prohibited/prohibits the recognition of shared interests, “we
must tell the full story of white racism in all of its complexity, and this complexity cannot
be fully resolved through a class analysis that sequesters the guilty as only among the
rich.”\textsuperscript{56}

It is not easy to discern the subtle and yet pervasive ways in which the ideology of
whiteness profoundly distorts authentic forms of human relationality. Contesting the
normative status of whiteness “means living in constant struggle, always working with
self and those around you. . . . It is a process that . . . [builds on] the notion that all benefit
when whiteness inflicts less violence [on] others in the world.”\textsuperscript{57}

It is important to keep in mind, though, that when threatened, when thrown back
upon themselves, made to recognize their freedom, whites, as I have argued, may decide
to flee. As history has shown, when threatened/challenged, whiteness can return with a
vengeance. As Paget Henry notes, “Sooner or later the persisting need for confirmation of
its [white, secure, and powerful] self-image would reassert itself. If not accommodated,
the earlier sense of crisis, of losing its grip on itself would only return with greater
intensity.”\textsuperscript{58} Whiteness is in a constant process of renegotiating its reality, reconfiguring
and remolding its apparent stability through the invention of an “Other” in terms of which
white identity is preserved through another act of negation. As Linda Alcoff observes:

As whites lose their psychic social status, and as processes of positive identity construction are derailed, intense anxiety, hysteria, and depression can result. The most likely solution to this will be, of course, for new processes to develop that simply shifts targets to create new categories of the abject through which to inflate collective self-esteem, and this is already happening in revivals of nativism, the vilification of illegal immigrants . . . and so on.59

In Beauvoirian terms, whiteness is like an “inhuman [idol] to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice” all that is of value, even the white body itself. Therefore, the serious world of whiteness is a dangerous world. Whiteness makes tyrants out of human beings. The white, eliding “the subjectivity of his [her] choice,” acts as if whiteness is an absolute value that “is being asserted through him [her].” Whiteness also requires ignoring, indeed, even erasing, “the subjectivity and the freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the [idol of whiteness]” means absolutely nothing. White procrustean expansiveness creates its own satellites of whiteness throughout the world. And whites who have raised their existential projects to “the statue of an idol will have no scruple about assuring” their implementation “at the price of a great number of lives of the [indigenous]; for what value has the life of [“savages”]” who stand in the way of modernity-in-white. Whiteness is a form of fanaticism “which is as formidable as the fanaticism of passion.”60 It is precisely this fanaticism that we must fear and combat. For
it territorializes and defines what is and what is possible. By doing so, it occludes other voices from speaking and other (non-white) ways of revealing the depths of, and the possibilities inherent in, the human.

Notes

3 Simone de Beauvoir relates a revealing story of her visit to the American South and how her whiteness was experienced in a profoundly relational fashion: “It’s the first time we’ve seen with our own eyes this segregation we have heard so much about; and we’ve been well warned: something is falling onto our shoulders which will no longer leave us across the entire South; it is our own skin that has become heavy and stifling and whose color burns us.” Quoted in Margaret A. Simons’s Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 179. What is important here is Beauvoir’s reference to her skin becoming heavy and stifling and whose color burned. She came to experience the lived-reality of whiteness vis-à-vis the social and existential derailment of the Black Other. She began to feel the weight of her whiteness, its oppressiveness, and its symbolic anti-Blackness. The point here is that her whiteness was experienced as both a property and a relation.
5 I would like to thank philosopher Fred Evans for his insights here. It is because of the significant philosophical work that he is developing regarding the ontological and political importance of the multi-voice body vis-à-vis combating hegemonic voices that presume to speak as “oracle” voices that I have begun to think about whitespeak in this manner. See, Fred Evans’ “Genealogy and the Problem of Affirmation in Nietzsche, Foucault and Bakhtin,” in Philosophy & Social Criticism, 27 (3), (2001): 41–65, and his book Psychology & Nihilism: A Genealogical Critique of the Computational Model of Mind (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993).
8 Linda Alcoff notes that “Racism, as Eduardo Mendieta has put it, feels as if one finds oneself in the world ahead of oneself, the space one occupies as already occupied.” See her chapter “Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics,” in Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism, ed. Paula M. L. Moya & Michael R. Hames-García (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 338.
12 Eleanor Holveck, Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Lived Experience: Literature and Metaphysics (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 94.
14 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 47.
16 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 47.
Philosopher Eleanore Holveck has described this form of oppression in terms of how white bodies might be shaken out of their seriousness, that is, how they might be shaken vis-à-vis the reality of experiencing their own bodies as objects rejection, harassment, and demonization, of being watched when they enter a clothing store or pulled over “while driving white.”


Holveck, *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Lived Experience*, 63.


Gothin, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Notions of Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity and their relationship to Jean-Paul Sartre’s Notions of Appeal and Desire,” 89.

This, of course, does not mean that one ought to ignore signs that could be potentially life threatening.


Noel Ignatiev, “The Point is Not to Interpret Whiteness but to Abolish It.” Retrieved from http://racetraitor.org/abolishthepoint.html


Peeples, “Richmond Journal,” 82.

Peeples, “Richmond Journal,” 82.

In saying “You must think I’m white,” one concern here is whether or not Blacks might be offended by a white person seeming to deny that he/she is white. I would like to thank philosopher Eleanore Holveck for posing this point to me. The reason why this should not be offensive to Blacks is that the white who says this is not really denying his/her whiteness, that is, his/her white skin. If the white meant to convey that he/she is really Black by saying “You must think I’m white,” then this would involve a form of appropriating Blackness without ever critically coming to terms with one’s whiteness. Hence, “You must think I’m white” does not function to territorialize Blackness. Rather, the white is saying, “You must think that I am a member of the club of whiteness, that I play by the rules of whiteness, that I act whitely-in-the-world.” To this extent, my sense is that Blacks would encourage such a move. The utterance itself is a form of resisting whiteness. It calls into question the presumption that because one’s skin is white, one’s intentions, one’s beliefs, can be read with certainty.


Ignatiev, “The Point is Not to Interpret Whiteness but to Abolish It.”


Ignatiev, “The Point is Not to Interpret Whiteness but to Abolish It.”
Ignatiev, “The Point is Not to Interpret Whiteness but to Abolish It.”
Ignatiev, “The Point is Not to Interpret Whiteness but to Abolish It.”
For a significant exploration of the “wigger” concept, See Crispin Sartwell’s “Wigger” in White on White/Black on Black, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).
Bailey, “Locating Traitorous Identities,” 37
Warren, “Performing Whiteness Differently,” 466.
Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 49.
Conclusion

This project has been an attempt to theorize and understand Black embodiment within the context of white hegemony, that is, within the context of a white racist anti-Black world. Indeed, the Black body’s lived historicity, from the perspective of whiteness as an “unconditioned” state of being, has been one of profound existential trauma and corporeal deformation. The experience of such trauma has had profound implications on how Blacks have been forced to see themselves through the distorted Black imago of the white imaginary. Within this context, I examined and theorized such themes as double consciousness, invisibility, and corporeal malediction that captured the phenomenological or lived reality of Black bodies under tremendous existential duress. I theorized the ways in which the Black body was/is subjected to powerful discursive regimes that historically rendered the Black body as “docile” and as the site of “evil,” bestiality, and “inferiority.” The point was to demonstrate that the Black body is a historically lived text, as it were, in terms of which whites have inscribed their projections, projections that actually speak to important dynamics regarding whites’ self-conceptualization.

Moving through the crucible of the Middle Passage and enslavement, the Black body became the site not only of white racist discursive constructions, but the victim of white brutality and inhumanity that literally left the Black body marked, scarred, and mutilated. As I have argued, whiteness is predicated upon a destructive parasitism. The “humanity” of whites is fundamentally predicated upon the erasure of non-white humanity. This, of course, led to the exploration of the historical emergence of a white racist Manichean paradigm within which whiteness functions as the transcendental signified. I also argued that whiteness, even before its historical link to the conceptual
apparatus of race, was a trope for goodness and purity. This facilitated the Manichean discourse within which Europeans later divided up the world.

As the transcendental signified, I demonstrated how the power of whiteness, manifested through the white gaze, which is a structured way of “seeing” that is always already mediated by certain reactionary value-creating forces, interpelated the Black body as that which is epistemologically and ontologically “given.” In other words, the white gaze is said to “know” all there is to be known about the Black body, because the Black body is ontologically fixed. But the “truth” of the Black body, which was actually a caricature of the Black body, was actually predicated upon “the lie” of the white body. This involved an exploration of the racist epistemological framework within which non-whites are constructed.

Given that the construction of the Black body is dialectically linked to the historico-ideological construction of the white body, it was necessary to turn (or return) the gaze upon the constitutional acts of white racist intentional consciousness. To theorize whiteness in terms of its self-conscious claims to supremacy, however, would have left un-theorized the various ways in which whiteness expresses itself in very subtle and insidious ways. As I have argued throughout this project, the discussion of whiteness does not begin and end with a discussion of white supremacy. In other words, it was necessary to render the unseen of whiteness seen, that is, to theorize whiteness at the site of the quotidian. In this way, whiteness is theorized in terms of its impact on Black bodies in everyday mundane social spaces of being-in-the-world. This might be described as a process of theorizing a phenomenology of the everyday transactional manifestations of white racism.
Through blending autobiography, history, and philosophical fiction, I provided a philosophically rich analysis of the ways in which whiteness “confiscates” the Black body through its own presupposed fixed subjectivity. I was also able to provide a vivid description, and a philosophical analysis, of what it means to live one’s existence in Black vis-à-vis the actual and potential threat of white hegemony. This method of inquiry calls into question certain conceptualizations of what constitutes doing philosophy. Hence, the subtext of my approach suggests alternative ways in which philosophy might be done, particularly with regard to exploring white racism. As I have also argued throughout this project, it is not enough to demonstrate that race is not a natural kind or through conceptual analysis to show that the concept of race is ontologically empty and epistemologically false. The fact of the matter is that racism exists unabated in the face of philosophical conceptual analysis. This is why it is important, as I have argued, to explore the phenomenological or lived dimensions of white racism. Although a fiction or a social construction, race has social ontological effects, maintained through embodied communicative acts.

Given the agential reality of Black embodiment, it is not enough to theorize the Black body in terms of its “niggerization” within the white imaginary. The point here is that Black embodiment, despite the power of white ideological constructions, never reached a point of ontological closure. Hence, this led to a consideration of the reality of the Black body as resistant, as “taking a stand” against white fictions and white brutality. In this context, I theorized a conception of Black agency and explored various historical modalities of Black resistance. The historical narrative of Black resistance in the so-called New World speaks to the profound ways in which human beings are protean,
trans-phenomenal, and have the capacity to create and develop their own perspectives on the world. Indeed, at a deeper philosophical level, Black resistance is a story of a people who forced the very re-conceptualization of a bankrupt and pernicious philosophical anthropology, one predicated upon the procrustean and narcissistic values of whitely-ways-of being-in-the-world.

To leave under-theorized the question of white anti-white praxis would leave out the significant project of how whites can contribute to the demise of an ideology that oppresses not only Black bodies, but white bodies as well. Seeking ways in which Blacks might live their “raced” bodies in less oppressive forms, it is not enough that Blacks take up this project within a vacuum where white efforts are absent or within a context where the Black body vis-à-vis the white body continues to be the phobogenic source of the white body image. It is here, through the work of philosopher Marilyn Frye that I distinguished between white phenotypic bodies and whitely ways of being-in-the-world. This distinction provides a way in which white bodies are not demonized or problematized as such, but white forms of being are targeted as the sites of critique. And while one should not forget the ways in which white racism socially and legally positions white bodies independently of their intentions, there are still ways in which white bodies can perform “traitorous” anti-whiteness acts. Indeed, if white racism qua whiteliness involves various historically contingent communicative practices, learned stylized ways of performing the white body whitely, ideologically inculcated ways of comprehending the white self and the so-called non-white Other, then there is no historical necessity that prevents phenotypic white bodies from discontinuing the lived project of white racism.
I have suggested existential conversion as a way of coming to terms with whiteness as a set of values and relations that are founded through human action. As white racism continues to exist, and as the white “oracle” voice continues to speak the only “single” truth, which turns out to be indicative of its desire to become the only legitimate voice, white and Black anti-white racist praxes must continue. This project is my first comprehensive attempt to speak to the dynamics of whiteness, its impact upon Black existential embodiment, its profound bad faith, its distortion of genuine forms of human relationality, and the possibilities of imagining an alternative future for whitely ways of being-in-the-world. As of this writing, it is not clear to me what a completely “rehabilitated” white racist identity looks like. There is, however, the recognition that this great unknown will not emerge unless whiteness is mapped, critiqued, confronted, and transformed not only at the quotidian level, but also in terms of its institutional and global manifestations.


Kelley, R. D. G. “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South.” *Journal of American History*, 80 (June), 1993: 75–112.


