

APORETIC THINKING AND THE PRODUCTION OF 'RACE': W.E.B. DU
BOIS, FRANTZ FANON, AND THE UNMAKING OF THE NEGRO

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Aporetic Thinking and the Production of 'Race' focuses on the early critical writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and the central theoretical texts of Frantz Fanon. Usually viewed as articulating the conflict between a biological and a socio-historical notion of race Du Bois's early texts are generally considered a failed attempt to disentangle himself from the constraints of nineteenth century racial discourse. Moving away from the limitations of this interpretation, I claim that Du Bois's conception of race emerges from his methodological engagement with the defining question of his early work, "What is a Negro?" My dissertation contends that the methodological imperative guiding his early analysis of this question places him alongside Max Weber, Heinrich Rickert and the German neo-Kantians, and his mentor Gustav Schmoller in his attempt to establish the epistemological basis of social scientific practice. I link the epistemological concern that guides Du Bois early analysis of the 'Negro problem' to the emergence of his distinct notion of race. His increased focus on the epistemological substrate constitutive of the phenomena he calls the 'Negro' and his inability to determine it in a manner he considers satisfactory coincides with his accelerated shift to the biographical as the modality through which the

paradox of the 'Negro' is thought. I suggest that race, as formulated by Du Bois in texts as diverse as *The Negro*, *Dusk of Dawn*, "The Conservation of Races," "Sociology Hesitant," *Darkwater*, and *Black Reconstruction*, is reducible to neither biology nor culture. Rather than this often rehearsed dichotomy I propose that Du Bois's notion of race gestures towards what contemporary theory identifies as the space of the 'political'. It is on this point that the problematic Du Bois confronts insinuates itself within the work of Frantz Fanon. In "Aporetic Thinking" I argue that the proliferation of theoretical languages within Fanon bears witness not to a seeming theoretical confusion on his part but rather speaks to the inadequacy of available theoretical languages to define or register the being of the Negro. Rather than championing one specific theoretical 'Fanon' (e.g. psychoanalytic, Marxist, phenomenological, etc.) my analysis, read within the context of Heidegger's "Age of the World Picture," contends that Fanon's work is best viewed as a challenge to the dominance of 'theoretical understanding' itself and of the subject it produces. The slippage within Fanon between 'theory' as discursive modality and 'theory' as a form of understanding is the site, I argue, from which Fanon's conception of what constitutes the space of colonial politics must be thought.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Spanish Town, Jamaica and raised in Montreal, Ainsworth Clarke studied literature and history at McGill University graduating with an Honors degree in English literature. Growing up and studying in Montreal, he benefited from an environment where questions of linguistic and national identities and their link to culture were part of an ongoing and foundational public conversation. In many ways this formative experience motivates much of his later academic work. On graduating from University Ainsworth managed a bookstore in Montreal before entering a doctoral program in comparative literature at Cornell University. During his graduate school tenure he served as a visiting faculty member at Suffolk University-Dakar, Senegal where he taught courses in American literature and postcolonial studies.

To my parents

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The pairing of the two authors at the center of this study might, on first appearance, seem somewhat unusual. W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon although representative members of what might be considered a discourse of the margins have until recently shared very little common disciplinary space within the University. In fact not long ago Du Bois and his texts were generally relegated to the darker corners of English departments while Fanon, perhaps finding greater favor, was more often to be found in political science departments than anywhere else. Of course times change. Today, Du Bois, although still principally taught in English departments, has acquired a much higher profile. Due in part to the institutionalization of African American studies within the academy and his central place in the canon of an African American literary tradition, Du Bois now commands far greater attention within academic circles than was imaginable even a generation ago. Fanon, likewise, has seen an expansion of his horizons. Postcolonial studies and the increasing attention to transnationalism within cultural studies have made of Fanon's work a necessary reference point for any serious scholarship in these areas.

Despite the repositioning of their work within the academy both authors seem nonetheless bedeviled and unable to escape the parameters governing the initial reception of their writing. Du Bois is still the inherited symbol of an ongoing racial politics that defines his texts in terms of their role in that politics. In other words, the Du Bois who offers an alternative conception of method within the social sciences, who engages in a critique of the emerging positivism of sociology, and who attempts to redefine the parameter through which we apprehend the social scientific object is elided in favor of the progressive, reformist, that is, the 'political' Du Bois.¹ Fanon in certain ways seems to fare no better. His reception is still marked by the dichotomy that prevailed when I first encountered him in college (which is quite some time ago now). There is the early Fanon, attentive to the formation of racialized identities and the fracture of their interiority but who seemingly cannot recognize the terms of the politics in which these agents live. And the later Fanon, cognizant of the political reality of the colonial world and the revolutionary political action that it requires, yet who seems somehow incapable of truly thinking the possibility of identity other than as political/national

¹ The importance of Anthony Appiah's essay on Du Bois's "The Conservation of Races" and the attention it generated stems in part from its challenge to this 'political' Du Bois. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," Critical Inquiry 12 (1985), Appiah, "Uncompleted.", Appiah, "Uncompleted.", Appiah, "Uncompleted.", Appiah, "Uncompleted."

identity.² Work on Fanon has tended to reproduce this dichotomous reading, positioning him on either one side or another of the postmodern/political, psychoanalysis/phenomenology, etc., divide.³ The respective terms of their reception also sheds some light onto the reason why there has been little attempt among scholars to bring these two thinkers into conversation. Scholars of Du Bois and Fanon have traditionally been separated by linguistic and disciplinary differences with Du Bois and Fanon each believed to be addressing

² The principal line of demarcation here is of course between *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les damnés de la terre*. See Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés De La Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961), Fanon, *Les Damnés De La Terre*, Fanon, *Les Damnés De La Terre*, Fanon, *Les Damnés De La Terre*, Fanon, *Les Damnés De La Terre*.

³ Recent examples of collections organized along such lines are Anthony C. Alessandrini's *Frantz Fanon: Perspectives* and Lewis R. Gordon's *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. Two noted attempts to resist this trend can be found in the Spring 2002 special issue of *Parallax* that collected a range of contemporary essays on Fanon and in the recent work of Hortense J. Spillers. See Anthony C. Alessandrini, ed., *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1999), Alessandrini, ed., *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, Alessandrini, ed., *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, Alessandrini, ed., *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, Alessandrini, ed., *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, Lewis R. Gordon, Dean T. Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996), Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, Hortense J. Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother'," *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 23.3 (1996), Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother'." , Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother'." , Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother'." , Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother'." , Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Introduction: Fanon's Counterculture of Modernity," *Parallax: A Journal of Metadiscursive Theory and Cultural Practices* 8.2 (2002), Ziarek, "Introduction: Fanon's Counterculture of Modernity." , Ziarek, "Introduction: Fanon's Counterculture of Modernity." , Ziarek, "Introduction: Fanon's Counterculture of Modernity." , Ziarek, "Introduction: Fanon's Counterculture of Modernity."

quite different questions. While Du Bois's work has been principally viewed as raising questions of concern to African Americans, of their role in the production of an American national imaginary and the politico-racial economy that subtends it, Fanon's purview has been the terrain of violent anticolonial struggle and the complex psychodynamics (whether individual or collective) inscribed within it.

A recent and still emerging body of scholarship is attempting to move beyond the parameters that up to now have governed the reception of Du Bois and Fanon's work. In "Race, Marxism, and Colonial Experience: Du Bois and Fanon," Michael Stone-Richards offers a provocative reading of the link that unify Du Bois and Fanon in a common project.⁴ Du Bois and Fanon, Stone-Richards argues, are inheritors of the early Marx and the left Hegelianism out of which his early work was produced. By focusing on the terms governing black *experience* Du Bois and Fanon each conclude, according to Stone-Richards, that under capitalism the socius is characterized by a "doubleness,"—termed 'manichaeism' in the case of Fanon and 'double-consciousness' in the case of Du Bois. With enviable attentiveness to the nuance of each writer's text Michelle Wright's recent study, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*, links Du Bois and Fanon through a common lineage arguing that their

⁴ Michael Stone-Richards, "Race, Marxism, and Colonial Experience: Du Bois and Fanon," The Cambridge Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois, ed. Shamooin Zamir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

respective work (alongside that of Senghor and Césaire) constitutes a pioneering if problematic counter-discourse of race.⁵ Du Bois and Fanon, Wright contends, produce within their respective registers a critical response to the idealist fallacy that grounds the dialectical conception of the “Black Other.” Vilashini Cooppan, in her rewarding *Worlds Within: National Narratives & Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing*, understands Du Bois and Fanon to be articulating the complex relation between the national and the global, identity and the nation within their texts.⁶ In each case, Cooppan argues, the heterogeneric and polyvocal character of their best known texts arise from the logic of spectrality (in its Derridean sense) that animates their respective relation to territory and nation. Both Thomas Holt and Ross Posnock each use the occasion of analyses of Du Bois and Fanon to make quite pointed interventions in disciplinary debates occurring in their respective fields. For Holt, Du Bois and Fanon illustrate how “race” is structured within and reproduced through the sinews of the everyday. Experience (in its subjective and objective dimensions) demarcates, in both a phenomenological and analytical sense, the locus where “race” acquires its force by simultaneously structuring

⁵ Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶ Vilashini Cooppan, *Worlds Within: National Narratives & Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

that experience and being structured by it.⁷ The traditional tools of the historical profession are unable, Holt concludes, to register the range of issues such a conception of race and racism present. Posnock's essay engages with various currents within the academy that are unified, he suggests, by their adherence to a notion of postmodernism and the identitarian politics that arise from it.⁸ His reading of Du Bois and Fanon positions them as inheritors of a cosmopolitan sensibility at odds, he argues, with the conception of politics and particularity that circulates within the academy today. As suggestive and productive as these studies have been they are still primarily concerned with either situating Du Bois and Fanon within the secure confines of (new) disciplinary borders or construing them as a legitimating voice for one side or another in our institutional polemics. To approach the relation between Du Bois and Fanon from a different perspective we need to return to the constraints that have worked to confine them to different institutional spaces within the academy.

As their respective places within the academy have become increasingly secure, the questions Du Bois and Fanon are believed to be asking have progressively overlapped (i.e., identity, subject-formation, race, etc.) and the issue of who is best suited to speak to

⁷ Thomas C. Holt, "Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History," The American Historical Review 100.1 (1995).

⁸ Ross Posnock, "How It Feels to Be a Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the 'Impossible Life' of the Black Intellectual," Critical Inquiry 23 (1997).

these particular configurations has itself arisen as a point of debate.⁹ These debates have a great deal to do with the allocation of resources, the corporatization of higher education, the marginalization of the humanities on the university campus and the transformation of the modern research university into a constellation of knowledge increasingly defined by what Bill Readings terms the “idea of excellence.” Yet they also speak to the challenge minority discourses pose for the self-conception of the university. At issue here I would suggest is the particular question raised by presence of these discourses/disciplines on the University campus, namely whether they can be subsumed under the logic by which the University constitutes disciplinary knowledge.

Attending to the question of knowledge formation raised by Reading’s analysis requires asking a different type of question: what object occupies the center of our disciplinary inquiry. Not what objective do we pursue in our inquiries but rather what object sits at the center of these inquiries and how does the construction of that object (i.e., how we constitute its ‘objectness’) determine the disciplinary boundaries/logic we inhabit. This is the fundamental question that guides my encounter with Du Bois and Fanon. What I

⁹ See Mae G. Henderson, “Where, by the Way, Is This Train Going?: A Case for Black (Cultural) Studies,” *Callaloo* 19.1 (Winter, 1996), Wahneema Lubiano, “Mapping the Interstices between Afro-American Cultural Discourse and Cultural Studies: A Prolegomenon,” *Callaloo* 19.1 (Winter, 1996).

mean to suggest here is that any attempt to assess the work of Du Bois and Fanon must also address the tenuous and conflicted relation their texts propose to sites of knowledge formation, that is to the logic of exclusion and regulation by which a field of inquiry comes to ground itself as a site of knowledge. Without due attentiveness to this dynamic the challenge Du Bois's and Fanon's texts put to us risks being lost in the unsaid of our everyday intellectual practice. Although they now occupy relatively secure places within the Parthenon of 'our' canonical texts this should not blind us to the disruptive capacity these texts embodied – a capacity initially thought particularly ill suited to a disciplinary order. In an attempt to identify the source of Du Bois and Fanon's 'disciplinary' unease this study focuses on the following questions their texts raise: What does it mean to think the Negro? What does it mean to think the 'nègre'? In taking Du Bois and Fanon to be proposing the above questions, I understand them to be both placing pressure on the terms through which a disciplinary logic produces its object *and* inquiring whether such a logic can circumscribe the figures they identify as the 'Negro' and the 'nègre'.

For both Du Bois and Fanon 'thinking' the Negro and the 'nègre' takes place alongside a (re)consideration of the sites from which such thinking occurs. In other words the strictures that define the institutional space, discursive regime, or theoretical vocabulary that

purports to register/produce the Negro necessarily come under review.¹⁰ At the center of this (re)consideration is the figure of the Negro as both the locus and articulation of the limit. My reference here is less to the status that the Negro (or in an earlier epistemic configuration the African) assumes as the limit of western modernity's conception of the human than to the consequences that accrue from the attempt to account for the Negro within recognizable discursive or disciplinary terms. Du Bois and Fanon in attempting to define (in the case of the former) and critique (in the case of the latter) the fiction one calls the Negro reveal, within their respective registers, the limits of the discursive regimes that purport to speak to and through it. Homi Bhabha helps us understand the mechanics by which the reinscription Du Bois and Fanon articulate produce their critical valence. Fanon's thought according to Bhabha—who is here outlining the contours of Fanon's critical gesture—moves beyond a simple contradiction of the West's epistemological formula. In repeating the West's "metaphysical ideas of progress or racism or rationality" Fanon does not simply counter these ideas but "distantiates them ... makes them uncanny by displacing them in a number of culturally

¹⁰ I will use the term "Negro" for the balance of this introduction rather than the clumsier Negro/nègre. By this I do not mean to suggest that the terms operate identically in the work of each writer or that they draw from an identical historical and semantic field. But because these figures designate, in their respective fashion, a moment of instability and disturbance within the fields they occupy, they thus assume a similar position in relation to the discourses they address and that address them.

contradictory and discursively estranged locations.”¹¹ For Bhabha, Fanon engages in a “catachrestic reversal” that results in both the displacement of conceptual vocabularies and the ‘unwarranted’ crossing of discursive boundaries. In other words, Fanon proceeds via the solicitation of an aporetic moment. The critical possibility Du Bois bequeaths to us requires that we understand how he also thinks the Negro through/as an aporetic disturbance. This avenue in Du Bois’s thought is opened by his continuing attempts to situate the African American ‘subject’ in relation to notions of exemplarity and exorbitance (and all that this structure of excess suggests).¹² Mobilized through the various figures that appear throughout his early work (e.g., veil, double-consciousness, etc.), these terms and the particular theoretical resistance they inscribe shape the landscape on which Du

¹¹ Homi Bhabha, "Conclusion: 'Race,' Time and the Revision of Modernity," The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994) 339-40, Bhabha, "Conclusion: 'Race,' Time and the Revision of Modernity," 339-40, Bhabha, "Conclusion: 'Race,' Time and the Revision of Modernity," 339-40, Bhabha, "Conclusion: 'Race,' Time and the Revision of Modernity," 339-40, Bhabha, "Conclusion: 'Race,' Time and the Revision of Modernity," 339-40.

¹² Nahum Chandler in a series of provocative essays explores the centrality of notions of exorbitance and exemplarity in Du Bois’s work. Nahum D. Chandler, "The Figure of the X: An Elaboration of the Du Boisian Autobiographical Example," Displacement, Diaspora, and the Geographies of Identity, eds. Smadar Lavie and Ted Swendenburg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), Chandler, "The Figure of the X: An Elaboration of the Du Boisian Autobiographical Example.", Chandler, "The Figure of the X: An Elaboration of the Du Boisian Autobiographical Example.", Chandler, "The Figure of the X: An Elaboration of the Du Boisian Autobiographical Example.", Chandler, "The Figure of the X: An Elaboration of the Du Boisian Autobiographical Example.", Nahum Dimitri Chandler, "Originary Displacement," Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture 27.3 (2000), Chandler, "Originary Displacement.", Chandler, "Originary Displacement.", Chandler, "Originary Displacement.", Chandler, "Originary Displacement."

Bois's iconic formulation ("How does it feel to be a problem") needs to be addressed.

Jacques Derrida has traveled furthest in attempting to understand the relation of the limit to the aporia, an understanding perhaps best captured in a formulation drawn from *Aporias*, his 1993 text that explicitly addresses this formative dimension of Derrida's thought: "*Il y va d'un certain pas*. [It involves a certain step/not; he goes along at a certain pace.]"¹³ The limit, Derrida argues, always involves the contamination of that which determines it as limit and thereby necessarily raises the question of the beyond of the limit. Configured as an impossibility, this beyond marks the foundation of the limit itself, marks the limit's very (im)possibility. It is this conceptual orientation that Derrida's phrase captures and this conception of the "pas," Derrida contends, i.e., its unfolding of the limit, leads to the entire economy of the aporia. In its definition of the term the Oxford English Dictionary offers a telling etymology that seemingly suggests Derrida's proffered conceptualization. According to the OED *aporia* names both an impassable passage and the

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics, eds. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 6, Derrida, *Aporias* 6, Derrida, *Aporias* 6, Derrida, *Aporias* 6, Derrida, *Aporias* 6. This question of the aporia has in a certain way been the most persistent and belatedly recognizable dimension of Derrida's work. See Paola Marrati, *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), Marrati, *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger*, Marrati, *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger*, Marrati, *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger*, Marrati, *Genesis and Trace: Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger*.

skepticism that arises from the failure of discursive resources.¹⁴ The skepticism that registers in the OED definition differs qualitatively from its foundational Cartesian variety, i.e., Descartes' radical proposition that grounds the subject's discursive power in the certainty of radical doubt. Locating the 'conceptual' resources of the aporia on quite different terrain, Derrida defines it less as a moment of discursive power than as an instance of productive insufficiency: "the difficult or impracticable, here the impossible passage, the refused, denied or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future advent [*événement de venue ou d'avenir*] which no longer has the form of the movement that consists in passing, traversing, or transiting."¹⁵ Derrida articulates the notion of a futurity outside the determination of the limit, the "coming to pass' of an event that would no longer have the form or the appearance of a *pas*," in other words, the possibility of an arrival produced *otherwise*.

In tracing the various configurations in which a reflection on the aporia has been a constitutive feature of this work, Derrida analyzes the particular contours in which the aporia operates. Recollecting how his thought has consistently been guided by reflections on the aporia,

¹⁴ "[a. Fr. aporetique (Cotgr.), ad. Gr. ἀπορητικ-ός, f. ἀπορέ-ειν to be at a loss, f. ἄπορ-ος impassable, f. ἄ priv. + πόρος passage.] Inclined to doubt, or to raise objections."

¹⁵ Derrida, Aporias 8, Derrida, Aporias 8, Derrida, Aporias 8, Derrida, Aporias 8, Derrida, Aporias 8.

Derrida clarifies the conceptual economy in which the paradox of the aporia circulates:

But, conversely, who would call a decision that is without rule, without norm, without determinable or determined law, a decision? Who will answer for it as if for a responsible decision, and before whom? Who will dare call duty a duty that owes nothing, or, better (or, worse), that *must owe nothing*? It is necessary, therefore, that the decision and responsibility for it be taken, interrupting the relation to any *presentable* determination but still maintaining a presentable relation to the interruption and to what it interrupts. Is that possible? Is it possible once the interruption always resembles the mark of a borderly edge, the mark of a threshold not to be trespassed?¹⁶

Although Derrida recounts the manner in which a notion of the aporia arrived to play such a prominent role in his thinking, especially as regards notions of responsibility and duty, the specific economy of the aporia Derrida conceptualizes in this passage extends beyond the specific theoretical intervention he makes above:

How to justify the choice of *negative form (aporia)* to designate a duty that, through the impossible or the impracticable, nonetheless announces itself in an affirmative fashion? ... The affirmation that announced itself through a negative form was therefore the necessity of *experience* itself, the experience of the aporia (and these two words that tell of the passage and the nonpassage are

¹⁶ Derrida, [Aporias](#) 17, Derrida, [Aporias](#) 17, Derrida, [Aporias](#) 17, Derrida, [Aporias](#) 17, Derrida, [Aporias](#) 17.

thereby coupled in an aporetic fashion) as endurance or as passion, as interminable resistance or remainder.”¹⁷

What registers here as a non-dialectical negation structures decision and responsibility by simultaneously positing and erasing the determinate relation that seemingly informs ethical action. In other words, Derrida conceives of the aporia as a resistance to the ‘theoretical’ modality and the forms of regulative determination (whether as program, rule, etc.) that it may and can imply. That is not to say that he either abandons regulative determinations or an awareness of their necessity. Rather, aporia signifies a moment articulated as resistance or remainder that recognizes ethical responsibility (in the particular example to which Derrida refers) as “radically heterogeneous” to the sphere of the theoretical. The ‘radical heterogeneity’ Derrida references helps to account for the uneasy relationship Du Bois and Fanon have to the disciplinary and discursive regimes they engage. It is not that either thinker disengages from a *recognizable* theoretical or disciplinary account of African American or diasporic experience in their writings. Du Bois and Fanon each mobilize the dominant theoretical schemes of their day in their respective attempts to conceptually demarcate African American and ‘diasporic’ experience. Yet their respective engagements reveal

¹⁷ Derrida, Aporias 19, Derrida, Aporias 19, Derrida, Aporias 19, Derrida, Aporias 19, Derrida, Aporias 19.

fractures within those discourses, fissures revealed by placing the Negro/nègre at the center, by making of it the 'object' of these discourses.

Du Bois and Fanon are the focus of this study because they each articulate more clearly than other principle figures of what I earlier termed the 'discourse of the margins' the counterintuitive basis that founds minority discourse's critical stance. Reading them alongside and against each other allows us to delineate the "arrival otherwise" characteristic of their thought and identify how each author, within the terms of their respective discursive constellation, enacts the "pas" of Derrida's aporetic logic. In other words, how each is simultaneously arrested at and traverses 'otherwise' the limit of the discourses they engage. In addition, inasmuch they are each clearly identified with two different and at times competing spaces on the disciplinary landscape it allows me to keep the question of disciplinarity, in however inadequate a fashion, in the background. In the final analysis the compulsion both Du Bois and Fanon articulate—in their quite different fashions—to appropriately circumscribe their respective (disciplinary) objects and the critical resources that are produced by their common failure to do so is the larger question that hovers over this study. Returning to this dimension of their thought is particularly necessary at a time when many scholars are refocusing on

the disciplinary and conceptual foundations of what was until recently termed “Black Studies.”¹⁸

To think Du Bois and Fanon together requires bracketing the received categorization of their work, a categorization that owes more to the convenience of disciplinary boundaries and the conception of influence that oftentimes still defines the relationship between texts than to the texts themselves. Yet although what Du Bois means by ‘Negro’ and Fanon by ‘Nègre’ share at most a tenuous denotative link they nonetheless partake in the articulation of a singular movement, itself constitutive of the attempt to think difference through these respective figures (i.e., the ‘Negro,’ le ‘Nègre’). To think their relation either through notions such as ‘influence’ or to conceive their possible conversation as derived from a common history of the margin is insufficient. The former presupposes, in essence, the identity of figures (i.e., of Negro and Nègre) and in such a manner as to not only erase the specificity of Du Bois and Fanon’s respective concerns but also anchors them in conceptual vocabularies that their respective projects

¹⁸ I’m using the term “Black studies” with the specific inflection given the term by Ronald Judy. See Ronald Judy, “Untimely Intellectuals and the University,” *Boundary 2* 27.1 (2000). Whether explicitly in the recent work of Hortense Spillers, Alex Weheliye, and Ronald Judy or implicitly in the work of Fred Moten, and Brent Hayes Edwards, amongst others, the study of African American expressive culture and Afro-diasporic culture is conceived as undergoing a moment of crisis and has compelled a return, within multiple registers, to questions of foundation. See Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), Hortense J. Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6.3 (Winter, 2006), Alexander G. Weheliye, “After Man,” *American Literary History* 20.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2008).

challenge. The latter, on the other hand, construes their relation as produced by a shared experience and history of marginality when their respective work brings accepted notions of experience or history under review. Both Du Bois and Fanon suggest that neither 'history' nor 'experience' remain immune from the *effects* of the aporetic logic identified in their texts thus problematizing either term's capacity to ground a common identity or an 'identity-in-common.' This is not to say there is no relation or shared sensibilities that derive from a common habitation of the margin but rather that this commonality (if that's the proper term) must be thought differently. In this instance what links our two authors is a common problematic that arises because of the site they each occupy in relation to the discourses they address and (equally important) that address them.

Unlike most studies of Du Bois I situate his early writings against the backdrop of the central intellectual concerns arising in his field at the turn of the twentieth century. If we are to determine what compels Du Bois's transition from the early sociological texts such as *The Philadelphia Negro* to the great bio-critical works it requires that we understand the intellectual legacy with which Du Bois grappled. The overriding concern of Du Bois's early texts was the attempt to specify the parameters of what the period termed the 'Negro problem.' Alongside his contemporaries Du Bois was attempting to forge a

methodological paradigm that would not altogether cede the terrain of the social sciences to those who considered the natural sciences an ideal model for social scientific practice. The early twentieth century attempt to locate what might constitute the methodological renewal of the social sciences finds Du Bois and his more illustrious contemporaries, i.e., Weber, Schmoller, Rickert, et al., all searching for a response to their respective disciplinary crises. For Du Bois the question that presses most insistently is precisely the articulation of a conceptual language that can speak to the 'Negro problem.'

Du Bois's early work finds in the newly emerging field of empirical sociology the ideal setting from which the question of Negro may be asked. In Du Bois's hands the 'Negro problem' becomes the material from which he fashions the research agenda of the Atlanta conferences. As proposed by Du Bois the Atlanta conferences were a 100-year research program whose objective was "the collection of a basic body of fact concerning the social condition of American Negroes, endeavoring to reduce that condition to exact measurement whenever or wherever occasion permitted."¹⁹ The study, divided into ten ten-year cycles, aimed to provide a complete map of the very contour and

¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois in Non-Periodical Literature Edited by Others, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY.: Kraus-Thomson, 1982) 226, Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," 226, Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," 226, Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," 226, Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," 226.

content of African American experience. This complete exhaustion of experience, the submission of every aspect of it to the epistemological glance and the belief that such a reduction was possible is what connected Du Bois to the governing social scientific impulse of his period. Yet unlike the other founders of the discipline, for whom the task was to harmonize the methodological approaches specific to nature and spirit and thereby establish the methodological foundation for the study of society, Du Bois's challenge pushed the very limit of this logic of method.²⁰ His attempt to articulate this entity called the "Negro" as both the site of scientific inquiry and subjective interiority and to redefine its points of convergence with the discourses that purported to define it, placed into question the disciplinary logic that subtended the 'objectness' of his (disciplinary) 'object.' The same ambivalence that threatened the stability of his mentor Gustav

²⁰ For a historical reconstruction of the various early attempts to ground social science methodology and delimit the specificity of its object see Jürgen Habermas, On the Logic of the Social Sciences, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A. Stark (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1988) 1-42, Habermas, On the Logic of the Social Sciences 1-42, Habermas, On the Logic of the Social Sciences 1-42, Habermas, On the Logic of the Social Sciences 1-42, Wolf Lepenies, Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Lepenies, Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology, Lepenies, Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology, Lepenies, Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology. Charles Bambach provides an illuminating analysis of the importance methodological reflection in the debates occurring in German Neo-Kantian circles at the turn of the twentieth-century. These debates were central to Du Bois's formation and provided part of the intellectual backdrop during his doctoral years in Berlin. See Charles R. Bambach, Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) 57-176, Bambach, Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism 57-176, Bambach, Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism 57-176, Bambach, Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism 57-176, Bambach, Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism 57-176.

Schmoller's object of inquiry come to infect Du Bois's own attempt to define the methodological site appropriate to the Negro.²¹ Sociology now no longer seems adequate and the subtle empirical positivism that at first appeared so intellectually seductive is left behind.

Fanon's texts (and their reception) present a slightly different problem of analysis for the critic. Unlike the insistence on univocal politico-historical meaning that has until recently dominated even the most productive readings of Du Bois, the multitude of theoretical languages within Fanon has often led to an appropriation of his work in which a problematic conceptual consistency is imposed or his consonance with a specific theoretical vocabulary invoked. Facilitating

²¹ Gustav Schmoller, principal voice in the *methodenstreit* that erupted in German social sciences during the 1880s and Du Bois's mentor at the University of Berlin, was never able to produce a methodology that satisfied the competing demands at the heart of his conception of economics. On the one hand he conceived of economics as a discipline whose object was reducible to statistical quantification while on the other he viewed it as an extension of the "moral sciences." In other words, the appropriate method for an object conditioned by both a natural and moral order in which neither category is reducible to the other eluded him. See Jacob Jan Krabbe, Historicism and Organicism in Economics: The Evolution of Thought (Dodrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996) 17-60, Krabbe, Historicism and Organicism in Economics: The Evolution of Thought 17-60, Heino Heinrich Nau, "Gustav Schmoller's *Historico-Ethical Political Economy: Ethics, Politics and Economics in the Younger German Historical School, 1860-1917*," The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought 7.4 (2000), Nau, "Gustav Schmoller's *Historico-Ethical Political Economy: Ethics, Politics and Economics in the Younger German Historical School, 1860-1917*," Nau, "Gustav Schmoller's *Historico-Ethical Political Economy: Ethics, Politics and Economics in the Younger German Historical School, 1860-1917*," Nau, "Gustav Schmoller's *Historico-Ethical Political Economy: Ethics, Politics and Economics in the Younger German Historical School, 1860-1917*," Nau, "Gustav Schmoller's *Historico-Ethical Political Economy: Ethics, Politics and Economics in the Younger German Historical School, 1860-1917*," Gustav Schmoller, "The Idea of Justice in Political Economy," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (March, 1894), Schmoller, "The Idea of Justice in Political Economy.", Schmoller, "The Idea of Justice in Political Economy.", Schmoller, "The Idea of Justice in Political Economy.", Schmoller, "The Idea of Justice in Political Economy."

this dynamic is the seeming division within Fanon's own trajectory in which the early psychoanalytically inflected work of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, gives way to the politically grounded analyses of *Les damnés de la terre*. But reducing Fanon's text to this trajectory requires that we construe them as relatively consistent examples of whichever theoretical vocabulary we believe they belong. Not only does this developmental schema require us to assign to the later Fanon a badge of political and philosophical maturity; to privilege the early work does not escape the problem. This latter inversion fails to displace the teleological structure that guides our interpretation inasmuch as teleological fulfillment arrives nonetheless, only at a different point. Apart from the questionable process by which an 'early' and 'late' Fanon are accommodated within the figure of the singular author, the intelligibility of Fanon's texts is itself determined in problematic terms. Whether referencing Marxist, phenomenological, or psychoanalytic vocabularies their 'coherence' is determined by fidelity to whichever conceptual vocabulary is believed to inform them. Both of these interpretive schemas require that we adhere to a binary modality (i.e., early/late, psychoanalytical/political, etc.) that the entirety of Fanon's corpus brings into question. If there is a consistent line that runs from *Peau noire, masques blancs* through to *Les damnés de la terre* it is Fanon's continued interrogation of the binary modality-

—whether at the level of the psyche or the socius—that structures colonial subjectivity. When approaching Fanon therefore we are compelled to situate his writing in such a way as to countenance *his* difference, i.e., the dissonance produced in his (re)presentation of philosophical and psychoanalytic problematics. This study attempts to reveal that dissonance by focusing on Fanon’s reimagining of the relation between self and other and the notion of colonial alterity that results.

This present study constitutes four chapters each addressing a different dimension of the questions broached above. The first chapter focuses on Du Bois’s early sociological work and argues that with “The Conservation of Races” and *The Philadelphia Negro* we witness the impasse on which Du Bois’s initial consideration of race founders. I contend that Du Bois’s methodological focus reveals a problematic that he will never truly resolve but that will structure his later biographical and critical work, namely the tension between knowledge and (Negro) experience. I contend that to fully understand the notion of race that emerges from Du Bois’s early work, one must attend to the methodological concerns that are at the center of these texts. I suggest that this methodological preoccupation is conditioned by two factors, both of which provide the context through which the specific conception of race resident within Du Bois’s early texts assumes

coherence, the debate over polygenesis and the emergence of sociology as a distinct discipline. The first factor introduces an ambiguous scientific conception of the Negro, itself the result of the attempt to distinguish between 'Negroes' and 'Caucasians' by defining them as members of different species. With the latter, the requirement underpinning the emergence of a new discipline, i.e., that it define the nature of the phenomena that it investigates and the status of the knowledge it produces, highlights the aporia that attends the theorization of 'Negro' experience witnessed in Du Bois's early work. These two factors condition Du Bois's turn towards issues of methodology and his attempt to establish the methodological protocol appropriate to the study of the American Negro.

Chapter two takes up Du Bois's conception of race more explicitly. That Du Bois's notion of race accumulates more contradictions than it perhaps resolves should come as no surprise. From the moment of its first modern usage race has been the repository of various and at times conflicting ideological currents. Even its initial role in natural history as a classificatory marker was inflected by the difficulty of defining precisely what was denoted by the idea of 'race.' And, of course, most important for an understanding of Du Bois own relationship to the intellectual legacy of the term is the central place of the Negro within the emerging discourse of race. The

significance of the ‘Negro problem’ cannot be fully grasped unless one recognizes its position as the point of intersection in which political, philosophical, and scientific discourses meet. Du Bois’s ‘redefinition’ of race functions, in part, as a response to the conception of the Negro that these discourses suggest. This chapter details the historical emergence of the notion of ‘race,’ its gradual migration from the discourse of natural history to its subsequent transformation within the nineteenth century scientific discourse of race. I argue that Du Bois attempts to realign the very foundation of the notion of race through an implicit critique of the particular brand of American scientific racialism represented by the influential work Samuel Morton, Louis Agassiz and Josiah Nott, the founders of the first school of American ethnology. Du Bois’s early work not only highlights the epistemological fault lines along which nineteenth century scientific American racialist discourse is structured, but it also, and more importantly, attempts to retranscribe the terms of that discourse within an entirely different theoretical register, that of the political. “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois’s seminal 1897 text, is his first and I argue most sustained attempt at such a retranscription.

Chapter three attempts to demarcate the operative contours of Du Bois’s great bio-critical texts and situate them in relation to the challenge constituted by Hegel’s philosophy of history. What sort of

historiography does Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* or *Darkwater* represent? What is the nature of the 'knowledge these texts purport to present? Of the three modes of historiography referenced in Hegel's *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy History*, each corresponds to a different stage in the development of Spirit, of its self-consciousness. They purport to raise experience out of the realm of "mere existence," to use Hegel's phrase, and thereby redeem experience for the operations of spirit. In other words, experience must lend itself to an activity that allows for its transformation from "mere existence" into a "representation of the internal and external faculties of mind" as Hegel puts it. But what if, and this is the Du Boisian question, experience does not lend itself to such an exhaustion of its capacities? What if there is, to borrow a phrase from Du Bois's "Sociology Hesitant," "something incalculable" to action and experience? To what sort of history and historiography would this give rise? Du Bois's biographical-critical texts, I contend, are precisely an example of such historiography. I argue that the realm of "mere existence" to which Hegel relegates the 'Negro' is precisely the space from which *Souls of Black Folk*, *Darkwater*, and *Dusk of Dawn* are written. I link the generic indistinctiveness that characterizes these texts to the problematic that both Philippe Lejeune and Paul de Man identify (one more readily than the other) with the autobiographical

and its resistance to the dominance of the epistemological gesture. In this sense *Souls*, *Darkwater*, and *Dusk*, resists the logic of Spirit's epistemophilic desire and articulate a moment of remainder within Spirit's enterprise.

The dominance of the epistemological in the apprehension of the being of the other is also the central preoccupation of my fourth chapter. I argue that Frantz Fanon's critique, especially as it's presented in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, addresses the grounds upon which the operation of the subject rests. This critique, I contend, proceeds by questioning the reduction of the relationship between self and *other* to the theoretical articulation of this relationship, that between self and *Other*. What this logic structures, according to Fanon's text, is the production of the subject through the reduction of the *other* to the *Other*. The subject is installed via the reduction of the ontological to the epistemological, from the articulation of being as that which *is* to that which *is known*. The terms of this logic are most clearly expressed, and its inadequacy most profoundly evident, within the colonial context.

Although these questions posed by Du Bois and Fanon appear derived from two different realms of inquiry, two different disciplinary modalities and are therefore connected in perhaps only the most superficial of manners, they are in fact unified through their

articulation of a singular problematic. In both their respective analyses Du Bois and Fanon grapple with the disruptive relation of their subjects to the operative discourses at hand. Du Bois's failure to fashion a sociological method adequate to a study of the "Negro" and Fanon's inability to philosophical circumscribe the possibility of the "Black" leads them to an identical recognition, that an altogether different gesture towards the phenomena under investigation is required. For Du Bois this recognition culminates with the production of the great bio-critical texts of the early twentieth century (i.e., *Souls of Black Folk*, *Darkwater*, *Dusk of Dawn*, *John Brown*). Fanon, on the other hand, attempts to broker the birth of a historicity without history (*L'an V de la revolution algérienne*) and a politics without ground (*Les damnés de la terre*). This study traces the trajectory from which these new possibilities emerge, identifying the key terms that are passed along the way — the political, race, experience, knowledge.

CHAPTER 2

Methods, Knowledges, and Negroes: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problem(s) of Race (I)

Du Bois begins *The Souls of Black Folk* by recounting his response to a question that — in one form or another — he will never cease asking: “How does it feel to be a problem?”²² Although the significance of this question has of late garnered some critical attention, its full impact on Du Bois’s work, and the critical reorientation it prompts have yet to be fully appreciated.²³ Not only does this question problematize the status of the African American subject (how does one articulate the subject as the site of a problematic?), its relation to history (what kind of historicity can a ‘problem’ have?) and its relation to itself (is a ‘problem’ still a subject?), but it is Du Bois’s response that provides what may well be the most perplexing challenge of the set of questions raised:

To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I
answer seldom a word.

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience...²⁴

²² W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” *Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986) 363.

²³ In this regard the recent work of Ronald Judy, Nahum Chandler, and Kevin Miles are notable exceptions.

²⁴ Du Bois, “Souls,” 363.

Embedded within this passage is the paradox that structures Du Bois's texts and produces the set of concerns Du Bois and his critics will, in various ways, attempt to address; namely, the relation between 'problem' (here meaning the distinctive epistemological and discursive parameters that condition the articulation of African American subjectivity) and experience (as both the site in which the 'problem' as such registers and through which it is rendered intelligible). This tension between 'problem' and experience is precisely what makes the theoretical specificity of African American subjectivity so intractable. Apprehending the terms of this 'experience' theoretically requires that we somehow give equal weight to two perhaps incompatible frames of reference. Both 'problem' and 'experience,' in their Du Boisian articulation, each signify in a twofold manner. In his usage, 'problem' references the obstacles associated with the racialized context of African American life *and* specifies — in a quite different discursive register — the structure of African American subjectivity. (Du Bois *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*) 'Experience' denotes the contour through which this racialized context is represented subjectively *and* demarcates an insufficiency that renders the possible methodological coherence required for an analysis of (African American) 'experience' problematic. Each term references the other through a complex interchange in which the relation between the empirical and the

methodological is placed consistently at issue. In other words this ‘problem’— that is the Negro problem and everything that it comes to denote — registers not solely as the experience of a *problem* but as a problem of *experience*. And to understand it as such is to acknowledge the nature of the challenge the ‘Negro question’ posed for Du Bois in his time; and the continued persistence of this challenge, the inheritance Du Bois’s question poses for us in ours.

Part of the difficulty Du Bois encounters in outlining the proper conceptual parameters of African American subjectivity involves the very notion of problem itself. For the semantic instability underlying the notion that he introduces to both describe *and* analyze the Negro, makes its functional and conceptual delimitation hard to establish. In his use of the concept Du Bois clearly has it do double-duty. On the one hand, Du Bois’s ‘problem’ appears to have as its reference the series of socio-cultural pathologies — “poverty, ignorance, crime and labor,” in Du Bois’s words — of which the Negro was taken to be the incarnation.²⁵ On the other, he seems to identify the notion of ‘problem’ as the specific contour that distinguishes African American interiority. The first instance arises from the Negro’s participation in the social world and his/her relation to others — Du Bois is *asked* how does “it feel to be a problem” — and therefore references the

²⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899) 5.

‘world’ in which whites situate, and the matrix from which *they* understand, the Negro. The latter, conversely, stems from a questioning in which the Negro’s own(ed) experience is central (“[a]nd yet being a problem is a strange experience...”). How one takes up the question and finds its proper limits, is the issue that guides Du Bois’s project and delimits what he comes to term the ‘Negro problem.’

The citation also provides one additional clue that illustrates precisely the complexity Du Bois will have to confront in theorizing the ‘Negro question.’ By asking, “how does it feel to be a problem,” Du Bois’s interlocutors presume that the experience to which their question refers, i.e., Negro experience, is self-evidently available, that it can be easily represented within terms they will find recognizable. And yet, Du Bois’s response suggests that the ‘concreteness’ the question implicitly ascribes to (Negro) experience leaves something essential, perhaps its ‘strangeness,’ aside. Of course Du Bois himself is no stranger to this particular lapse either. By invoking the ‘problematic’ nature of African American experience and defining its parameters, at least initially, within the academic terms with which he was familiar, Du Bois situates the ‘problem’ within an acceptable scholarly framework. In other words, by inserting it within a disciplinary economy and thereby establishing its appropriate discursive and sociological contours Du Bois renders the ‘problem’ intelligible to the

disciplinary protocols that define the terms by which phenomena are produced as knowledge by the modern research university.²⁶ Placed securely within the confines of the new empirical sociology, the ‘Negro problem’ becomes the site from which Du Bois constructs an entire research agenda — the ambitious program of the Atlanta Conferences — whose objective is to render the problem legible in sociological terms.²⁷ Du Bois’s early work evidences a clear debt to the new discipline, especially the methodological precepts that seem to guide his early analysis of the broad complex of issues. But the ‘problem,’ as Du Bois comes increasingly to formulate it, is not exhausted by the empirical parameters in which it becomes situated. As early a text as *The Philadelphia Negro* already bears witness to an understated uncertainty regarding the ability of the investigator to accurately portray the everyday of Negro experience.²⁸ And this because the

²⁶ The centrality of the “methodological division of labor” as the constituent element of the modern research university is analysed in Ronald Judy, (Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 1-30.

²⁷ For a later overview by Du Bois of the work and objective of the Atlanta Conferences see Du Bois, “My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,” 225-28. Ronald Judy offers an insightful analysis of these early studies in his Ronald Judy, “On W.E.B. Du Bois and Hyperbolic Thinking,” Boundary 2 27.3 (2000): 1-35.

²⁸ The methodological introduction to *The Philadelphia Negro*, one of Du Bois most emphatically sociological texts, itself invokes the necessary limitations that accompany sociological inquiry: “The best available methods of sociological research are at present so liable to inaccuracies that the careful student discloses the results of individual research with diffidence; he knows that they are liable to error from the seemingly ineradicable faults of statistical method, to even greater error from the methods of general observation, and, above all, he must ever tremble lest some personal bias, some moral conviction or some unconscious trend of thought due to previous training, has to a degree distorted the picture in his view. Convictions on all great matters of human interest one must have to a greater or lesser degree, and they will enter to some extent into the most cold-blooded scientific research as a

categories used to define this experience might not only themselves be suspect, but in addition the possibility of error can never truly be eliminated — in this instance, the error inscribed in the very relation of Negro experience to scientific observation. The question then, “How does it feel to be a problem?” might require a different sort of answer.

The tension between these two different ways of delimiting the Negro problem, i.e., between an empirical approach and one that exceeds the purely empirical, manifests itself clearly in Du Bois’s attempt to forge a protocol appropriate to the determination of Negro experience. As initially confirmed by Du Bois, the Negro problem required an analytic response that rendered it legible to the terms governing the accepted methods of sociological inquiry. Yet the further Du Bois progresses the more his texts evince a persistent ambivalence regarding the capacity of the new discipline to truly frame the complexity of the “problem” — and this for several reasons. First, determining what constitutes the empirical framework of, in Du Bois’s words, the “real question” (i.e., “how does it feel to be a problem”) requires specifying the sociological categories through which it is articulated (crime, poverty, etc.) while simultaneously removing the structural bias against African Americans these categories, even in

disturbing factor.” Failure is here structurally inscribed in the very process itself. These “ineradicable faults” make of scientific inquiry (understood in the broad sense) and its truth an ideal towards which the investigator strives but which nonetheless remains always just out of reach. Du Bois, The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study 3.

their *scientific* usage, display. Second, and more importantly for our purposes, it is further complicated by the requirement of situating this structure of the ‘problem’ in relation to a notion of experience meant to specify the Negro’s subjective relation to the world, but which is itself subtended by a category — i.e., *race* — that presupposes a conception of sociality at odds with the methodological precepts underwriting his analysis. That this is an odd way to construe what might itself be a tenuous proposition, i.e., the formative relationship between race and methodology, presents itself as a possible response to the perspective I’ve proposed. What has race — as a concept — to do with methodology and how does whatever conception of sociality have to do with either?²⁹

²⁹ Another way of understanding this question is to recognize the impact of the notion of atomistic individualism, which underpinned the laissez-faire liberalism of Du Bois’s day, in framing the parameters by which social questions could be defined. The formation of a distinctly American social science begins with the crisis in the ideology of American exceptionalism that marks the Gilded Age. Two different developments characterize this crisis: the breakdown of orthodox religious authority and the decline of its influence on scientific discourse, and the appearance of pronounced labor unrest and the eclipse of the republican ideal that it was presumed to foreshadow. American social science emerges, in part, in response to and on the basis of these developments. The gentry class, as Dorothy Ross terms them, who had been supplanted in their national leadership by a new political and business elite, availed themselves of this opportunity to reassert a now altered authority. “They began to think of themselves,” Ross writes, “as professionals, whose authority and expertise had in part an older kind of social resource, in status and higher education, and in part a new source in their specialized, expert social function. The basis of their new authority was to be modern scientific knowledge.” Natural science defined the scientific ideal to which the gentry class continued to strive and positivism remained its principal methodological precept. Again Ross: “Realism reinforced the empirical thrust of the commitment to natural knowledge. Baconian empiricism had been the reigning methodology of American science, resting on a philosophy of commonsense realism and although new philosophical currents would shape the restructuring of Gilded Age social science, they would not

The issue orienting Du Bois's early work is precisely this tension between methodology and experience, the repeated attempts to fashion a protocol appropriate to the study of the "Negro problem." This insistent dyadic tension marks the very structure of Du Bois's texts and the series of terms he generates in his various attempts to arrive at a register of the issue. The proliferation of these 'double' concepts has not gone unnoticed, and in fact their analysis has become a staple of Du Bois criticism. 'Double-consciousness,' 'second-sight,' the 'veil,' terms marshaled by Du Bois to explain and describe Negro experience, and all inscribed with this both/neither quality, have become common reference points in discourse surrounding Du Bois's work.³⁰ Even the notion of the talented-tenth seems to presuppose an uneasy dual negotiation (viz., between a vanguard and the masses) at the heart of what Du Bois considers the African American experience. Yet the significance of this structural 'unease,' and the paradox it could well be said to elicit, have more often than not been addressed exclusively in terms of the contemporary political issues to which his texts are believed to have been a response. Or, in other instances, his discourse is placed in the service of current disciplinary concerns with little

alter its underlying empirical thrust." Dorothy Ross, The Origins of American Social Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 62, 59.

³⁰ For a recent study that attempts to construct its own theoretical vocabulary from the dualisms that comprise Du Bois's conceptual offering see Howard Winant, The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 8-9, 114-20.

regard for the precision of Du Bois's own claims. Even our most astute literary and cultural critics, in attempting to engage fully with the various and perplexing nuances of Du Bois's thought, often resort to precisely those categories of analysis that Du Bois's work questions. An example of this particular interpretive blindness is evident in the influential rereading of Du Bois undertaken in the work of Ross Posnock.

I.

Posnock's interest in Du Bois is framed by his concern with the current state of the academy. In particular by the different model of literary-cultural analysis proposed by adherents of cultural studies and the concurrent dismissal of the aesthetic he believes underpins this transformation. In offering an alternative trajectory for the practice of cultural analysis Posnock attempts to 'rehabilitate' Du Bois and resituate him as an avatar of the cosmopolitan intellectual:

In short, Du Bois's career encourages a rethinking of the currently alleged antagonism between the aesthetic and the political. This conflict is concomitant with the ascendancy in the academy, by the mid-1980s, of cultural studies, whose founding gesture repudiated the concept of aesthetic value as elitist and apolitical. I will explore how Du Bois's encounter with pragmatism, imbibed directly at Harvard professor William James, encouraged elitist,

aesthetic, and activist impulses to overlap in his remarkably hybrid sensibility. Du Bois, in effect, shows how pragmatism can mediate between the aesthetic and the political and help moves us beyond the constricting dichotomy, which has at times polarized contemporary debate.³¹

Yet, this twofold task — one explicit, i.e., rehabilitating the aesthetic as a valid category of political emancipation, and one implicit, i.e., the rehabilitation of pragmatism — requires that Posnock reframe the nature of Du Bois's project. Not only is Du Bois's precise relation to the pragmatist tradition far from settled, the nature of the elder James's influence on Du Bois's work remains itself a contested issue.³² And, beyond these two points, the question of whether the notion of the aesthetic with which Posnock is operating conforms to that inscribed in Du Bois's text is itself not unproblematic. In other words, Posnock's rereading of Du Bois will undoubtedly require a redefining of Du Bois as well.

In his attempt to establish Du Bois's pragmatist credentials Posnock argues that the purported elitism so familiarly associated

³¹ Ross Posnock, "The Distinction of Du Bois: Aesthetics, Pragmatism, Politics," American Literary History.3 (1995): 502.

³² For a positive assessment of the relationship between pragmatism, James, and Du Bois see Ronald R. Sundstrom, "Douglass and Du Bois's *Der Schwarze Volkgeist*," Race & Racism in Continental Philosophy, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Sybol Cook (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003) 32-52. For a view that contests the significance of James's influence on Du Bois see David Levering Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993) 96, Adolph Reed, Jr., "Du Bois's 'Double Consciousness': Race and Gender in Progressive Era Thought," Studies in American Political Development 6 (1992): 93-139.

with Du Bois needs to be redefined. Elitism, as a description of the gesture that defines Du Bois cultural politics, misconstrues and inadequately designates the basis of Du Bois own cultural interventions.³³ Rather than elitism Posnock introduces the notion of *distinction* as a term that in his view provides a more productive rendering of the parameters of Du Bois's cultural analysis. Distinction represents far more accurately, if we follow Posnock, the creative, transformative, and multivalent character of Du Bois's own formulations and interventions regarding culture. And, in Posnock's view it is this transformative quality, that ascribed to this notion of 'distinction,' that connects Du Bois to the pragmatist tradition:

Du Bois played with both the social and diacritic meanings of distinction: possessing distinction as well as making and contesting distinctions were intimately related for him.³⁴

And,

Du Bois's predilection for the mobility of troping received philosophical coherence and direction from his favorite Harvard professor: "The turning was due to William James."³⁵

³³ For a very different assessment of Du Bois's elitism see Ronald Judy, "The New Black Aesthetic and W.E.B. Du Bois, or Haphaestus Limping," Massachusetts Review: A Quarterly of Literature and Public Affairs 35.2 (1994): 249-82.

³⁴ Posnock, "Distinction," 503.

³⁵ Posnock, "Distinction," 503.

Distinction here becomes a term of critical reappropriation and renaming that places Du Bois within an unambiguously pragmatist lineage. In Posnock's usage the term also attempts to replicate the doubled conceptual structure identified with Du Bois's own key notions, a gesture Posnock believes evinces Du Bois's pragmatist credentials.

Following Richard Rorty, Posnock defines pragmatism as a project of conceptual redefinition.³⁶ The significance he ascribes to the notion of distinction stems from his identification of the term with this defining gesture of the pragmatist tradition. Through his analysis of Du Bois's work, Posnock finds an illustration of this 'pragmatist logic' articulated in Du Bois's classic study *The Philadelphia Negro*. In Posnock's reading of Du Bois's pivotal 1899 study, 'distinction'

³⁶ Rorty provides a description of the defining gesture of pragmatism in the following passage: "Since 'education' sounds a bit too flat, and *Bildung* a bit too foreign, I shall use 'edification' to stand for this project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking. The attempt to edify (ourselves and others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the 'poetic' activity of thinking up such aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions." Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) 360. Whether termed 'pragmatism,' 'edifying discourse,' or 'hermeneutics,' Rorty's critique of philosophical foundationalism offers an alternative philosophical trajectory in which the notion of 'redefinition' is central. See also Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy, eds., After Philosophy: End or Transformation? (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1987) 21-25.

references not only the best class identified with a people, but it facilitates, on Posnock's interpretation, a shift in the characterization of the Negro away from an association with destructive stereotypes towards a more accurate representation. Citing Du Bois, Posnock emphasizes this point: "[i]n many respects it is right and proper to judge a people by its best classes ... the highest class of any group represents its possibilities rather than its exceptions, as is so often assumed in regard to the Negro."³⁷ Distinction therefore functions as a term that enacts a movement beyond, in Posnock's words, the "givens of racism".³⁸

Operating along two different yet related avenues, distinction signifies both as a mark of separation, but also functions as a form of typicality inasmuch as the best class exemplifies the possibility resident within the race as a whole. Because this typicality extends (structurally) to all Negroes, and therefore all Negroes participate in that form of exemplarity associated with their 'best class,' Posnock argues that the dynamic that links distinction and exemplarity connects to democracy as well. It is through this relation of distinction to democracy, claims Posnock, that Du Bois's proximity to both a Romantic conception of the aesthetic and the pragmatist tradition become clear. Comparing Du Bois to John Dewey, Posnock remarks

³⁷ Du Bois quoted in Posnock, "Distinction," 504.

³⁸ Posnock, "Distinction," 504.

that “Dewey finds possibility inscribed in the open-ended experimental thrust of pragmatism and democracy,” and that both Du Bois and Dewey, “partake of art’s liberating power ‘to insinuate possibilities of human relation not to be found in rule and precept.’”³⁹. As the passage suggests, Posnock’s notion of the aesthetic adheres to a broadly Kantian definition, i.e., aesthetic judgment cannot be reduced to either rule or concept and yet remains, necessarily, universal. The tension between judgment and rule, so central to Kant’s conceptual focus in the *Third Critique*, informs Posnock’s idea of politics.⁴⁰ His conception of Du Bois’s politics arises from the connection posited between the Kantian notion of the aesthetic *and* the pragmatist ideal of the political. The aesthetic, as Posnock construes it, not only conditions Du Bois’s conception of politics, but also defines its opposition to the instrumental rationalist view of political ends: “But such judgments [i.e., regarding Du Bois’s politics] ignore his pragmatist understanding of politics as a *distinctive mode of experience* and conduct rather than a *determinate order of knowledge*” (Italics added).⁴¹ Posnock highlights

³⁹ Posnock, "Distinction," 504.

⁴⁰ In part, Kant’s *Third Critique* is an attempt to outline the proper use and limit of our power of judgment and Kant’s conceptual difficulty revolves precisely around the relation of judgment to concepts. Writing in the preface to the *Critique of Judgment* Kant remarks: “So judgment itself must provide a concept, a concept through which we do not actually cognize anything but which only serves as a rule for the power of judgment itself — but not as an objective rule, to which it could adapt its judgment, since then we would need another power of judgment in order to decide whether or not the judgment is a case of that rule.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987) 6.

⁴¹ Posnock, "Distinction," 508.

the opposition mentioned at the outset of this chapter between experience and the terms by which one can claim knowledge of that experience. In other words, Posnock brings into focus the tension Du Bois articulates between the order of experience and the order of knowledge.

Up to this point Posnock's outline of the Du Boisian conception of experience has consistently recognized its unsettled relationship to a grounding epistemological gesture. As we noted earlier the question that prompts and conditions much of Du Bois's work requires that he straddle, uneasily, the relation of knowledge and experience. And Du Bois goes much further, for he inscribes the tension between knowledge and experience at the very heart of (Negro) experience itself. All these elements of Du Bois's discourse are present in one manner or another in Posnock's analysis, and are united in Posnock's conception of the Du Boisian political:

But the controversy of Du Bois's politics resulted not from his retreat but *from his struggle to think in and through the paradox*. Rather than imposing goals and values grounded in reason's antecedently formulated truths — the foundationalist effort of rationalism — Du Bois's conduct was shaped by the contingencies of the historical experience within which he was embedded. And in 1923 that experience was riven by the clash of competing priorities and sympathies: black progress in this century has been largely separatist, so black schools must continue; integration is a risk, yet without it race pride congeals into hatred and a promise of democracy — the

opportunity for interracial contact — withers. Much to the dismay of his audience, Du Bois's speech staged the clash rather than defusing or muffling it. His double message enacts his root conviction in the "unreconciled strivings" of the black soul, a tension Du Bois internalizes as the structure of his vision.⁴² (Italics added)

For Posnock, the conflict emphasized above remains solely within the confines of experience. Du Bois is presented with two equally valid yet contradictory propositions (i.e., integration or separation) that resist adjudication by reference to a rule; and yet, it is this structure that ideally represents the contours of African American experience and the notion of the political that it founds. In other words, the Du Boisian political illustrates the tenuous relationship between epistemology and experience. Yet the conflict, as Posnock presents it, never challenges the conception of political action supposedly at issue. Although the conflict Posnock articulates may well withstand easy resolution, it is not conditioned by the antinomial relation between knowledge and experience presented within the Du Boisian text. Under Posnock, Du Bois's hesitation and uncertainty, his refusal to define an epistemologically anchored path of action is recuperated as itself a species of knowledge.⁴³

⁴² Posnock, "Distinction," 509.

⁴³ Relating Du Bois's formulation to Deweyan notions of inquiry, Posnock contends that: "Refusing to dispense solutions, Du Bois's political conduct seems most concerned to register the 'turns and twists' of the 'curious path' on which black Americans find themselves. ... Committed to turning and groping, *Du Bois*

Although Posnock recognizes the conflict Du Bois ascribes to the very structure of African American experience, his redefinition of the terms of Du Bois's analysis comes at a significant cost. He subsumes the conflict under a philosophical thematic that evacuates any concern in Du Bois's formulation with the methodological problematic that it inflects. The clearest illustration of the consequence of this reading is that Posnock fails to ask the question that much of his analysis, not to mention that of Du Bois's, broach. By defining politics as a "distinctive mode of experience" rather than a "determinate order of knowledge" Du Bois implicitly questions the conceptual substrate of the political itself. In other words, what conception of the political emerges when it is defined as a "distinctive mode of experience" rather than grounded in the certainty of epistemological transparency?

Posnock's analysis transforms Du Bois's valuation of the aesthetic into the basis and condition of Du Bois's politics. "To Du Bois," writes Posnock "aesthetic bliss and the erasure of the color line would forever be fused."⁴⁴ Finding echoes of Schiller in Du Bois's own programmatic lectures on European art and culture, Posnock claims for Du Bois the notion that "pleasure in appearances not only prove one's external freedom from necessity but also one's internal

exemplifies what Dewey calls a 'disciplined mind' — one whose 'delight in the problematic' is a sign of the 'scientific attitude,' an attitude that makes 'productive use of doubt by converting it into operations of definite inquiry' (Italics added). Posnock, "Distinction," 510.

⁴⁴ Posnock, "Distinction," 512.

freedom.”⁴⁵ The implicit reference to the possibility of a democratic politics erected on the foundation of a revitalized notion of the aesthetic is rendered explicit when Posnock writes that:

Despite his celebration of the gifts of black folk, for Du Bois the “higher individualism” of aesthetic experience is beyond “race identity,” neither black nor white but his, or anyone’s, by virtue of “looking at the world as a man and not simply from the narrow racial and provincial point of view.” Indeed, *The Souls of Black Folk* describes the “freedom for expansion and self-development” in and through European culture as redemptive, a “boon and guerdon for what they [black Americans] lose on earth by being black.” While Du Bois’s “kingdom of culture” stands against American philistinism, it is finally defined less by racial or national identity than by practices. Deriving a “higher individualism” from the practice of aesthetic contemplation, Du Bois’s kingdom of culture avoids the segregation of essentialism (which makes identity prior to practice) and embraces democratic openness.⁴⁶

Apart from the question of whether one can construe aesthetic contemplation (in its Kantian sense) as a practice, Posnock’s reading of Du Bois requires that he dispense with one of the central features of his own interpretation of Du Bois’s politics. By defining Du Bois’s idea of politics as a practice — and by relegating the notion of identity that emerges from it within the same terms — Posnock transforms the paradox he initially claims grounded experience into a species of reconciliation. Deriving identity from politics or action necessitates

⁴⁵ Posnock, “Distinction,” 514.

⁴⁶ Posnock, “Distinction,” 514-15.

that one posits a relation of reciprocal transparency between subject and action. And, therefore, it requires a stable, relatively unproblematic, notion of intentionality.⁴⁷ Without this notion of intentionality, the transparency between subject and action required to link politics and the aesthetic — *within the terms Posnock outlines* — is untenable. In other words, given Posnock's terms, what notion of identity can we derive from a subject who does not know, or misconstrues, his or her actions? That is, from a subject whose intentions are not secure or, for that matter, their own?

Undoubtedly Posnock would contest this particular understanding of his work. Rather than a continuation of what one might term — for lack of a better phrase — the 'discourse of the subject,' Posnock clearly enlists his version of cosmopolitanism, and the particular interpretation of Du Bois it ascribes, as a critique of the philosophical underpinnings of this notion of transparency. More specifically, as a critique of what he considers its Cartesian provenance: "In moving beyond authenticity, they both [i.e., Du Bois and Fanon] displace the original Cartesian subject by deriving identity from action".⁴⁸ But the claim, proposed by Posnock, i.e., that deriving

⁴⁷ Seen from this perspective, Posnock's argument is similar to that forwarded by Walter Benn Michaels. Both authors are engaged — although in slightly different ways — in an attempt to rethink the proximity of the notions of race and essentialism. See Walter Benn Michaels, "From Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 655-85.

⁴⁸ Posnock, "How It Feels to Be a Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the 'Impossible Life' of the Black Intellectual," 325.

identity from action permits an escape from the Cartesian economy of the subject, not only misconstrues Descartes but also the structure of transparency necessary for Posnock's own argument.

Although Descartes situates the knowing subject at the center of philosophical discourse, Posnock's claim, and its purported critique of Descartes, points to a misconception of the philosophical consequences of the Cartesian position. Descartes's philosophical reconceptualization produces the knowing subject as its result, but it anchors that subject in the certainty of its own representations. Inasmuch as such certainty is required for the subject's epistemological claims to have any validity, it is the *proper* grounding of this certainty — its clarity — that legitimizes the epistemological foundationalism Posnock desires to critique.⁴⁹ From the very beginning of the *Meditations* Descartes proposes that nothing that cannot be ascertained with certainty can be construed as true. The victims here are not simply outright falsehoods but even those principles that never

⁴⁹ Charles Taylor describes, in the following passage, the truly novel proposition Descartes's innovation establishes: "The confidence that underlies this whole operation is that certainty is something the thinker can generate for himself, by ordering his thoughts correctly — according to clear and distinct connections. This confidence is in a sense independent of the positive outcome of Descartes's argument to the existence of a veracious God, the guarantor of our science. ... [...] ... Descartes is thus the originator of the modern notion that certainty is the child of reflexive clarity, or the examination of our own ideas in abstraction from what they 'represent'..." Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," Philosophy: End of Transformation?, eds. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1987) 468-69.

raise themselves beyond the level of credible probability.⁵⁰ Such certainty requires as its correlate — in the Cartesian schema — a self-grounding subject that produces itself through the proper ownership of itself. This particular Cartesian conceptual necessity could be illustrated in various ways, whether through a focus on Descartes's distinction of the imagination from the understanding or his propositions regarding the relationship between reason and desire — to name simply two. But perhaps nothing makes the parameters through which Descartes subject operates clearer than the importance he assigns to the unified, indivisible, will.

The singular unity of the individual will, one of the central presumptions underlying Descartes conception of the *res cogitans*, assumes its significance in Descartes thought because it imposes the order required for the production of clear and distinct truths. In the second discourse, Descartes arrives at a conclusion that he appears to broach as if it were itself a truism, namely, “that there is less perfection in works composed of separate pieces and made of different

⁵⁰ “Now it will not be necessary, in order to accomplish this aim, to prove that they are false [i.e., his opinions], a point which perhaps I would never reach; but inasmuch as reason persuades me already that I must avoid believing things which are not entirely certain and undubitable, no less carefully than those things which seem manifestly false, the slightest ground for doubt I find in any, will suffice for me to reject all of them.” René Descartes, “Meditations on the First Philosophy in Which the Existence of God and the Real Distinction between the Soul and the Body of Man Are Demonstrated,” trans. F.E. Sutcliffe, The Discourse on Method and the Meditations (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968) 95.

masters, than in those at which only one person worked.”⁵¹ As

Descartes proceeds to elaborate this reflection, the exact nature of the claim at issue becomes clearer:

So it is that one sees that buildings undertaken and completed by a single architect are usually more beautiful and better ordered than those that several architects have tried to put into shape, making use of old walls which were built for other purposes. So it is that these old cities which, originally only villages, have become, through the passage of time, great towns, are usually so badly proportioned in comparison with those orderly towns which an engineer designs at will on some plain that, although the buildings, taken separately, often display as much art as those of the planned towns or even more, nevertheless, seeing how they are placed, with a big one here, a small one there, and how they cause the streets to bend and to be at different levels, one has the impression that they are more the product of chance than that of a human will operating according to reason.⁵²

Of course, at one level, this passage articulates the central role Descartes ascribes to method, to the proper regulation of one’s thoughts. But equally present, and not at all disconnected from the significance Descartes attaches to method — or any less clearly stated — is the characterization of order as the product of the indivisible will. At issue here is not the beauty of individual buildings, but rather, the

⁵¹ René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Properly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking the Truth in the Sciences," trans. F.E. Sutcliffe, Discourse on Method and the Meditations (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968) 35.

⁵² Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Properly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking the Truth in the Sciences," 35.

order(ing) of the overall design.⁵³ The singular unity of the will garners importance in Descartes conceptualization precisely because the order(ing) it produces defines the operation of reason. As this is the case, the contrary— an adherence to multiplicity or the many — proves to be a reliable sign of error. It is no surprise then that in writing of the principles his reflections bring under review, Descartes concludes that, “as for their imperfections, if they have any, *and the mere diversity among them suffices to assure us that many of them have imperfections*, usage had doubtless softened many of them considerably...”⁵⁴ (Italics added). Multiplicity, it seems, implies imperfection, confusion, and signifies — of necessity — an absence of clarity, a lack of uniformity. The self-contained nature of the *cogito*, its self-enclosed structure that partakes of no necessary relation with anything outside itself, is constructed on the foundation of the indivisible will.

Posnock’s implicit characterization of Descartes, the position that leads him to assert that deriving identity from action “displaces

⁵³ In writing of the relationship between Descartes’s ontology and his epistemology, Taylor highlights the etymological connection between *cogitare* and ‘ordering’ I introduce in this passage: “The order of representations must thus meet standards which derive from the thinking activity of the knower. It is an order collected and brought together to meet, inter alia, certain subjective demands. Thinking which is such a construction or gathering is rightly designated by ‘*cogitare*’, with its etymological links to notions like gathering and ordering.” Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 145.

⁵⁴ Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Properly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking the Truth in the Sciences," 37.

the original Cartesian subject,” fails to recognize how his own argument inhabits, quite comfortably, the terms of Descartes position. A product of the *cogito* itself, the certainty associated with the Cartesian subject requires that it be self-generating and its operations self-grounding.⁵⁵ By proposing his specific relation between subject and action, Posnock also comes to require that his ‘subject’ assume legitimacy only through a constitutive relation to itself. Although he claims for Du Bois an alternative pragmatist locus of action, one distinct from the constraints of the epistemological order, he nonetheless situates Du Bois within an economy governed by this very order. Despite his attempt to unsettle the relation of knowledge and experience, to speculate on the possibility of a disjunctive relationship between the two categories, Posnock, in the end, returns the paradox that would have initiated this movement back to its ‘proper’ place. Whereas Du Bois extends the terms of the paradox to the conceptual substrate of the political itself, thereby offering a — not unproblematic — rearticulation of the basis of political action; Posnock, by comparison, retrieves a conception of the political whose structure owes its consistency to the safety of the Cartesian position. The

⁵⁵ “What I get in the cogito,” writes Taylor, “is just this kind of certainty, which I can generate for myself by following the right method ... [.] ... The thesis is not that I gain knowledge when turned towards God in faith. Rather the certainty of clear and distinct perception is unconditional and self-generated. What has happened is rather that God’s existence has become a stage in *my* progress towards science through the methodical ordering of evident insight. God’s existence is a theorem in *my* system of perfect science. The centre of gravity has decisively shifted.” Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity 156-57.

relational transparency of subject and action — so essential to Posnock's argument — depends on the regularity of the social field and the self-generating certainty of intentional relations for its coherence.⁵⁶ In other words, precisely those features on which Descartes' *cogito* is both predicated and that it produces. Whether one derives identity from action or from knowledge, the closed loop of the Cartesian subject governs both. After all, for Posnock, one derives identity from one's *own* action, not from the actions of another.

That Posnock falters on the issue of the Du Boisian political, despite recognizing the terms through which Du Bois specifies the contours of African American politics, is not surprising. As we have seen, Posnock reintroduces the structure of the Cartesian subject — a conception he believed to have left well behind — and offers an idea of the political that is conditioned by its proximal relationship to this inheritance.⁵⁷ But Du Bois raises a question that resists formulation within these terms, and, that perhaps, cannot be addressed within the framework to which Posnock subscribes. What Du Bois raises, the

⁵⁶ Regarding this regularity of the social field, Anthony Cascardi puts it quite well when he writes that “[b]oth perspective and the *cogito*,” here comparing the formal innovations that comprise the hallmark of *Quattrocento* painting with Descartes's new epistemological standpoint, “assure a uniformity and regularity of proportion, and provide a vision that could in principle be held by *anyone*”. Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 34.

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” trans. William Lovitt, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row Publishing, 1977) 127-28. For a view that contest the degree and scope of influence ascribed to Descartes by Heidegger see Andrew Bowie, “Rethinking the History of the Subject: Jacobi, Schelling, and Heidegger,” *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, eds. Simon Critchley and Peter Dews (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 105-26.

question he isolates, is that of the ‘politics of race.’ By this I do not mean a politics informed by issues of race, nor one subtended by the operation of the ‘racial’ subject. Du Bois appears to propose something quite different than anything either of these two categories traditionally defines. In this sense, the relationship between ‘politics’ and ‘race’ inaugurates a semantic field that situates us on quite different theoretical terrain. The ‘politics of race’ signals — at least from the standpoint of Du Bois’s circumscription of the issue — the attempt to think a different relation between ‘politics’ and ‘race.’⁵⁸

If Posnock provides an ideal point from which to preface the difficulties associated with the Du Boisian notion of politics, then Anthony Appiah’s influential writings on Du Bois offers an equally ideal introduction to the complexity of Du Bois’s conception of race.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Following from the powerful work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, the conception of the political suggested here is not defined as a question of strategy or political calculus, but is rather meant to indicate what Lacoue-Labarthe has in his *Heidegger, Art and Politics* termed “the essence of things political.” Articulated through various terms, each constituting different determinations through which the political is thought (i.e., authority, legitimacy, the state, the people, citizenship, sovereignty, etc.) — and represented to thought — they nonetheless fail to broach what may be called “the central question” of the political, i.e., the question of relation. The proper delimitation of the political as understood in terms of the question of relation is an ongoing question that cannot be answered here, but I do take it as my tentative point of departure. The political, although this brings into question the very possibility of its delimitation, can with due caution be understood therefore as the space of relation. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 17. See also, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, “La Panique Politique,” trans. Céline Surprenant, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (New York: Routledge, 1997) 1-31, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “Opening Address to the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political,” 107-21, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “The ‘Retreat’ of the Political,” 122-37.

⁵⁹ Appiah, “Uncompleted,” 21-37, Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Conservation of ‘Race’,” *Black American Literature Forum* 23.1 (1989): 37-60, Kwame Anthony

Appiah's work on Du Bois has, in many respects, set the terms for much of the contemporary debate regarding Du Bois's notion of race.⁶⁰ And, although they are at this point in some instances close to twenty years old, these essays continue to impose themselves on any serious reading of Du Bois's work. Appiah's writing provides an additional benefit for our purposes. They not only constitute perhaps the most provocative — and definitely the most unyielding — engagement with Du Bois's notion of race, they also articulate the stakes involved in any such rereading of Du Bois with admirable clarity.

Appiah's critique focuses on Du Bois's adherence, despite the latter's claim to the contrary, to a biological conception of race. In summarizing Du Bois's argument in "Conservation" Appiah notes that

On the face of it, Du Bois's argument in "The Conservation of Races" is that "race" is not "scientific" — that is, biological — but a sociohistorical concept. Sociohistorical

Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 28-46.

⁶⁰ For recent work that engages — in varying degrees — Appiah's interpretation of Du Bois see, Robert Gooding-Williams, "Outlaw, Appiah, and Du Bois's 'the Conservation of Races'," *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics*, eds. Bernard W. Bell, Emily Grosholz and James B. Stewart (New York: Routledge, 1996) 39-56, Tommy Lott, "Du Bois on the Invention of Race," *The Philosophical Forum* XXIV.1-3 (1992-93 Fall-Spring): 166-87, Tommy Lott, "Du Bois's Anthropological Notion of Race," *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001) 59-83, Kevin Thomas Miles, "'One Far Off Divine Event': 'Race' and a Future History in Du Bois," *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Sybol Cook, *Studies in Continental Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) 19-31, Lucius Outlaw, "'Conserve' Races? In Defense of W.E.B. Du Bois," *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture*, eds. Bernard W. Bell, Emily Grosholz and James B. Stewart (New York: Routledge, 1996) 15-37, Paul C. Taylor, "Appiah's Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Reality of Race," *Social Theory and Practice* 26.1 (2000): 103-28.

racess each have a “message” for humanity, a message that derives, in some way, from God’s purpose in creating races. The Negro race has still to deliver its full message, and it is the duty of Negroes to work together — through race organizations — so that this message can be delivered.⁶¹

Although Du Bois appears to posit a sociohistorical conception of race (or at least something that seems akin to it), Appiah finds that the argument proposed in “Conservation” suggests a different understanding of race. Writing of Du Bois’s use of terms such as “family,” “blood,” and “common history” to describe the bonds that unite a race, Appiah argues that “[a]t the center of Du Bois’s conception, then, is the claim that a race is ‘a vast family of human beings, always of common history and traditions,’ and therefore “if we want to understand Du Bois, our question must be: What is a ‘family ... of common history’?”⁶² At issue for Appiah is the question of whether notions of “common history” or “family” can do the conceptual work Du Bois requires. In other words, can they truly supplant the biological, become the unifying ground for a non-biological conception of race, and therefore function as the basis of group racial differentiation? Du Bois’s terms fail in this respect, Appiah contends, by reintroducing the biological conception of race in a different form.

⁶¹ Appiah, Father's House 30.

⁶² Appiah, Father's House 31.

Appiah turns to Du Bois's notion of "common history" to illustrate the logic he believes organizes Du Bois's argument:

Does adding a notion of common history allow us to make the distinction between Slav and Teuton, or between English and Negro? The answer is no.

Consider, for example, Du Bois himself. As the descendant of Dutch ancestors, why does not the history of Holland in the fourteenth century (which he shares with all people of Dutch descent) make him a member of the Teutonic race? The answer is straightforward: the Dutch were not Negroes, Du Bois is. But it follows from this that the history of Africa is part of the common history of African-Americans not simply because African-Americans are descended from various peoples who played a part in African history but because African history is the history of the people of the same race.⁶³

"Common history" then, the notion Du Bois invokes as a feature that distinguishes one race from another, is insufficient, according to Appiah, for the task at hand. It relies on a circularity of argument, in Appiah's estimation, that presumes what it purports to explain:

... sharing a common group history cannot be a criterion for being members of the same group, for we would have to be able to identify the group in order to identify its history. Someone in the fourteenth century could share a common history with me through our membership in a historically extended race only if something accounts for their membership in the race in the fourteenth century and mine in the twentieth. That something cannot, on the pain of circularity, be the history of the race.⁶⁴

⁶³ Appiah, Father's House 31-32.

⁶⁴ Appiah, Father's House 32.

Appiah unfolds what he understands as the conditions of Du Bois's argument in the above passages. And, although his analysis will extend its focus beyond the idea of "common history" to include Du Bois's notion of "blood" and "family," the terms of his critique are repeated in each instance. Namely, that Du Bois requires a conceptual variable that can function to delimit the field under discussion, i.e., distinguish one race from another. Further, in Appiah's view, the variables Du Bois solicits, such as "common history," "family," "blood," etc. — namely, the entire architecture of the notion of sociohistorical races — as markers of difference fail to achieve their stated end. The source of Du Bois's failure, Appiah maintains, is nothing less than his unreconstructed adherence to the scientific conception of race. "Once we have stripped away the sociohistorical elements from Du Bois's definition of race, we are left with his true criterion," Appiah concludes, "the scientific conception."⁶⁵ For Appiah, Du Bois's inability to escape the constraints of nineteenth century racialism configures the terms of Du Bois's notion of race.⁶⁶ The entire trajectory of Du

⁶⁵ Appiah, *Father's House* 32-33.

⁶⁶ Appiah defines 'racialism' as the doctrine that contends that: "there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race. These traits and tendencies characteristic of a race constitute, on the racist view, a sort of racial essence; it is part of the content of racialism that the essential heritable characteristics of the 'Races of Man' account for more than the

Bois's argument, Appiah implies, is guided by a fundamental misunderstanding of the basis on which it is constructed. Du Bois's notion of race therefore, whether that of the early "Conservation of Races" or the later *Dusk of Dawn*, is incoherent outside of the nineteenth century biological parameters of the idea.

Appiah's critique of Du Bois has as its target something other than simply the latter's racialism, or even the scientific theories of race that underpin it. For Appiah, Du Bois's racial essentialism is the point of contention. Race — as an operative term — makes sense, Appiah seems to argue, only to the degree that it functions as an *a priori* determining property. His dismissal of both Du Bois's notion of "common 'impulses'" and "voluntary and involuntary 'strivings'" occurs precisely because they can only be construed as *a posteriori* properties.⁶⁷ From this perspective it matters little how one chooses to qualify the term (i.e., *sociohistorical* races, etc.), invoking 'race' as a distinguishing characteristic is already to fall prey to the logic of racial essentialism. Du Bois's notion of race, in Appiah's view, conforms

visible morphological characteristics — skin color, hair type, facial features — on the basis of which we make our informal classifications. Racialism is at the heart of nineteenth-century attempts to develop a science of difference, but it appears to have been believed by others — like Hegel, before then, and Crummell and many other Africans since — who had no interest in developing scientific theories." Appiah, *Father's House* 13.

⁶⁷ "And if we ask which common impulses that history has detected allow us to recognize the Negro, we shall see that Du Bois's claim to have found in these impulses a criterion of identity is mere bravado. If, without evidence about his or her impulses, we can say who is a Negro, then it cannot be part of what it is to be a Negro that he or she has them; rather it must be an *a posteriori* claim that people of a common race, defined by descent and biology, have impulses, for whatever reason, in common." Appiah, *Father's House* 33.

clearly to the above definition — regardless of Du Bois’s claims to the contrary.

As one might expect, given the stakes involved in any such reading of Du Bois, there has been no shortage of respondents contesting the strength, credibility, or even in certain instances the generosity of Appiah’s interpretation. Robert Gooding-Williams for example, although in broad agreement with the specifics of Appiah’s reading, believes that its reluctance to acknowledge the political context shadowing Du Bois’s intervention in the debate regarding race, indicates an important shortcoming of Appiah’s analysis.⁶⁸ Likewise, Tommy Lott has contested Appiah’s interpretation of the role “sociohistorical criteria” assume in Du Bois’s understanding of race. Contra Appiah, Lott argues that Du Bois “spoke of race in this sociohistorical sense as an ‘invention’ that various European nations had used to realize their group ideal. An important lesson to be drawn from history, according to Du Bois, is that racial identity has played

⁶⁸ Gooding-Williams situates Du Bois’s use of race in the broader context of Du Bois’s politico-strategic calculus: “For Du Bois, the political mobilization of African Americans (in part, through the formation of the American Negro Academy) required the rhetorical mobilization of such signifiers as ‘Negro’ and ‘race’ because these signifiers were the signifiers in terms of which African Americans comprehended themselves as a subordinate group. So while Du Bois could have produced a nonbiological explanation of group spiritual differences, *absent* any talk of race, he continues that talk for political purposes, and, in order to rationalize it, states a definition of ‘race’ consistent with a nonbiological explanation of group spiritual differences. Still, to the extent that Du Bois seems not to use *this* definition (to do the work of individuation), and appears to rely instead on one congenial to the nineteenth-century racial sciences, he demonstrates his inability fully to reconcile the rhetorical requirements of his politics and the theoretical implications of a nonbiological explanation of group spiritual differences.” Gooding-Williams, “Outlaw, Appiah, and Du Bois’s ‘the Conservation of Races,’” 51.

an important role in guiding the collective actions that led to the modernization of European nations.”⁶⁹ Du Bois’s belief, namely, that through the “embrace of their African-American identity” a similar benefit could accrue to the American Negro, is the prism through which we should view Du Bois’s claims regarding the ‘invention’ of race, Lott contends. In this sense, Du Bois’s sociohistorical criteria, inasmuch as they participate in this ‘invention’ of race, constitute an entirely different conceptual framework than that which subtends the biological notion.

Appiah has encountered criticism from another quarter as well. It is not only the content of Appiah’s argument that has invited objections; several of his more astute readers have also questioned the protocol that guides his reading. Lucius Outlaw, in his influential response to Appiah’s critique, argues convincingly that Appiah, in treating each component of Du Bois’s argument as a discrete claim, misreads Du Bois’s text. More specifically, by ignoring the relationship between the various terms of Du Bois’s argument Appiah misconstrues the precise nature of Du Bois’s claims.⁷⁰ And, following in the wake of Outlaw’s criticism, Paul C. Taylor, in his “Appiah’s Uncompleted Argument,” contests Appiah’s ‘eliminativism’ and the

⁶⁹ Lott, "Du Bois's Anthropological Notion of Race," 66.

⁷⁰ Outlaw, "Conserve Races?," 23.

philosophical nominalism that underpins it.⁷¹ But, it is Kevin Thomas Miles, in his impressive “One Far Off Divine Event,” that perhaps goes furthest down this avenue of criticism. By underlining the absence of generosity he detects in Appiah’s reading Miles proffers an entirely different Du Bois, a figure Appiah may well not recognize.⁷² Although these are all important reevaluations of Appiah’s pivotal essays, I want to focus attention on another aspect of Appiah’s reading, one that illuminates the contour of Du Bois’s idea of race.

Towards the latter part of his essay, in an extended analysis of the ‘science’ of race, Appiah proceeds to give an account of the relation

⁷¹ For Taylor, Appiah’s ‘eliminativism’ remains deeply indebted to the philosophical nominalism to which Appiah subscribes: “Eliminativism exhausts the field only if certain assumptions are built in, assumptions that are rarely made explicit. If one thinks, for example, that social facts in general are facts only in some honorific sense of the term, and that only the entities postulated by, say, physics are real, then of course races do not exist. But this kind of physicalism is profoundly counterintuitive, and seems to function more as a way of inflating the notion of reality than as a tool for guiding our interactions with the world.” Taylor, “Appiah’s Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Reality of Race,” 114.

⁷² That Appiah’s generosity is *the* issue at hand for Miles is clear from the following passage: “Appiah does well to point out the ways in which Du Bois has erred so long as the remarks in ‘The Conservation of Races’ and in *Dusk of Dawn* remain inextricably bound to an attempt to connect the present to some point empirically fixed in the past. Appiah is also correct in identifying the elements in Du Bois’s language that appear to depend upon the biological as such. Appiah’s criticisms do, however, fail in at least one important respect: they fail to take seriously Du Bois’s effort to think beyond the boundaries of the biological as it operates within the limits of an ordinary conception of history. The point at which Du Bois begins to express himself in terms of what he can feel better than he can explain more readily suggests an excess in his thought that outstrips his ability to give a master name to that about which he is speaking. ... What remains for readers of Du Bois today is not simply to discover flaws in his thinking, but perhaps to read him with the kind of generosity that Kant brings to his reading of Plato when he remarks in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that ‘it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject, whether in ordinary conversation or in writing, to find that we understand him better than he understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept, he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention.’” Miles, “One Far Off Divine Event’: ‘Race’ and a Future History in Du Bois,” 25-26.

of race — as a classificatory category — to the unfolding history of scientific thought. “The appeal of race as a classificatory notion,” he remarks,

provides us with an instance of a familiar pattern in the history of science. In the early phase of theory, scientists begin, inevitably, with the categories of their folk theories of the world, and often the criteria of membership of these categories can be detected with the unaided senses. ... Gradually, as the science develops, however, concepts are developed whose application requires more than the unaided senses; instead of the phenomenal properties of things, we look for deeper, more theoretical properties. ... Few candidates for laws of nature can be stated by reference to the colors, tastes, smells, or touches of objects. It is hard for us to accept that the color of objects, which play so important a role in our visual experience and our recognition of everyday objects, turn out neither to play an important part in the behavior of matter nor to be correlated with properties that do. Brown, for example, a color whose absence would make a radical difference to the look of the natural world, is hard to correlate in any clear way with the physical properties of reflecting surfaces.⁷³

Race, Appiah contends, constitutes an eclipsed category, part and parcel of an earlier, less developed, scientific modality. The history of scientific knowledge is understood here as the gradual evolution of ever more complex conceptual tools that increasingly place the results of science at odds with the ‘reality’ of everyday life. As science progresses we arrive at the recognition that the bases of our various

⁷³ Appiah, Father's House 38-39.

classificatory schemes often do not coincide with the ‘truth’ of the natural world. Race is one such scheme. But there are others. Color, Appiah suggests, provides an example of a feature of the natural world that we inflate with significance but whose importance is in actuality quite minimal. Of course, in a sense, Appiah is correct. The ‘scientific’ value of an object rarely aligns with the phenomenal properties our senses detect. Nor does race, if understood within the parameters Appiah proposes, escape from these consequences of scientific progress. Yet the issue remains, does Appiah’s definition of race, and Du Bois’s own understanding of it, coincide?⁷⁴

We can begin to broach an answer to this question by turning to a passage in Du Bois’s *Dusk of Dawn* that has assumed representative status as one of his signal pronouncements regarding the question of race:

“But what is this group; and how do you differentiate it; and how can you call it ‘black’ when you admit it is not black?”

I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the black man is a person who must ride “Jim Crow” in Georgia.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ I do not mean to suggest that Appiah himself subscribes to a particular definition of race — he doesn’t. Rather, a consequence of his position is that the biological conception, although false, remains the only logically consistent notion of race.

⁷⁵ Du Bois, “Dusk,” 666.

Often read as a citation of the inseparable relation of politics and power to race, this passage is frequently used to confine—in whole or in part— Du Bois’s understanding of race to juridico-political (as opposed to *biological*) terms.⁷⁶ And, this reading does have its merits inasmuch as it recognizes the centrality Du Bois assigns to the phenomenology of race, to the unrelenting everyday of racial experience. Yet, although it is difficult to ignore the importance Du Bois ascribes to the juridico-political strictures through which ‘race’ assumes its particular American form, I want to draw attention to something else.⁷⁷

The above passage constitutes the concluding section of a dialogue between Du Bois and his fictional interlocutor Roger Van Dieman. Their discussion revolves around the issue of racial difference; specifically, of the criteria that establish it, the value one may assign to it and the history it proposes. Van Dieman, although sympathetic to the African American’s predicament, nonetheless remains a devout adherent to the racist perspective that defines the

⁷⁶ For two recent studies that interpret this passage along these lines see Kenneth Mostern, Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 71-72, Taylor, "Appiah's Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Reality of Race," 109.

⁷⁷ I do not mean to imply that it is solely in the American context that race manifests itself in juridico-political terms. Rather, that the origin, function, and variability of the juridico-political determinants that comprise the American racial economy differs from others, such as, for instance, that of South Africa. See Eric Foner, Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), George M. Fredrickson, White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American & South African History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

relative status of different racial groups in a very particular order. “[T]he white race,” he contends, “excels in beauty, goodness, and adaptability, and is well abreast even in goodness.”⁷⁸ Du Bois, on the other hand sees no reason — and in fact finds many that point to the opposite conclusion — to concede Van Dieman’s claim of white superiority. Apart from the various cultural objects Du Bois ascribes to ‘historically’ black peoples, he enumerates other contributions, both ethical and spiritual, that are indicative of the ‘equality’ of the races. And, although Van Dieman’s becomes increasingly exasperated by Du Bois’s consistent dismissal of his arguments regarding the superiority of the white race, nothing distresses him more than Du Bois’s apparent conclusion: that the continuous intermixing of racial groups makes the idea of race a quite tenuous proposition. “What becomes of all your argument,” Van Dieman’s demands of Du Bois, “if there are no races and we are all so horribly mixed as you maliciously charge?”⁷⁹ It is from this position that Van Dieman’s question, the one he broaches in the above passage, acquires its significance: “how can you call it ‘black’ when you admit it is not black?”

The question, and Du Bois’s response to it (“I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”), forces Van Dieman’s into an uncomfortable recognition of the juridico-

⁷⁸ Du Bois, "Dusk," 657.

⁷⁹ Du Bois, "Dusk," 665.

political context of African American life. But this is only one — and not the most consequential — of the issues that the question itself raises. To, as Van Dieman's puts it, "call it 'black' when you admit it is not black," is to countenance the notion that 'blackness,' and by extension race, cannot be circumscribed by, or even principally defined in terms of, an epistemological gesture. In other words, Du Bois's notion of blackness is not founded on an epistemological claim. Appiah's critique therefore loses much of its force. His interpretation of Du Bois presupposes, and in fact argues, that Du Bois understands race as an object in the world in much the same way as a flower or a color. That is as something that one may submit to clear epistemological criteria. But Du Bois defines race, or more accurately the *possibility* of race, in very different terms than those Appiah proposes. And it is precisely these very different terms that give rise to the tension witnessed in Du Bois texts between the order of knowledge and the order of experience.

CHAPTER 3

Methods, Knowledges, and Negroes: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problem(s) of Race (II)

That Du Bois's notion of race accumulates more contradictions than it perhaps resolves should come as no surprise. From the moment of its first modern usage race has been the repository of various and at times conflicting ideological currents. Even its initial role in natural history as a classificatory marker was inflected by the difficulty of defining precisely what was denoted by the idea of 'race.' And, of course, most important for an understanding of Du Bois own relationship to the intellectual legacy of the term is the central place of the Negro within the emerging discourse of race. The significance of the 'Negro problem' cannot be fully grasped unless one recognizes its position as the point of intersection in which political, philosophical, and scientific discourses meet. Du Bois's 'redefinition' of race functions, in part, as a response to the conception of the Negro that these discourses suggest.

According to Michael Banton 'race' enters the lexicon of "the English language in 1508 in the poem *The Dance of the Seven Deidly*

*Sins by the Scotsman, William Dunbar.*⁸⁰ Although there is no clear agreement as to whether the word originally migrates from the Italian or the French, there is consensus regarding its Latinate origins. With the arrival of the eighteenth century ‘race’ begins to function as one of the various synonyms that translate the Latin words *gens* and *genus*.⁸¹ In this usage it comes to occupy the same semantic orbit as words such as ‘stock,’ ‘tribe,’ ‘family,’ and ‘nation.’ Yet, Enlightenment use of the word still resides at some distance from the modern meaning of the term, i.e., from the “cultural, genealogical and political connotations” that subtend the idea of race in the nineteenth century.⁸² H.F. Augstein, in his rewarding *Race: The Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850*, claims that the Enlightenment’s own self-understanding did not require the transformation of ‘race’ into the foundation of ‘racial theory’ in part because it did not view race as a signifier of *essential* distinctions. Whether one believes — as Augstein argues — that the existential anxieties accompanying the transformations within European cultures of the period contributed to the semantic expansion of the term, by the end of the eighteenth century ‘race’ comes to mean significantly more than it did at the beginning of the century.

⁸⁰ Michael Banton, *Racial Theories*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 17.

⁸¹ For the early history of the term ‘race,’ I follow and am greatly indebted to H.F. Augstein, ed., *Race: Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Origins of a Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

⁸² Augstein, ed., *Race: Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850* ix.

During the eighteenth century natural history — the avenue through which ‘race’ is principally introduced to Enlightenment culture at large — was primarily concerned with the classification of natural objects, and “[i]t’s criteria was derived less from anatomical and physiological insights than from external observations.”⁸³ Linnaeus, the famed Swedish naturalist whose binomial classificatory scheme organized the basis for much later work in the field, in his distinction between *species* and *varieties* provides an illustration of the problem he and his contemporaries encountered. Linnaeus considered *species* as “primordial forms” whose character had remained unchanged since creation. Varieties differed in that they were elements within species that had undergone an alteration in appearance due to external pressures or factors. Linnaeus’s conception of species emerges from his application of the first four propositions articulated in his “Observationes” in the *Systema Naturae*. Firstly, like can only produce like, and therefore no species other than those existing at the moment of creation are possible. Secondly, the continual propagation of the various species means that there are presently more individual members of each species than at any previous time. Thirdly, each species can be traced back to an original pair or hermaphroditic beginning; in other words, each species constitutes an unbroken unity. And finally, these propositions confirm God as the single creator

⁸³ Augstein, ed., Race: Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850 xii.

of these different species.⁸⁴ Even this brief outline of the Linnaean classificatory model testifies to an already expressed tension between variability and fixity, between change and stasis, at its heart. As Michael Banton writes, “[t]he Linnaean classificatory enterprise depended upon the assumption that the various sets of individuals to be classified were stable, for how could they be classified if they were changing?”⁸⁵ But the existence of varieties within species, that is, within these otherwise “primordial forms,” presupposes that change is a factor of species development. As such the line of demarcation between species, and between varieties *within* species, arises as an issue. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century there remained significant reservations regarding the actual line separating humans from apes, and, as Banton informs us, “on which side of that line Pygmies, Hottentots and Orang Utans belonged.”⁸⁶ The question therefore of “What is the Negro?” begins to acquire a quite different tenor.

Although Linnaeus’s classification of the human species situated it on a line of continuity that included apes, he nonetheless regarded humans — all humans — as a separate species, and did so because

⁸⁴ Eric Voegelin, *The History of the Race Idea: From Ray to Carus*, trans. Ruth Hein, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, eds. Paul Caringella, Jürgen Gebhardt, Thomas A. Hollweck and Ellis Sandoz, vol. 3, 34 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998) 29-31.

⁸⁵ Banton, *Racial Theories* 21.

⁸⁶ Banton, *Racial Theories* 20.

Homo sapiens exhibited the demonstrable reproductive isolation proper to a distinct species. Still, Linnaeus's biological order, defined as it was by morphologically based classificatory relationships, seemingly introduced cultural judgments that appear to foreshadow the tenets ascribed to nineteenth century racial theory:

Americanus: reddish, choleric, and exact; hair — black, straight, thick; wide nostrils, scanty beard; obstinate, merry, free; paints himself with fine red lines; regulated by customs.

Asiaticus: sallow, melancholy, stiff; black hair, dark eyes; severe, haughty, avaricious; covered with loose garments; ruled by opinions.

Africanus: black, phlegmatic, relaxed; hair — frizzled; skin — silky; nose — flat; lips — tumid; women without shame, they lactate profusely; crafty, indolent, negligent; anoints himself with grease; governed by caprice.

Europeans: white, sanguine, muscular; hair — long, flowing; eyes — blue; gentle, acute, inventive; covers himself with close vestments, governed by laws.⁸⁷

Intermingling in Linnaeus's description of the four human groups are implicit claims that *conjoin* phenotype and evaluative judgments in a manner reminiscent of that found in nineteenth century racial discourse.⁸⁸ The classification Linnaeus provides situates the European at the most advanced level of development. Yet Linnaeus's principal reference point remains the unity of the species and its origin

⁸⁷ Linnaeus cited in Smedley, *Race* 161.

⁸⁸ Linnaeus actually distinguishes six different diurnal varieties of *Homo sapiens*: *ferus*, *americanus*, *europaeus*, *asiaticus*, *afar*, *monstrous*. I do not list the first or last of these varieties because they are not immediately pertinent to my argument.

in the single act of divine creation. Therefore later hypotheses regarding the possibility of multiple acts of creation and with it multiple ‘species of men,’ or other formulations that divide different human beings into different — hierarchically related — species, remain alien (although not necessarily incompatible) to Linnaeus’s understanding of the biological order.

To Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, we owe the first successful attempt to disentangle the notion of species from the rigidity of Linnaeus’s classificatory grid. That Buffon had very little sympathy for Linnaeus or his classificatory system was no secret. When he critiques the system that wishes “to judge of the whole by a single instance, to reduce nature to the status of petty systems which are foreign to her,” Buffon undoubtedly had Linnaeus’s “artificial taxonomy” in mind.⁸⁹ That he championed a substantially different methodological approach than Linnaeus, stems from the very different assumptions that guide his understanding of nature:

For in order to make a system, an arrangement — in a word, a general method — it is necessary that everything be taken in by it. It is necessary to divide the whole under consideration into different classes, apportion these classes into genera, subdivide these genera into species,

⁸⁹ Georges Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon, "Initial Discourse: On the Manner of Studying and Expounding Natural History (1749-1767)," trans. John Lyon, From Natural History to the History of Nature: Readings from Buffon and His Critics, eds. John Lyon and Phillip R. Sloan (Indianapolis: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 100.

and to do all this following a principle of arrangement in which there is of necessity an element of arbitrariness. But nature proceeds by unknown gradation, and, consequently, it is impossible to describe her with full accuracy by such divisions, since she passes from one species to another, and often from one genus to another, by imperceptible nuances. As a result, one finds a great number of intermediate species and mixed objects which it is impossible to categorize and which necessarily upset the project of a general system.⁹⁰

For Buffon the classificatory distinctions of Linnaeus's system cannot be other than artificial. Nature does not lend itself to the type of categorization that Linnaeus classification presumes. If the differences between the two naturalists could be summarized simply (which it can't), it would probably be reduced to the following: for Buffon nature is a productive not a static entity.⁹¹ The proliferation of 'varieties' and the intermixing of natural objects suggest, for Buffon, that change is a central value of the natural world. Thus unlike Linnaeus, Buffon recognized that mutability, evidenced by the constant modification of varieties, was inscribed in the very notion of species and therefore that any effective definition had to accommodate that fact.

Buffon's definition of species moves away from the morphologic basis underlying previous conceptions of the category and introduces different parameters for the understanding of the notion:

⁹⁰ Comte de Buffon, "Initial Discourse: On the Manner of Studying and Expounding Natural History (1749-1767)," 102.

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970) 126-27.

l'espèce est donc un mot abstrait & général, dont la chose n'existe qu'en considérant la Nature dans la succession des temps, & dans la destruction constante & le renouvellement tout aussi constant des être: c'est en comparant la Nature d'aujourd'hui à celle des autres temps, & les individus actuels aux individus passés, que nous avons pris une idée nette de ce que l'on appelle espèce, & la comparaison du nombre ou de la ressemblance des individus n'est qu'une idée accessoire & souvent indépendante de la première: car l'âne ressemble au cheval plus que le barbet au levrier, & cependant le barbet & le levrier ne sont qu'une même espèce, puisqu'il produisent ensemble des individus qui peuvent eux-même en produire d'autres, au lieu que le cheval & l'âne sont certainement de different espèces, puisqu'ils ne produisent ensemble que d'individus viciés & inféconds.⁹²

Despite his initial skepticism as to the actual existence in nature of something one could call 'species,' Buffon nonetheless acknowledged that nature provided the basis for (tentatively) circumscribing one species from another. Buffon's new definition limits membership within a species to entities who can mate and produce fertile offspring. No longer construed primarily in relation to morphology, Buffon integrates the possibility of change into his definition of species and resituates the organizing force of the category in its historicity. In other words, different individuals aren't unified under the same species because of their shared morphological traits, but rather because they

⁹² Georges Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon, "L'asne (1749-1767)," Oeuvres Philosophiques De Buffon, ed. Jean Piveteau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954) 355-56.

participate in the “succession of similar forms.”⁹³ His example illustrates precisely this point. The morphologic similarity between the donkey and the horse mistakenly suggests that they are members of the same species, while the differences between the greyhound and the spaniel obscures the fact that they belong to one species. What the greyhound and the spaniel share, that the donkey and the horse do not, is a line of succession (i.e., a compatible reproductive physiology). As Paul L. Farber specifies, writing of Buffon’s definition, “[p]artly by morphology, but most dramatically by the constant succession of like forms, species were recognizable.”⁹⁴

This new conception of species extended to *Homo sapiens*, and specifically opposed claims that located any particular human variety outside the enclosure of a single human species:

Les hommes diffèrent du blanc au noir par la couleur, du double au simple par la hauteur de la taille, la grosseur, la légèreté, la force, &c., & du tout au rien pour l’esprit; mais cette dernière qualité, n’appartenant point à la matière, ne doit point être ici considérées; les autres sont les variations ordinaires de la Nature qui viennent de l’influence du climat & de la nourriture; mais ces différences de couleur et de dimension dans la taille n’empêche pas que le Nègre & le blanc, le Lappon & le Patagon, le géant et le nain, ne produisent ensemble des individus qui peuvent eux-même se reproduire, & que par conséquent ces hommes, se différens en apparence, ne soient tout d’une

⁹³ Paul L. Farber, "Buffon and the Concept of Species," Journal of the History of Biology 5.2 (1972): 266.

⁹⁴ Farber, "Buffon and the Concept of Species," 263.

seule & même espèce, puisque cette reproduction constante est ce qui constitue l'espèce.⁹⁵

Given Buffon's new definition, differences between varieties of human beings did not imply that they inhabited differing species. In fact the very possibility of overlapping interrelations, of a unity drawn from difference, substantiated the claim that different varieties of human beings held membership in the same species. After all, it is the reproductive fertility that ensues from the union of "le Nègre & le blanc" that warrants their shared membership in the species. But this flexibility, Buffon's recognition of nature's continuing modifications, also makes 'race' an apt designation for the different groups of human beings. Originally 'race' denoted a family lineage, whether of animals or humans, that "formed a veritable 'history' of traits passed down through generations in innumerable forms."⁹⁶ For Buffon the variability of the human species was best articulated through this specific conception, i.e., 'race,' rather than Linnaeus's far more rigid notion of 'variety.' These 'races' "represented particular stocks whose members, like those great families showed a considerable degree of resemblance, yet were in a state of constant variation."⁹⁷ This use of

⁹⁵ Comte de Buffon, "L'asne (1749-1767)," 356.

⁹⁶ Nicholas Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29.3 (1996): 255.

⁹⁷ Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," 255.

race emerging from Buffon's definition of species, is not yet the dominating idea that proceeds to govern the nineteenth century; in Buffon's, and for that matter Linnaeus's usage, 'race' remains a descriptive as opposed to an analytic category. Both Buffon and Linnaeus in their use of 'race' maintain a tenuous relationship to its original meaning (i.e., 'lineage'), but they maintain one nonetheless. In other words, they have not traveled as far down the road in their usage as a Johann Friedrich Blumenbach for example, for whom race "specifically denoted visible differences of physiology rather than common stock."⁹⁸ This becomes particularly evident once one compares Blumenbach's descriptions with that of Linnaeus. The *American* variety of humankind, according to Blumenbach, is:

Copper-coloured...; hair black, stiff, straight and scanty...; forehead short; eyes set very deep; nose somewhat apish, but prominent; the face invariably broad, with cheeks prominent, but not flat or depressed; its parts, if seen in profile, very distinct, and as it were deeply chiselled...; the shape of the forehead and head in many artificially distorted. This variety comprehends the inhabitants of America except the Esquimaux.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," 257.

⁹⁹ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, "On the Natural Variety of Mankind (1795)," trans. Thomas Bendyshe, *The Idea of Race*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lott (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000) 29.

Blumenbach's description focuses exclusively on the morphological characteristics of his subjects and therefore seems to return us to an earlier idea of species. However the basis of Blumenbach's descriptions are predicated on a rigorous quantification of this morphology. What we witness in the above passage is the result of a diligently applied quantitative method, one that seems to leave little room for the 'racial' definitions offered by Linnaeus — of the 'indolent' African, for example. Yet it's precisely the introduction of such methods that marks the transition from a regime of observation to that of measurement, from a discourse of natural history to the science of biology, from a language of varieties to a modern conception of race. Without this shift away from a discourse of 'lineage' and 'family,' to speak *scientifically* of different human groups as *different in kind* would have encountered a conceptual obstacle. Completely divorced from its semantic relationship to 'lineage' or 'family,' Blumenbach begins to construe 'race' in markedly different terms.

None of these three authors escape from the constraints of their racial bias or prejudice. A brief perusal of any of their texts provides a clear enough indication of that. They each subscribe to a hierarchy that situates 'whiteness' at the point of privilege and organizes the balance of human "varieties" in relation to it.¹⁰⁰ But neither do any of

¹⁰⁰ For a reading of the centrality of 'racial' hierarchy for Buffon's own *Histoire naturelle* see Tzvetan Todorov, On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and

the three question the fundamental unity of the species or the proposition that all individuals are members of a single human family. Yet by the end of the eighteenth century this proposition would come under increasing attack. Linnaeus's classificatory scheme was an attempt to answer a question that had acquired increasing importance during the age of colonial expansion, i.e., that of human diversity. In other words, if human beings were the products of a single divine creation and could therefore trace their lineage back to a common origin, how could one account for the differences in appearance and levels of 'civilization'? Linnaeus's answer — and in this he was joined by Buffon, Blumenbach, and many others — was that environment produced the modifications evident in different varieties of human beings. Yet the age of colonial expansion appeared to invalidate this hypothesis. With the increasing transfer of populations to different climatic regions — for example, the establishment of Europeans in North America and the forced removal of Africans to Europe and the colonial territories — the predicted physiognomic and cultural changes simply did not occur. Environment, apparently, could not account for diversity.

With the weakening of the 'environmentalist' position, polygenesis reemerged — it had been formulated as an explanation of

Exoticism in French Thought, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 96-106.

human diversity as early as the sixteenth century in the writings of Giordano Bruno and Paracelsus — as a legitimate narrative of human difference.¹⁰¹ David Hume's evaluation of the precise mental and cultural capacity of the Negro (or the lack thereof) is representative in this respect:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the 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 in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GEMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Augstein, ed., Race: Origins of an Idea, 1760-1850 xiii. See also, Richard H. Popkin, "The Philosophical Bases of Modern Racism," The High Road to Pyrrhonism, eds. Richard A. Watson and James E. Force, vol. 2 (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, Inc., 1980) 90.

¹⁰² David Hume, "Of National Character (1748)," The Philosophical Works, eds. Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose, vol. 3 (London: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1992) 252.

Differences that had previously been ascribed to theories of degeneracy or the wisdom of a divine plan were now increasingly explained as characteristics proper to differing species. The Negro's failure to achieve a passing grade in Hume's comparative evaluation signifies less the underdevelopment of Negro capacity than it does the Negro's status as a permanently inferior species of human being. In dismissing all indications that might signify the possibility of Negro 'advancement,' whether witnessed by educational or artistic achievement, Hume condemns the African to what he considers its proper place outside the purview of the human family.¹⁰³ Although Hume's understanding of race still partakes of an older discourse, evident by his emphasis on the African's cultural rather than biological shortcomings, the significant issue here is his willingness to supplant the biblical narrative of creation and the unity of the species that it presumes. Assumptions informing the idea Negro inferiority undergo a

¹⁰³ Thomas Jefferson, although slightly more generous in his assessment than Hume, nonetheless reasserts, in almost identical terms, the basic content of Hume's argument: "But never yet could I find a black that had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. ... Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism." And, Jefferson's observations yield a conclusion, which, despite its tentativeness, still betrays his proximity to Hume's own verdict: "The opinion, that they [i.e., Negroes] are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence. ... I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications." Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (1781) (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1972) 140, 43.

gradual transformation beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century. The well formed opinion of the Negro's subordinate status, a staple of eighteenth century scientific discourse and a truism beyond argument, no longer rests on the secure foundation of biblical truth — at least as it had been understood up to that point. Polygenesis, the position Hume advances in the above passage, not only posits multiple species of human beings, but conflicts with the tenets of biblical teaching; and yet, it acquired an increasing influence, in both Europe and the colonies, as an explanation of human difference. Its influence was most pronounced in the United States and provided the unifying thread for the coterie of scholars who would form the first school of American ethnology.¹⁰⁴ The ensuing debate between monogenesisists and polygenesisists that occurs in the first half of the nineteenth century provides the terms through which the basic configuration of nineteenth century racial theory assumes form in the United States. Ultimately this transition, from a language of classification to a discourse of biology, from questions lineage to those of race, ushers in the basis of nineteenth century racial ideology; and, as such, informs

¹⁰⁴ See Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 14-18, George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) 71-96, Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Revised ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996) 74.

the immediate 'scientific' and cultural backdrop of W.E.B. Du Bois's own reflections on race.

III.

Pre-Civil War America witnessed a movement towards a new understanding of the reasons for racial inferiority. No longer exclusively construed as the result of 'degeneracy' or the consequences of the Negro's allotted fate (i.e., his/her position in the Great Chain of Being) — arguments dependent on a notion of monogenesis for their coherence —, Negro inferiority now began to be conceived in reference to polygenesis. This revival of polygenesis served other than solely scientific purposes. Its arguments were marshaled in response to those forwarded by the growing abolitionist movement and the threat it constituted to the slave power. As we have seen Enlightenment natural historians presumed that human diversity was conditioned by environmental and geographical factors. By producing fertile offspring, the sexual union of Negroes and Caucasians clearly conformed to the criteria by which different 'varieties' were unified under the umbrella of a single species. The issue of species unity therefore remained a minor though not insignificant question. Explanations for the Negro's difference from her European counterpart made reference principally

to the climatic and geographical variants necessarily effecting the African's development. In other words, regardless of the undeniable hierarchical order in which natural historians such as a Linnaeus or a Buffon placed the African— situating her, depending on the author, either on the lowest or sometimes the penultimate rung of human development — they nonetheless considered both the European and the Negro as members of the same species. With the advent of the nineteenth century this basic assumption began to change. In this context Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* published in 1744 (and reprinted in the United States in *The Columbian Magazine* in 1788) was to be of particular importance. Long, an English jurist and planter who had lived in the West Indies for over twelve years, published his *History* as a justification of black slavery. It gained significant popularity, and more importantly, proved highly influential among Southern plantation owners. Of Long's many arguments supporting slavery he staked his principal claim to the belief that the Negro constituted a distinct species, that their physical traits placed them closer to beasts than human beings, and that the African occupied an intermediate level between lower apes and *Homo sapiens*. Negroes, in his view of the matter, were "devoid of genius, and seem almost incapable of making any progress in civility or science. They have no plan or system of morality among them. ... It being a common proverb,

that all people of the globe have some good as well as ill qualities except the African.”¹⁰⁵ (Smedley) What distinguishes Long’s text from other proto-anthropological treatises written in the colonies — apart from its influence on the issue of the Atlantic slave trade — is its unabashed advocacy of polygenesis. Long is not writing from the center of politics and culture, or from the sophisticated comfort of a European capital, his published adherence to polygenesis therefore constitutes an even more telling indication of its increasing influence.

Despite the historical importance of Long’s text, his influence in scientific circles of the period paled besides that of Samuel Stanhope Smith. Smith’s *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, published in 1787 and updated in 1810, was considered the authoritative American text concerning the origins of human diversity and remained deeply influential well into the 1840s. Smith, a defender of monogenesis, argued that racial differences were the result of differing social and climatic environments. He claimed that if such external environmental factors were erased then the differences witnessed between races would eventually be eliminated. Smith’s argument foundered on the same shoals other adherents of monogenesis had encountered, i.e., no one had ever witnessed the transformation Smith postulated.¹⁰⁶ Although

¹⁰⁵ Long quoted in Smedley, *Race* 180.

¹⁰⁶ Fredrickson, *Black Image* 72.

Charles Caldwell presented the first important American critique of Smith's arguments, in his *Thoughts on the Original Unity of the Human Race*, it was not until the emergence of the 'American School of Ethnology' that the combination of science and polygenesis exhibited its profound influence on American racial thinking.

Up until the publication of Dr. Samuel George Morton's *Crania Americana* in 1839, considered by many as the inaugural text of the first school of American ethnology, the account of human difference still followed — at least in its basic outlines — the narrative proposed by Samuel Stanhope Smith. Morton's study, alongside the increasing scientific prestige associated with the American school of ethnology, initiated the eclipse of Smith's influence in scientific circles. What distinguished Morton's text was both the centrality he assigned to polygenesis and the purported scientific value of his analysis.¹⁰⁷ Polygenesis became more than simply the explanatory framework subtending Morton's argument; it identified Morton's study as specifically American in its provenance, and granted polygenesis a cultural legitimacy far outstripping its status anywhere else.¹⁰⁸ As

¹⁰⁷ Morton's data on the internal cranial capacity of different races is reproduced, for example, in the work of Carl Gustav Carus, and from Carus makes its way into the writings of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau. See Banton, *Racial Theories* 50-51.

¹⁰⁸ Gould, remarking on the transformation that engendered the establishment of a distinctly American variant of ethnology writes: "A collection of eclectic amateurs, bowing before the prestige of European theorists became a group of professionals with indigenous ideas and an internal dynamic that did not require constant fueling from Europe. The doctrine of polygeny acted as an important agent in this transformation; for it was one of the first theories of largely American origin that

such, it established the profile, both scientifically and institutionally, of the first school of American ethnology.

Morton underwrote his argument with ‘scientific’ data drawn from his vast skull collection. His comparative analysis of Native American and, later, Egyptian skulls led him to conclude that opinions which stated, “that the differences now observable in mankind are owing solely to vicissitudes of climate, locality, habits of life, and various collateral circumstances” were ill-formed.¹⁰⁹ In opposition therefore to the then governing consensus, Morton surmised that different races were particularly suited to different environments, and that this racial adaptability occurred independently of climatic or environmental factors. Citing Caldwell’s argument in *Thoughts on the Unity of the Human Species* — who himself was relying on Archbishop James Ussher’s accepted Biblical timeline¹¹⁰ —, Morton asserted that the Negro had not changed since the moment of its creation. If one accepted the biblical chronology regarding Noah’s descent from the ark (i.e., 4179 years ago), Morton argued, then the possibility of Negroes having actually derived their origins from the patriarch of the flood is

won attention and respect of European scientists — so much so that European referred to polygeny as the ‘American School’ of anthropology. Polygeny had European antecedents ... but Americans developed the data cited in its support and based a large body of research on its tenets.” Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* 74.

¹⁰⁹ Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana; or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America (1839)*, American Theories of Polygenesis, ed. Robert Bernasconi, vol. 1, 7 vols. (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 2002) 2.

¹¹⁰ Fredrickson, *Black Image* 73.

unlikely. Presuming Noah's family to have been Caucasian — a fact of which there is no reason to doubt according to Morton — and recalling that the presence of Negroes can be dated to at least 3445 years ago, the resulting interval of 734 years would simply have been insufficient for the emergence of a new race. And further, Morton contends, “recent discoveries in Egypt give additional force to the preceding statement, inasmuch as they show beyond all question, that the Caucasian and Negro races were as perfectly distinct in that country upwards of three thousand years ago as they are now”.¹¹¹ All evidence, in Morton's view, points to the inevitable conclusion that races, and in particular the Negro and the Caucasian races, derive from different origins.

Of course, if Morton's arguments rested primarily on his knowledge of biblical interpretation and chronology, then the scientific value of his texts would have been negligible. Rather than his biblical exegesis, it was through his measurement and classification of differences between white, Native American, and Negro skulls that Morton acquired his fame. From his examination of skull measurements Morton argued that the cognitive capacity and physical attributes of the various races had remained relatively unchanged. His 1844 study, *Crania Ægyptiaca*, undertaken in collaboration with

¹¹¹ Morton, *Crania Americana; or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* (1839) 88.

George R. Gliddon, reinforced the conclusions he had drawn from his earlier work. When measuring the cranial capacity of his Egyptian skulls, after having first dispersed them into their respective ethnographic divisions, Morton's results reflected the conclusions he had asserted in 1839.¹¹² Of the seventy-two skulls that comprised his study, the largest cranial capacity of any individual skull was 97 cubic inches belonging to a skull of the Pelasgic form (i.e., Caucasian), and the skulls of the Pelasgic form also supplied the highest mean average of cranial capacity. Negroid skulls, by contrast, had the lowest mean average of cranial capacity.¹¹³ Because cranial capacity was supposedly correlated with brain size and 'civilizational capability,' the conclusions that would be drawn from such a study are evident. Not only did it reinforce the hierarchical order of racial difference, it also substantiated the Southern perception of the Negro as inherently inferior and biologically destined for slavery. Morton's studies reinforced the growing contention that Negroes and Caucasians constituted different 'types of men' and provided the basis for further

¹¹² Most of these skulls were collected by George Gliddon in his time as United States consul to the city of Cairo, and were thereafter forwarded to Morton. Through his travels in the region Gliddon originally obtained 137 skulls of which 100 belonged to "the ancient inhabitants of Egypt." Morton concedes that he cannot ascertain with even the remotest certainty precisely to what period these remains belong. Fortunately, their supposed ethnographic discrepancies allow him to classify them according to their racial type. Samuel George Morton, Crania Ægyptiaca; or, Observations of Egyptian Ethnography, Derived from Anatomy, History and Monuments (1844), American Theories of Polygenesis, ed. Robert Bernasconi, vol. 1, 7 vols. (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 2002) 1-3.

¹¹³ Morton, Crania Ægyptiaca; or, Observations of Egyptian Ethnography, Derived from Anatomy, History and Monuments (1844) 21.

research along these lines by the other two founding members of the American School of Ethnology, Louis Agassiz and Josiah C Nott.

Louis Agassiz and Dr. Josiah C. Nott came from very different social and scientific backgrounds. Agassiz, before arriving in the United States in 1846, had already established an enviable scientific reputation in his native Switzerland and throughout Europe. His scientific credentials were further enhanced by his position at Harvard both as a professor as well as founder and director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology — with which he was affiliated until his death in 1873. The irony of his impact on Southern opinion makers regarding slavery and the Negro is that Agassiz had never encountered a Negro until his arrival in America.¹¹⁴ This cannot be said of Josiah Nott. Nott was a Southerner, an apologist for African slavery, a co-editor of the abridged American edition of Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, and after the death of Samuel Morton the principal propagator of the tenets associated with the American School of Ethnology. As George Fredrickson has remarked, "that Nott was

¹¹⁴ The impact of this first encounter, and the revulsion that he felt, is recollected in a December 1846 letter he wrote to his mother: "It was in Philadelphia that I first found myself in prolonged contact with negroes; all the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. ... Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to reprocess the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, and their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of the palm of their hands, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away." Agassiz quoted in Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* 75-77.

recognized as a leading scientist was perhaps more indicative of the racial preconceptions of his audience than of the quality of his research and theoretical formulations.”¹¹⁵ Yet despite their respective agendas, Agassiz and Nott were each admirers of Samuel Morton, and in 1854 collaborated with George R. Gliddon in the publication of *Types of Mankind*, a text published in honor of Morton.

The arguments proposed in *Types of Mankind* were principally indebted to the conclusions drawn from research undertaken by Morton in both his *Crania Americana* and the later *Crania Ægyptiaca*. But *Types of Mankind* extended the argument by attempting to provide a clearer theoretical foundation for Morton’s assessments. The conclusion of Morton’s research, namely, “that each Race was adapted from the beginning to its peculiar local destination,” and further, “that the physical characteristics which distinguish the different Races, are independent of external causes” was not, even in the science of the day, the easiest position to defend.¹¹⁶ Morton’s claim led logically to a conclusion that posited several types of human groups, each particularly suited for their specific environment and each originating in their respective geographical area. Proceeding along this line of inquiry in his “Sketch of the Natural Provinces of the Animal World and their Relation to Different Types of Man,” — his own contribution

¹¹⁵ Fredrickson, *Black Image* 79.

¹¹⁶ Morton, *Crania Americana; or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America (1839)* 3.

to *Types of Mankind* — Agassiz extended the scope of Morton's argument. Focusing on the manner in which the "Asiatic zoological realm" is specifically delineated, Agassiz writes:

But since it is not my object to describe separately all faunae, but chiefly to call attention to the coincidence existing between the natural limitation of the races of man, and the geographical range of the zoological provinces, I shall limit myself here to some general remarks respecting the Mongolian fauna, in order to show that the Asiatic zoological realm differs essentially from the European and the American. ... [.] ... If we now ask what are the nations of men inhabiting those regions, we find that they all belong to the so-called Mongolian race, the natural limits of which correspond exactly to the range of the Japanese, Chinese, Mongolian and Caspian faunae taken together, and that peculiar types, distinct nations of this race, cover respectively the different faunae of this realm.¹¹⁷

The question of human diversity is answered for Agassiz by reference to the order he witnesses in the zoological realm. It is no coincidence, in his view, that one finds Mongolian flora and fauna within the same geographical parameters that one locates the Mongolian race. Or as he states it, one finds "the Japanese inhabiting the Japanese zoological province; the Chinese, the Chinese province, the Mongols, the

¹¹⁷ Louis Agassiz, "Of the Natural Provinces of the Animal World and Their Relation to the Different Types of Man," *Types of Mankind (1854)*, eds. Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon, vol. 3, *American Theories of Polygenesis* (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 2002) lxv-lxvi.

Mongolian province”.¹¹⁸ The zoological record appeared to reinforce the notion that the globe was peopled by “distinct types of man” whose differences were qualitative and inscribed in the biological order.¹¹⁹ In other words, human beings did not share a common origin.

In holding this position, Agassiz and Nott, challenged not only the reigning orthodoxy regarding human diversity, but were also forced to confront what had become the secular and scientific basis of the idea of a common human origin: Buffon’s definition of species. By eliminating morphological similarity (or difference) as the determining criteria underlying the unity of a species, Buffon had also shifted the terms of discussion. Agassiz and Nott could no longer simply assert Negro inferiority or rely on the purported civilizational deficiency of the Negro as evidence of the good sense of their position. Therefore they challenged Buffon’s definition directly by charging that any theory that “makes specific difference or identity depend upon genetic succession,” remains mired in confusion, and is itself “begging the principle and

¹¹⁸ Agassiz, "Of the Natural Provinces of the Animal World and Their Relation to the Different Types of Man," lxvi.

¹¹⁹ The accuracy of Agassiz’s formulation is less important here than the significance his audience attached to his claims. Because humans are capable of migrating to most any geographical location, and are therefore considered an ideal example of a “cosmopolitan, variable species,” Agassiz’s particular classification is inapplicable. Although the zoological strictures Agassiz placed on fauna and flora did not apply to *Homo sapiens*, nor was it ever the dominant explanatory paradigm, it was still — in the period — a respectable scientific opinion. For a critique of Agassiz’s views see Gould, The Mismeasure of Man 74-78.

taking for granted what reality is under discussion.”¹²⁰ But, supplanting Buffon’s definition required locating another criteria — one other than “genetic succession” — that could form the basis of species differentiation. In his response, Agassiz proposed a refurbished notion of morphology, a concept allied to the idea of geographical dispersal outlined above, — conceptions that Nott would adopt in his own writings on human diversity — as the appropriate criteria by which species could be classified and distinguished.

Although morphology assumed a renewed importance for Agassiz — and by extension for Nott — and became the basis of their classification of different species-types, it did not prevent them from falling into the error Buffon’s definition had been intended to avoid. In perhaps the most noted example, Nott could claim that,

inasmuch as there is no evidence that dogs did really all proceed from one stock, or that their different types, such as greyhounds, mastiffs, turnspits, &c., can be transformed into each other by physical causes; and again, considering that all these canine types did preserve, side by side in Egypt, their *respective forms* for thousands of years, these animals must be regarded, by every naturalist, as specifically distinct.¹²¹ (Italics mine)

¹²⁰ Agassiz, "Of the Natural Provinces of the Animal World and Their Relation to the Different Types of Man," lxxiv.

¹²¹ Josiah Clark Nott, "Types of Mankind," Types of Mankind (1854), eds. Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon, vol. 3, *American Theories of Polygenesis* (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 2002) 386.

For Agassiz no less than for Nott, the slightest morphological difference between organisms presumed the discovery of another species. Thus the mastiff, the greyhound, and the turnspit can be defined as separate species, all on the basis of morphological distinction and geographical location. The taxonomic ‘irregularity’ of this classification applies to human beings as well. Negroes, Caucasians, Esquimaux, etc., all considered “distinct types of man” according to Agassiz, can be categorized as such because they subscribe to the same zoological rules that Agassiz sees at work in all flora and fauna. But Buffon’s emphasis on “genetic succession” — and the scientific consensus surrounding his definition of species — constitutes a serious challenge to Agassiz and Nott’s proposed argument. In other words, their Typological Theory of racial difference requires that “genetic succession” be marginalized as the criterion that determines species distinction. By rehabilitating morphological difference and unifying it with geographical dispersal in order to construct a determinate criterion of species distinction, Agassiz chose to confront Buffon on somewhat different terrain than his collaborator. Although Nott adopted most, if not all, of Agassiz’s formulations, he also chose to emphasize an aspect of the question to which Agassiz had only devoted slight attention. While Agassiz opted for a return to morphology and geographical location as an antidote to the perceived

error of Buffon's definition, Josiah Nott addressed himself explicitly to the issue of hybridity and the question of fertility and species survival that it implied.

In his challenge to Buffon's definition, Nott approached the issue from a different angle. Although, like Agassiz, he claimed that "genetic succession" was an inadequate criterion for distinguishing species, his argument proceeded in a different direction. He asserted that the existence of hybridity in nature confirmed Morton's insight that "different degrees of affinity exist in nature" and that this must be "taken into account in all inquiries into the prolificacy of diverse 'species.'"¹²² Borrowing the language of Morton's discourse, in which he had distinguished between *remote*, *allied*, and *proximate* species, Nott contended that this classification explained how — contra Buffon — different species could produce fertile offspring.¹²³ Negroes, Caucasians, etc., although derived from the same genus constituted, in Nott's assessment, proximate species and therefore the fertility of their offspring was to be expected. In other words, different human groups might share the same genus but they are still separated by their inclusion into different species or types.

¹²² Nott, "Types of Mankind," 394.

¹²³ Citing on an earlier paper published by Morton, Nott defined the terms as follows:
"REMOTE SPECIES, of the same genus, are those among which hybrids are never produced.
"ALLIED SPECIES produce, *inter se*, an infertile offspring.
"PROXIMATE SPECIES produce, with each other, a fertile offspring."

Nott, "Types of Mankind," 81.

By formulating the issue of species difference along these lines, Nott situated the question species survival at the forefront of any discussion of human diversity. Returning to his canine example, Nott remarks that “[w]here opposite types of dogs are bred together, and their hybrid progeny becomes again intermingled, all sorts of mongrel, degenerate, or deformed varieties arise,” and moreover, products of such unions generally “possess a short and fleeting existence.”¹²⁴ Humans, conforming to the same natural laws that apply to all creatures, are necessarily exposed to similar threats. “The species of men are all *proximate*,” yet, Nott cautions, “some are perfectly prolific; while others are imperfectly so — possessing a tendency to become extinct when their hybrids are bred together.”¹²⁵ Miscegenation constitutes a threat, and to the Josiah Nott of *Types of Mankind*, it is a threat directed principally at the white race.¹²⁶ (Nott) Yet within a very short time it will be the Negro’s survival that will be the subject of speculation.

By introducing the issue of hybridity, the constitutional adaptability of different “types of man” arises as a question. Therefore,

¹²⁴ Nott, "Types of Mankind," 394.

¹²⁵ Nott, "Types of Mankind," 397.

¹²⁶ “It seems to me certain, however, in human physical history, that the superior race must inevitably become deteriorated by any intermixture with the inferior; and I have suggested elsewhere, that, through the operation of the laws of hybridity alone, the human family might possibly become exterminated by a thorough amalgamation of all the various types of mankind now existing upon earth.” Nott, "Types of Mankind," 407.

although all “species of men” are proximate, some are clearly more proximate than others:

When two *proximate* species of mankind, two races bearing a general resemblance to each other in type, are bred together — *e.g.*, Teutons, Celts, Pelasgians, Iberians, or Jews — they produce offspring perfectly prolific ... When, on the other hand, species the most widely separated, such as the Anglo-Saxon with the Negro, are crossed, a different result has course. Their mulatto offspring, if still prolific, are but partially so; and acquire an inherent tendency to run out and become eventually extinct when kept apart from parent stocks.¹²⁷

Nott’s evaluation of the biological deficiency of mulattos testifies to what will become an increasing refrain in the latter third of the nineteenth century: the biological unsuitability of the Negro for survival. By the end of the Civil War the importance of Darwin’s theories began to impose themselves on American racist thinking. Even Josiah Nott, once a devoted advocate of polygenesis, converted to positions he considered congruent with Darwinian hypotheses. Monogenesis and polygenesis were rapidly relegated to the margins as the new discourse of Darwinian evolutionary biology acquired a foothold. Debates that had defined the landscape of American conceptions of race slowly receded into the background as a new terrain of debate emerged. With the advent of Darwin’s revolution and

¹²⁷ Nott, "Types of Mankind," 397-98.

the adoption of his theories by the principal exponents of American ethnology, the terms of racial debate underwent a shift.

IV.

The value of Du Bois's early writings stems from his willingness to inhabit the contradictions that emerge from the discourses that speak to the 'Negro problem.' (Banton; Voegelin; Augstein; Agassiz; Comte de Buffon "L'asne (1749-1767)"; Hume; Jefferson; Popkin; Gould; Baker) Du Bois does not extract himself easily, if at all, from these contradictions. And as such, particular vigilance when approaching these early texts is required. Often enmeshed within the discursive modalities of nineteenth century racial logic Du Bois's early texts seemingly betray an allegiance to the conceptual vocabulary they claim to contest. But one must also recognize that Du Bois's texts do not yield simply, or necessarily, to this logic. The resources marshaled in opposition to the governing racial logic are also drawn from it and it is through this intersection of a prior and insistent discursive modality with a new and incipient critical rearticulation — one left almost always unresolved — that Du Bois's texts impose themselves. It is the absence of this awareness on the part of critics that can make the

renewed focus on Du Bois's work at times perplexing. Criticism of Du Bois's early work, while much of it well-warranted, often demand a conceptual or theoretical consistency that the discourses out of which Du Bois writes, themselves, when addressing race, simply do not have. But the issue goes much further. Although Du Bois, an undeniable intellectual product of his age, accepts the basis on which most of these discourses are constructed, the questions he implicitly puts *to them* challenges their basic configuration. How do we come to ask the 'Negro question'? What is the trajectory by which the Negro results as a 'problem'? In other words what are the discursive modalities by which the 'Negro' is articulated and what is the historicity that attends the being of the 'Negro.' These questions, asked in one form or another throughout Du Bois entire corpus, assume particular importance in the early work because his various initial attempts to navigate them foregrounds the epistemological question at their core: what is the Negro? What does it mean to ask this question? For Du Bois, it means first to engage with the range of discourses (natural history, evolutionary biology, phrenology, history, etc.) across which the body and the being of the Negro lies available for inspection. Second, it means to compare the manner in which this question is asked of others — and in what register — and evaluate the way in which these answers are then parsed. Yet primarily for Du Bois it means bringing

into proximity discursive regimes whose affiliation within his texts produce unusual answers to what were thought to be well-rehearsed questions.

“The question, then, which we must seriously consider is this: what is the real meaning of Race; what has, in the past, been the law of race development, and what lessons has the past history of race development to teach the rising Negro people?”¹²⁸ This is the question that begins Du Bois’s “The Conservation of Races,” his 1897 address to the American Negro Academy. Delivered less than a year after Plessy vs. Ferguson, the supreme court decision that constitutionally sanctioned legal segregation, and written within the ever receding shadow of what was the promise of the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments, Du Bois’s essay appears at an undeniably burdened historical moment for African Americans.¹²⁹ The 1890s were also to become the decade of the highest number of reported lynchings in American history.¹³⁰ The over 2000 lynchings during the decade, most of which visited upon black people, punctuated the reversal of what had seemingly begun so well with the Emancipation Proclamation and

¹²⁸ Du Bois, “Conservation,” 815.

¹²⁹ The decision in Plessy was given on May 18th, 1896 and Du Bois delivered “Conservation,” on March 5th, 1897.

¹³⁰ Shipp Trial Project, [Lynching in America: Statistics, Information, Images](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html), Internet, Archive at Tuskegee Institute, Available: www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html.

the hopes of the newly freed slaves. Alongside these developments, the 1890 U.S. census unleashed a new debate, couched in Darwinian terms, regarding the Negro's fitness for survival. The census reported declining Negro birthrates and populations and this was construed as betokening the death knell of the Negro race.¹³¹ By the 1890s discussions of the inevitable disappearance of the American Negro, spurred primarily by interpretations of the 1890 census, acquired increasing currency. The prevailing question was no longer, as it had been, whether the Negro constituted a different species, but whether the Negro was fit for survival.¹³² Written alongside the tumult of late nineteenth century American racial politics "The Conservation of Races" presents itself in part as Du Bois's attempt to situate the Negro within the period's "race talk" in a somewhat different way.¹³³ What is worked through in Du Bois's address—at a subterranean level as it were—is the attempt to broker the beginnings of a rapprochement between an understanding of the Negro and a conception of race.

That the conception of race on offer in Du Bois's "Conservation" finds itself at odds with either the biological or cultural variant of the

¹³¹ The rate of population increase among Negroes (as African Americans were designated in the 1890 census) had dropped by almost half in the 1890 census. Whereas the Negro population increased by approximately 1.7 million between 1870 and 1880, the 1890 census indicated that their numbers increased by less than one million between 1880 and 1890. United States Census Bureau, Census Data for the Year 1890, Internet, United States Historical Census Data, Available: www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/censusbin/census/cen.pl?year=890.

¹³² Fredrickson, Black Image 246-47.

¹³³ Hannah Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1973) 174.

notion might at first seem to be a slightly specious argument. After all Du Bois's entire terminology seems borrowed from the governing discursive schemes of the day. Race appears to be a question of "language," "blood," even of specific "genius;" Du Bois marshals the entire rhetoric of late nineteenth century racial discourse in service of a conception of race that seemingly leaves us no further than when we began. But in following this either/or choice we quickly find that Du Bois's text can in fact offer us either option —a biological or a cultural determination of race — and sometimes in remarkably close proximity to each other.¹³⁴ That tensions and slippages arise in Du Bois's text between a conception of race anchored in the biological and one firmly situated on the semantic field of the socio-historical is altogether clear. Yet the question remains: is this all there is to the position Du Bois elaborates, namely, an overly confused notion of racial difference that fails to rigorously propose a consistent definition. Does the conception of race Du Bois outlines falter on the unresolved tensions that his texts appear unable to surmount? Whatever answer one chooses to pursue, proceeding without due attentiveness to the complexity of the claims registered in a text such as "The Conservation of Races," ignores what may be construed as Du Bois's initial cautionary note regarding race:

¹³⁴ Du Bois, "Conservation," 818.

Although the wonderful developments of human history teach that the grosser physical differences of color, hair and bone go but a short way toward explaining the different roles which groups of men have played in Human Progress, yet there are differences — subtle, delicate and elusive, though they may be — which have silently but definitely separated men into groups. While these subtle forces have generally followed the natural cleavages of common blood, descent and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and ignored these. At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races, which, while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the Historian and Sociologist.¹³⁵

Students of Du Bois are undoubtedly familiar with this passage.

Outside of the well-known opening section of *The Souls of Black Folk*, there might not be a more recognizably Du Boisian paragraph than this one. It appears to articulate the two competing conceptions of race seemingly at the center of Du Bois's essay. The first, a definition that ensconces race in the framework of scientific discourse thereby relegating race to a species of biological determinism and making of the Negro an epiphenomenon of biological destiny. The second conception seemingly operative in Du Bois text locates race within the parameter of a socio-historical determination of racial difference. Both of these ideas of race present themselves in this paragraph and provide the terms through which a critical reading of Du Bois's notion of race must navigate. Most critics, whether sympathetic or otherwise,

¹³⁵ Du Bois, "Conservation," 816-17.

have generally construed the distinction between these two conceptions of race as an opposition.¹³⁶ Either one of the definitions must be dismissed as unrepresentative of the true scope of Du Bois idea of race, or the apparent contradiction implied by their dual presence minimized by emphasizing the presence of one at the expense of the other. That within these pages the number of races vary depending on whether Du Bois is relying on the scientific (2) or socio-historical (8) account would seem to reinforce the interpretive strategy that attempts to resolve this problem by adjudicating between these two seemingly 'rival' accounts of race.¹³⁷ But Du Bois's text appears to offer a third formulation, one that may provide another way of negotiating the specifically Du Boisian paradox of race:

¹³⁶ See amongst others, Peter Coviello, "Intimacy and Affliction: Du Bois, Race, and Psychoanalysis," *Modern Language Quarterly* 64.1 (2003): 1-32, Gooding-Williams, "Outlaw, Appiah, and Du Bois's 'the Conservation of Races'," 39-56, Tommy Lott, "Du Bois and Locke on the Scientific Study of the Negro," *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 27.3 (2000): 135-52, Lott, "Du Bois's Anthropological Notion of Race," 59-83, Miles, "'One Far Off Divine Event': 'Race' and a Future History in Du Bois," 19-31, Outlaw, "Conserve Races?," 15-37, Cynthia D. Schrager, "Both Sides of the Veil: Race, Science, and Mysticism in W.E.B. Du Bois," *American Quarterly* 48.4 (1996): 551-86.

¹³⁷ Referencing the scientific definition Du Bois maintains that "[t]he final word of science, so far, is that we have at least two, perhaps three, great families of human beings — the whites and Negroes, possibly the yellow race." A page later, once he turns to history, the number is augmented by five: "We find upon the world's stage today eight distinctly different races, in the sense in which History tells us the word must be used. They are, the Slavs of eastern Europe, the Teutons of middle Europe, the English of Great Britain and America, the Romance nations of Southern and Western Europe, the Negroes of Africa and America, the Semitic people of Western Asia and Northern Africa, the Hindoos of Central Asia and the Mongolian of Eastern Asia." Du Bois, "Conservation," 816, 17-18.

If this be true, then the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races...¹³⁸

Found at the beginning of the paragraph that succeeds the previous citation, Du Bois here introduces an equivalence in which a peculiar notion of race seems operative: *individuals are to nations as groups are to races*.

The peculiarity of the citation stems less from the seeming identification of nations and races. This commonplace already fueled much of the political rhetoric of European and American imperial expansionism during the nineties and through the turn of the century.¹³⁹ Du Bois's formulation would appear then to rehearse the accepted truisms of contemporary political rhetoric and race thinking albeit in service of a slightly different objective, namely, the rehabilitation of the American Negro. But reading Du Bois's claim in such a narrowly circumscribed a manner denies the actual idea of race at the heart of his formulation. The specificity of Du Bois's proposition is clarified if compared to another late nineteenth century theorist of the dialectic of race and nation Ernest Renan. Renan's classic statement on the matter "What is a Nation?" delivered some fifteen years before Du Bois's own effort to reinscribe the relationship

¹³⁸ Du Bois, "Conservation," 817.

¹³⁹ Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism 185-221.

between race and nation,¹⁴⁰ argues for the distinctiveness of the nation and of its centrality as the site for the actualization of the ‘properly’ modern political relation:

At the time of the French Revolution, it was commonly believed that the institutions proper to small, independent cities, such as Sparta and Rome, might be applied to our large nations, which number some thirty or forty million souls. Nowadays, a far graver mistake is made: race is confused with nation and a sovereignty analogous to that of really existing peoples is attributed to ethnographic or, rather linguistic groups.¹⁴¹

The nation that Renan defines above as the locus of an authentic, “really existing peoples,” is also the site from which one recognizes the operation of true sovereignty; in other words sovereignty derived from the facticity of *this* people. Following a clear and well worn path, Renan offers a recognizable trajectory by which sovereignty derives from a source — in this case the “people” — from which authority, the authority of the political, is itself authorized. Why then, if the heart of the argument seems in such proper order, is it that the misapplication of institutional-political models (i.e., Sparta, Rome) constitutes a far less serious matter than the apparently egregious confusion of race with nation? What sort of dissimulation does race initiate and on

¹⁴⁰ Renan delivered his famous speech at the Sorbonne on March 11th, 1882 and Du Bois delivered his in May 1897, a little over fifteen years later.

¹⁴¹ Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?," trans. Martin Thom, Nation and Narration, ed. Homi Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990) 8.

whose behalf (viz., who are its *false* “people”?) And what is the exact nature of its threat to sovereignty? In other words, what distinguishes race from nation and how is that distinction operative?

The question is not simply one of definition. As conceived by Renan, the emergence of the nation requires that its constituent peoples engage in an active forgetting through which the national bond is thereby formed.¹⁴² The “principle of nationality” initiated by, according to Renan, the invading Germanic tribes, enacts both this erasing of peoples and the concomitant forming of people(s)-as-nation. Neither the Greek nor Phoenician city-state, neither the Assyrian nor Persian Empire, the German clan, nor even Rome managed to fuse their diversity into a singular national unit. For Renan nations constitutes themselves by transmuting pre-existing identifications into ‘historic’ attachments thereby forging a unified national identity through the fusion of their various populations.¹⁴³ The relation that defines the political and from which the sovereignty ascribed to the

¹⁴² Renan, "What Is a Nation?," 11.

¹⁴³ Renan relates the specific failures of the Hapsburg monarchy to its inability to enact this dialectic of fusion and forgetting: “Far from managing to fuse the diverse [ethnic] elements to be found in its domains, the House of Hapsburg has kept them distinct and often opposed the one to the other. ...If you take a city such as Salonika, or Smyrna, you will find their five or six communities each of which has its own memories and which have almost nothing in common. Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.” Renan, "What Is a Nation?," 11.

“people” issues is this fusion, this transformation of many into one.¹⁴⁴

But what in this operation is being forgotten? What must memory leave behind? In his comparison of the relative success of the nationality principle in France as compared to the Hapsburg Empire Renan suggests an answer:

No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century.¹⁴⁵

Lost to the beyond of memory are those identifications that defined individuals and peoples before their attachment to the nation and erased from its place in lived memory is the violence that inaugurates the space of the political itself:

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Renan couldn't be clearer when he writes that the “defining feature” of those states that can be genuinely termed nations is that they have achieved “the fusion of their component populations.” Renan, “What Is a Nation?,” 10.

¹⁴⁵ Renan, “What Is a Nation?,” 11.

¹⁴⁶ Renan, “What Is a Nation?,” 11.

The violence at issue here is not simply the violence of inauguration but is the violence of race, *racial violence*. Race constitutes itself in Renan's contention as the site of inauguration but one that doesn't itself accede to a place within the configuration of the political. In other words, race is precisely what must be superseded if a nation is to be formed as such. If the political is the space of fusion, of a supervening unity, in essence, of the union of the subject, then race in its proposition of violent difference, of racial violence, remains inassimilable to the project that defines the national principle.

If we follow the logic of Renan's argument we come to recognize why race constitutes such a disturbing formative component of the national project. In the dialectic of forgetting and remembering that facilitates the transformation of preexisting relations into national attachments, the fiction is the idea of nation itself. The actualization of what Renan terms the "nation" requires the eclipse of the violent inscription of group life he calls "race." To distinguish racial identification as the moment which founds the possibility of nation, and therefore the emergence of a site that one can identify with the political, is to derive the legitimacy of that site from a moment that exceeds it, that of racial violence itself. It's this founding paradox that threatens the phantasm of national becoming. Not that that particular brand of forgetting proper to the project of nation — that specific

national illusion — ever truly risks being unveiled; it's rather the threat that the logic of national becoming will at some point impose itself. The very sovereignty that grounds the political space of the nation derives from an articulation at once external and internal to it, in fact, simultaneously in both places and in neither. The place of racial violence, that site from which the nation derives its being is not, as Renan reminds us, the locus of “really existing peoples;” yet conversely, the space of truly existing peoples (i.e., the nation), cannot actualize itself as such. *Pace* Renan, sovereignty it seems can only be “analogous,” the ever consequential masquerade of analogy. We appear, at the end, to find ourselves unraveling Renan's paradox by which race and nation face each other as the apparition the other denies.

If Renan's conception of the relation between nation and race favors the privileging of nation at the expense of race and construes nation as the site of legitimate political relation, Du Bois's confers on race a somewhat different status. Let's return to the Du Boisian passage with which we began:

If this be true, then the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races...

With Du Bois, in marked similarity to Renan, there is also a question of the “really” existent—especially as it applies to the agent that constitutes the motor of history. In other words there is an indication that the discourse proffered by Du Bois, inasmuch as it evinces, even in a understated fashion, a concern with “true” and “false” agents/peoples, i.e., with the locus of true agency, it displays a subtle affiliation with the discursive framework Renan produces. But if we follow the logic of Du Bois’s formulation to its conclusion we find ourselves at a somewhat different point of arrival than Renan. For Du Bois, the nation does not constitute the locus of the relation one can call political. If the analogies at work in the above passage liken individual to nation and group to race then nation cannot constitute the form of the political configuration. Du Bois’s words seem an echo of an earlier analogy itself a consideration of the similarity between individual and nation:

What is the use of working for a law-governed civil constitution among individual men, i.e., of planning a commonwealth? The same unsociability which forced men to do so gives rise in turn to a situation whereby each commonwealth, in its external relations (i.e., as a state in relation to other states), is in a position of unrestricted freedom. *Each must accordingly expect from any other precisely the same evils which formerly oppressed*

*individual men and forced them into a law-governed civil state.*¹⁴⁷ (Italics added)

Drawn from the seventh proposition of Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," the analogy relies on a comparison in which individual states are likened to human beings. Nations according to Kant, occupy the same status as individuals prior to their entrance into civil union, they live in a "lawless state of savagery."¹⁴⁸ The analogy extends beyond being a simple illustration, for Kant the "state of savagery" in which states find themselves before the advent of a federation of nations prevents the full development of human capacities. As with the individual human being for whom to live outside the civil order, outside the political relation, is to "hold up the development of all [one's] natural capacities," likewise the state that remains within the realm of "barbarous freedom" also hinders the full and complete development of human capacities.¹⁴⁹ For inasmuch as the fulfillment of human freedom — and thus one's proper identity as a human being — requires the establishment of the civil bond, of

¹⁴⁷ Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose (1784)," trans. H. B. Nisbet, Kant: Political Writings, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 47.

¹⁴⁸ Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose (1784)," 47.

¹⁴⁹ Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose (1784)," 49.

the political relation, to live outside of such relation is to withdraw from that which defines oneself as a human being.¹⁵⁰

Following the outlines of Kant's analogy is to say that nations, prior to their membership in the "federation of peoples" are like individuals before their entry into civil union; namely, they live outside the formative conditions of the political relation. Du Bois and Kant therefore situate both the individual and the nation along the same axis, as they each place both terms outside the (self-)defining conditions of the political relation. Yet with this difference: under Du Bois race has now become part of this conceptual mix. For if individuals and nations are outside the constitutive relation of the political bond, then the other pairing in Du Bois's equivalence, i.e., groups and races, may well have a claim to more than simple membership within it. By placing race amid this discursive context and having it assume other than its prescribed role, Du Bois places pressure on the conception of race itself and, as I will suggest, on the parameters of our understanding of the political as well. Understood

¹⁵⁰ Summarizing the importance Kant ascribes to our common relation through the law Charles Taylor remarks that: "If to be free is to follow the moral law, and to act morally is to see that the maxim of my action could be willed universally, then freedom requires that I understand myself as a human among humans. I have to understand myself as standing under a law that applies to myself as well to others, one that is not addressed to me alone, but to a rational subject as such." Charles Taylor, "Kant's Theory of Freedom," Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 326, see also 28-30. Refracted through the formalism of the law, the common bond Kant imputes to the human being in its capacity as moral subject and as a constituent feature of the subject's very humanity finds its corollary in the possibility — because the result of the purposiveness of nature— of the ideal political constitution.

along these lines race no longer conforms to its previous incarnation as a referent for distinctions drawn from differences of pigment or acculturation. Having revalorized the dialectic of race and nation by placing race — granted, in a tentative and altogether insecure fashion — at the site of what nation had previously claimed for itself (viz., the political), Du Bois locates race on quite different terrain. Rather than the index of cultural or biological particularity race is presented on other terms.

This conception of race might initially appear utterly alien not only to our conception of Du Bois but to the actual concerns of Du Bois's text. After all doesn't the Du Bois with which we are familiar oscillate between two very different yet clearly, if inconsistently, defined notions of race? And aren't there numerous instances, especially in a text such as "Conservation," in which the conflict that arises occurs between a scientific and a sociohistorical conception of racial difference? A passage such as the following may well be a citation on which the skeptical might rely:

Certainly we must acknowledge that physical differences play a great part, and that, with wide exceptions and qualifications, these eight great races of to-day follow the cleavage of physical race distinctions... But while race differences have followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences — the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual,

psychical, differences — undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them.¹⁵¹

Here we have all the elements generally assumed to define Du Bois's conception of race; his recognition of the "great part" played by phenotypic difference, accompanied by his evident unwillingness to reduce the issue to simple physio-biological determinations. And, in the final analysis, Du Bois is either conceived as having failed to surmount the biological underpinnings inscribed in his notion of race, or, it is concluded, that the true issue at hand is Du Bois's introduction of a cultural definition of race. Yet, as is often the case with Du Bois's text, it seemingly provides an alternative formulation. In this instance that alternative means a reading that doesn't reduce the semantic economy of "Conservation" to an entrenched binary opposition:

The whole process which has brought about these race differentiations has been a growth, and the great characteristic of this growth has been the differentiation of spiritual and mental differences between great races of mankind and the integration of physical differences.¹⁵²

In this passage, which occurs at the conclusion of the previous citation, we find that Du Bois's terms are not static. Predicated on the

¹⁵¹ Du Bois, "Conservation," 818.

¹⁵² Du Bois, "Conservation," 818-19.

growing differentiation of “spiritual and mental differences” *and* the convergence of “physical differences,” Du Bois’s conception of race requires the eclipsing of physical differences for the emergence of racial difference itself. Whether one finds Du Bois claim regarding the dual criterion by which the emergence of race is defined consistent with the entire rhetoric of “Conservation,” there remains nonetheless a level at which the full reduction of race to the biological is resisted. But “Conservation” takes us further afield:

The age of nomadic tribes of closely related individuals represents the maximum of physical differences. They were practically vast families, and there were as many groups as families. As the families came together to form cities the physical differences lessened, purity of blood was replaced by the requirement of domicile, and all who lived within the city bounds became gradually to be regarded as members of the group, *i.e.*, there was a slight and slow breaking down of physical barriers. This, however, was accompanied by an increase of the spiritual and social differences between cities. This city became husbandmen, this, merchants, another warriors, and so on. The *ideals of life* for which the different cities struggled were different. When at last cities began to coalesce into nations there was another breaking down of barriers which separated groups of men. The larger and broader differences of color, hair and physical proportions were not by any means ignored, but myriads of minor differences disappeared, and the sociological and historical races of men began to approximate the present division of races as indicated by physical researches.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Du Bois, "Conservation," 819.

Conceiving of race within the terms specified above, Du Bois removes it from the reductive categorization that would claim it for either biology or history. In his narrative, individuals initially find themselves in loose aggregations defined either through familial or group affiliation. These aggregations, distinguished principally by their tribal or familial combinations, constitute “the maximum of physical differences,” and yet we are not here speaking of race. Rather than race these ‘pre-racial’ individuals inhabit what is best defined as a state of nature. Aligning less with the radical atomism of Hobbes than with Kant and Rousseau, Du Bois structures his illustration as a representation of the transition from a state of nature to a realm of political relation. “Conservation” maps the journey undertaken by individuals circumscribed by profound cleavages whose movement away from the “age of nomadic tribes” — and the emphatic physical differences that define it — concludes with a markedly different type of relation. It’s not simply that physical differences cease to assume importance, but rather that the transition from a state of nature to a form of association *requires* the eclipse of these differences. In other words “purity of blood” *must be* “replaced by the requirement of domicile.” What characterizes Du Bois’s narrative is this shift from blood to domicile, from family to city, from nature to something he calls ‘race.’ In formulating this alternative narrative of de-

differentiation Du Bois conceives of race in substantially different terms by identifying the contours of race with the space of the political.

It's from the site of this now resituated conception of race that the question of nation and national identity is refracted. Having proposed the constitutive relationship of race and the political, Du Bois reveals the conditioning question of African American identity, i.e., "What, after all, am I? Am I American or am I a Negro?" to be determined by the logic of difference identified with his conception of race.¹⁵⁴ African Americans are Americans, he writes,

not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion. Farther than that, our Americanism does not go. At that point, we are Negroes, members of a vast historic race that from the very dawn of creation has slept, but half awakening in the dark forests of its African fatherland. We are the first fruits of this new nation, the harbinger of that black to-morrow which is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic to-day. We are that people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy. As such, it is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals...¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Du Bois, "Conservation," 821.

¹⁵⁵ Du Bois, "Conservation," 822.

Not only the repository of America's 'better self,' Du Bois also seemingly claims for the Negro those characteristics and achievements that most clearly articulate the American sensibility. And in this he appears to argue that it is through the addition of the Negro's African 'essence' that a properly American identity is forged. Two identificatory economies therefore register in Du Bois's passage. The first, structured around the pillars of American civil society, defines the African American in relation to her inscribed 'Americanness.' This facet of African American identity coalesces around the particular elements that comprise the recognizable features of the national character (i.e., citizenship, religion, language, political ideals, etc.). The second economy articulates the African component of African American identity by situating the Negro at the site and as the *possibility* of its own history. Having just awoken, assuming its status as the "first fruits of this new nation," the "harbinger" of a future day, one which Du Bois notes is "yet destined," the Negro enacts its history as a continuous moment of arrival — an ever repeated future present. But, whereas it might appear so, the relationship between these two economies of identification is not one of addition. Structured by the differences that distinguish the American from the Negro — or, more accurately, the Negro's Africanness from her Americanness, we nonetheless cannot reduce Du Bois's formulation to this simple binary

meaning. Even though it appears that the Negro, in *adding* her African ‘essence’ to the American self “soften[s] the whiteness of the Teutonic to-day” and its specific manifestation in America’s “mad money-getting plutocracy,” Du Bois’s Negro is not the African. And, the conjoining that engenders the African American involves neither the ‘African’ nor the ‘American.’ Rather than identity by addition “Conservation” proposes a quite different alternative. For Du Bois, it is “[a]t that point” when the Negro ceases to be American, that is, at that threshold beyond which the Negro’s “Americanism does not go,” that the Negro articulates that which is essentially American — its music, its stories, its darkness, its light. Yet Du Bois proceeds even further, arguing that it is inasmuch as the Negro *is* the incarnation of these properly *American* ideals that he or she can be said to be a *Negro*. If we follow “Conservation,” we find ourselves in an interminable chiasmic loop in which the identity of African and American unfolds as the continued inversion of place, and the consequent incompleteness of identity as identity itself. Race, understood in Du Boisian terms, constitutes itself as nothing other than the site of this incompleteness.

CHAPTER 4

Du Bois's Natural History, or the Historiography of Mere Existence

In a letter written after having read the manuscript of what would become *Dusk of Dawn*, W.E.B. Du Bois's 1940 autobiography, Ira Reid, the well-known sociologist and colleague of Du Bois's at Atlanta University, wrote what has turned out to be a signal insight: "It seems to me that the history of the Negro in the United States, apart from the mass aspect of slavery, is largely a matter of biography."¹⁵⁶ Reid's idea is one of those claims pregnant with an insight whose force can truly only be gauged retrospectively. Reid, of course, meant that the history of the African in the "New" World was a history of individuals who, as he termed it, "dared to do." In other words, individuals whose very actions define and produce what has come to be understood as African American history, a pageant of triumphant figures whose biography express and intersect with the movement of the African in the "New" World. His reference here is to Douglass, Washington, Dunbar, etc., individuals whose opinions and actions have, in his estimation, given shape to the African in America. In formulating the matter within these terms Reid does not stray from the generally accepted pattern by

¹⁵⁶ Ira Reid, Letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, February 15, 1940, W.E.B. Du Bois, The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois, Selections 1934-1944, vol. II (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976).

which historical significance is ascribed. In defining the historical event along these lines of significance Reid simply reasserts an inherited truism: great history is the preserve of great men.¹⁵⁷ On this view “biography” denotes nothing other than the sum total of a life and has no appended significance other than as the site and calculus of individual human action. Where Reid does offer the suggestion of something different is in his intimation regarding the inscription of the African in history and his privileging of the (auto)biographical as the modality through which this gesture occurs. The convergence of history and biography that he points to, however tangentially, extends well beyond the commonplace claims he seems to reserve for it. Biography — the space of the autobiographical — seemingly asserts its privilege as the site through which the particular historicity of African American subjectivity lies revealed. Implicit in his claim is the proposition that African American history, with its unique convergence of history and biography distinguishes itself as somehow different — or with a difference worthy of mention in any case. Reid’s formulation

¹⁵⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has reminded us of the importance of this particular understanding of historical development among scholars of African American history: “Perhaps the one unshakable assumption of historians of Afro Americans has been the belief that great black men and women have made great black history.” The truly gendered nature of this particular conception of historical movement, an emphasis that Gates seemingly elides in his observation, is not coincidental and remains an important issue in the theorization of African American history and literature. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Frederick Douglass and the Language of the Self,” Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 115. For a critical interrogation of the ‘representativeness’ accorded black male/heterosexual intellectuals see Hazel V. Carby, Race Men, W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998).

carries the weight of more than simply academic interest. The purported absence of history, along with that of literacy, culture and science, initially framed the reception of the African in the “Old World.” It defined her at worst as nothing other than a far cleverer version of the ape and at best as a faint shadow of the human. The slave narratives were intended in part as a challenge to this definition of the African. But the question here is less whether reading African American history through the (auto)biographical changes the particular significance we ascribe to the trajectory of that history or the events within it. Rather than this particular question, Reid might be pushing us to pose an altogether different one: Can the specific conception of (auto)biography that emerges in African American culture, and of which the slave narratives provide the basic contour, produce what we have come to understand as history, produce something akin to the historical? Another way of asking this question: does the convergence of the African American autobiographical and/as the historical produce a different History, require a different historiography?

Nowhere is the pertinence of these questions more evident than in the early work of W.E.B. Du Bois, for whom a distinctly African American historiography seemed to emerge from the odd convergence of the historical and the autobiographical. To interpret history through

the biography of “world-historical individuals,” — to borrow a phrase from Hegel (although being put to far more pedestrian usage) — is itself nothing new, Hegel’s project being simply the most elaborate example of the gesture. Du Bois’s idiosyncrasy resides elsewhere and is perhaps best captured by the subtitle he chose to give his 1940 work: *An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*. Read literally the subtitle makes very little if any sense; how precisely does a concept lend itself to an autobiographical (as opposed to genealogical, analytical, etc.) demarcation? As *Dusk of Dawn* is Du Bois’s own autobiography are we to imply that the “race concept” of the subtitle is subtended by the “racial” self of one W.E.B. Du Bois? And if so what does it mean to say that a “concept” rests on the possibility of a “self”? As these questions suggests Du Bois’s various (auto)biographies produce a historiographical sensibility that challenges the reduction of experience to a species of evidence, the gesture that conditions the practice of historiography, and contests the empiricism on which this gesture is founded.¹⁵⁸ Du Bois’s (auto)biographies are clearly something more than the articulation of historical events framed by the biography of the individual life, they are in a strange way — and as we shall see — the site of the impossible.

¹⁵⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 97-113.

I.

Philippe Lejeune in his "The Autobiographical Pact," one of the central reference points for contemporary theories of autobiography, proceeds to offer the following definition of autobiography:

Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.¹⁵⁹

Lejeune's essay is an attempt to arrive at a clearer definition of the form and to circumscribe in a more effective manner, what is in most estimations, a very problematic genre. The preceding citation assembles four different component parts in view of establishing the logic underpinning the coherence of the autobiographical narrative. According to Lejeune the categories to which these components belong can be listed as follows: (1) form of language, (2) subject treated, (3) situation of the author, and (4) position of the narrator.¹⁶⁰ This will be the first of several offerings Lejeune will propose over the span of his essay, each providing an ever more refined definition of the

¹⁵⁹ Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," trans. Katherine Leary, On Autobiography (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 4.

¹⁶⁰ Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 4.

parameters, both linguistic and literary, governing the autobiographical text. Now, for a text to be considered in any sense autobiographical it must meet these four criteria, even if within the confines of these four conditions there remains a certain degree of latitude. But, and in this Lejeune is uncompromising, there are two criteria without which we cannot speak of autobiography at all. These two conditions are, as far as Lejeune is concerned, “a question of all or nothing,” they are the two elements that mark the specificity of autobiography and distinguish it from other literary offerings. Autobiography requires, in Lejeune’s conception of it, the *unity of the author and narrator* as well as the *unity of the narrator and the principal character*; in other words, the coherence of the autobiographical narrative requires as its center the stability of identity. In Lejeune’s notion of autobiography, author, narrator and protagonist must be identical, thereby anchoring the coherence of the genre in the unity of these three component parts. Of course securing autobiography within this unity raises no shortage of difficulties, problems of which Lejeune is keenly aware:

- How can the identity of the narrator and the protagonist be expressed in the text? (*I, You, He*)
- In the narrative written “in the first person,” how is the identity of the author and the protagonist-narrator shown? (*I, the Undersigned*)...

—Is there not confusion, in most of the arguments concerning autobiography, between the notion of *identity* and that of *resemblance*? (*Exact Copy*)...¹⁶¹

In each instance mentioned by Lejeune, whether in relation to the circumscription of the narrator, the distinction and significance ascribed to ‘grammatical persons’ within the text, or the establishment and regulation of an identity shielded from mimesis, the basic problem of identity presents itself insistently. The stability Lejeune requires of identity appears remarkably difficult to obtain; and yet, it is precisely this stability that establishes the coherence of the autobiographical. The question to be asked then is, from whence does this instability arise?

Lejeune’s argument finds itself confronting an obstacle that stems in part from the problematic relation between ‘grammatical person’ and identity found in the linguistic analysis to which he’s so clearly indebted. Émile Benveniste, the linguist from whom Lejeune draws most heavily, problematizes the identification of grammatical person and individual it would seem Lejeune requires for organizing his conception of autobiography. The complex relation between ‘individual,’ ‘subject,’ ‘grammatical person,’ and the ‘I’ registers in several areas of Benveniste’s analysis. The problematic relation

¹⁶¹ Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 5.

between these terms is evident from the outset even in Benveniste's analysis of the linguistic parameters of the verbal person:

In the three relationships it institutes, it sums up the ensemble of the positions that determine a verbal form provided with a mark of person, and it is valid for the verb of any language whatsoever. There are always, then, three persons and there are only three. However, the summary and non-linguistic nature of a category thus established must be proclaimed. By aligning on a single level and in an unchanging order 'persons' defined by their succession and related to those beings which are 'I,' 'you,' and 'he,' we only transpose into a pseudolinguistic theory differences which are lexical in nature. These denominations do not indicate to us the necessity of the category or the content that it implies or the relationships which link the different persons.¹⁶²

Although in the division between first, second, and third person we have the entire range of possibilities in which 'person' may be inscribed in a verbal form — and this regardless of language — Benveniste also clearly delineates a possible objection that remains present. Namely, that the distinction under review is of a lexical rather than a grammatical order and that the relationship of grammatical person to verb remains underdetermined. Therefore three questions arise: (i) is the grammatical person a necessary category, (ii) who or what does the category refer to, (iii) what is their relation to each other. At issue here is not simply the distinction between the lexical and the

¹⁶² Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971) 195-96.

grammatical, whether the pronominal differences outlined above belong to one order or another. The possible introduction of a “pseudolinguistic theory” arises from the threat of an insufficiently linguistic explanatory framework, from an insufficiently guarded distinction between the linguistic and the phenomenal. Even as Benveniste outlines — after having registered his initial caution — how the verbal person is constitutive of the structure of the verb as such, the question of the differentiation of these ‘persons’ remains an issue: “A linguistic theory of verbal person can be constituted only on the basis of the opposition that differentiate persons; and it will be summed up in its entirety in the structure of these oppositions.”¹⁶³ The differentiations Benveniste writes of here proceeds from the categorization propounded by Arab grammarians in which, as Benveniste reminds us, “the first person *al-mutakallimu*” is

‘the one who speaks’; the second, *al-muhatabu* ‘the one who is addressed’; but the third is *al-ya’ibu* ‘the one who is absent.’ A precise notion of the relationships among persons is implied by these denominations; precise especially in that it reveals the disparity between the first and second person and the third. Contrary to what our terminology would make us believe, they are not homogeneous.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 197.

¹⁶⁴ Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 197.

According to Benveniste there exists a greater proximity between the first and second person than between these two and the third, with their respective referential structures seemingly accounting for this difference. Both the first and second person either state or imply the 'I'; in the first person the 'I' constitutes the point of utterance, and in addition accounts for itself as such.¹⁶⁵ The second person also involves positing the 'I' inasmuch as the structure of the I-you dyad requires its possible reversibility. Once we arrive at the third person the structure changes dramatically. In this final instance we are no longer dealing with the 'I,' implied or otherwise. Situated outside of the particular grammatical economy that governs the I-you relationship, the third person constitutes "an exception to the relationship by which 'I' and 'you' are specified."¹⁶⁶ The precise contours of this exception relates to the very question of the 'person':

The form that is called the third person really does contain an indication of a statement about someone or something but not related to a specific 'person.' The variable and properly 'personal' element of these denominations is here lacking. It is indeed the 'absent' of the Arab grammarians. It only presents the invariable inherent in every conjugation. The consequence must be formulated clearly; the 'third person' is not a 'person'; it is really the verbal form whose function is to express the non-person. This definition accounts for the absence of any pronoun in the

¹⁶⁵ "I' designates the one who speaks and at the same time implies an utterance about I'; in saying I,' I cannot *not* be speaking of myself." Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 197.

¹⁶⁶ Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 197.

third person — a fundamental fact that it suffices to notice — and the very peculiar situation of the third person of the verb in most languages...¹⁶⁷

Whereas the first two persons correlated to the verbal from *do* refer (or articulate) the site of a (verbal) person, the third does not. The linguistic difference that distinguishes the first and second person from the third speaks to the peculiar status of the third person. It represents neither the loss nor lack of ‘person,’ nor is it an instance of ‘depersonalization,’ rather the third person articulates, *gives structure to*, an absence.¹⁶⁸ ‘Absence’ designates not only the distinction between the third and the first two persons, but also the complexity of person when referenced linguistically. This is never clearer than when Benveniste summarizes the conception of the plural as it operates in reference to the ‘I’:

It is clear, in effect, that the oneness and the subjectivity inherent in ‘I’ contradict the possibility of a pluralization. If there cannot be several ‘I’s’ conceived by an actual ‘I’ who is speaking, it is because ‘we’ is not a multiplication of identical objects but a junction between ‘I’ and the ‘non-I,’ no matter what the content of this ‘non-I’ may be.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 197-98.

¹⁶⁸ Benveniste reiterates these claims regarding the third person when he remarks: “there is no apheresis of the person; it is exactly the non-person, which possesses as its sign the absence of that which specifically qualifies the ‘I’ and the ‘you.’ Because it does not imply any person, it can take any subject whatsoever or no subject, and this subject, expressed or not, is never posited as a ‘person.’” Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 200.

¹⁶⁹ Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 202.

Neither multiplication nor increase by some other form of addition, pluralization is here construed as the articulation of a space conditioned by the convergence of the 'I' and the 'non-I' — even if it remains a space, as Benveniste clarifies, in which the 'I' holds preeminence. This conception of the plural requires a proliferation of new terms (e.g., the *strict person* which designates the singular and the *amplified person* that now comes to name the plural), and a new distinction that imposes linguistic order (i.e., the *correlation of personality* which situates the I-you dyad in relation to the non-person and the *correlation of subjectivity* which situates the first two person in relation to each other). Yet this organizational code still cannot completely eliminate the strange slippage between the phenomenal and the linguistic that occurs at odd moments in Benveniste's text. This would be of scarcely any interest if not for Benveniste's attempt to maintain a clear distinction between the phenomenal and the linguistic, to protect the linguistic's self-sufficiency as it were:

I cannot be defined except in terms of a 'locution,' not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies 'the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*.' This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness. If I perceive two successive instances of discourse containing *I*, uttered in the same voice, nothing guarantees to me that one of them is not a reported discourse, a quotation in

which *I* could be imputed to another. It is thus necessary to stress the point; *I* can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone.¹⁷⁰

From this passage it would appear that 'I' has a purely and exclusively linguistic existence, but Benveniste continues:

It has no value except in the instance in which it is produced. But in the same way it is also an instance of form that *I* must be taken; the form of *I* has no linguistic existence except in the act of speaking in which it is uttered. There is thus a combined double instance in this process: the instance of *I* as referent and the instance of discourse containing *I* as referee. The definition can be stated precisely as: *I* as 'the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance of *I*.'¹⁷¹

Distinguished from other pronominal forms by its pure(ly) linguistic existence, the *I* would appear to be the paradigmatic example of the clear distinction between the phenomenal and the linguistic. And yet the reintroduction of reference by Benveniste and its link, in this particular instance, to a notion of individuality counters the strict conceptual order Benveniste had been forging. How does one reconcile the unique instance of each *I* in discourse with the permanence of the individual? In other words, a conception of the individual presumes a level of continuity that Benveniste's claim regarding the function of the

¹⁷⁰ Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 218.

¹⁷¹ Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 218.

I precludes. Benveniste manages to escape the possible contradiction into which he's entered by noting the unique function of the personal pronoun within language *and* by specifying the relationship between the realm of language and that of subjectivity:

It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in *its* reality which is that of being. ... [.]
... The 'subjectivity' we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as 'subject.' It is defined not by the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself (this feeling, to the degree that it can be taken note of, is only a reflection) but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness. Now we hold that 'subjectivity,' whether it is place in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. 'Ego' is he who *says* 'ego.' That is where we see the foundation of 'subjectivity,' which is determined by the linguistic status of 'person.'¹⁷²

In dismissing affect as an indicator of the individual's sense of self Benveniste manages the complete formalization of the relation between language and subject. The performativity of the utterance marks Benveniste solution to the dilemma of subjectivity/identity, — “ 'Ego' is he who *says* 'ego.' ” This is not a solution that is truly available for Lejeune.

¹⁷² Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 224.

The reliance of the grammatical conception of person on its phenomenal correlate, a site of possible confusion Benveniste registers from the very outset of his study, is countered in his analysis by the need to maintain their separation, thereby securing the properly linguistic order of the analysis. This tension between the phenomenal and the linguistic haunts not only Benveniste's linguistic analysis but Lejeune's literary one as well.

Lejeune's analysis of autobiography relies heavily on Benveniste's understanding of the operation of pronominal forms within language. But as we've seen Benveniste's argument renders any clear demarcation of the 'person,' grammatical or otherwise, quite problematic. Whether grounded in a distinction between the first two and the third person or the grammatical person and individual identity, Benveniste's formulations retain the form of an ill-fitting resolution if the objective is a recognizable notion of identity. Lejeune's attempt to dissociate the category of grammatical person from that of identity is evidence of his recognition of this difficulty. For Benveniste, these two categories cannot be distinguished with the certainty Lejeune requires; yet, it is nonetheless important that Lejeune achieve this certainty. Failing to unsettle the consequences arising from, for example, the proximity of the first two persons with the third — an intimacy of grammatical persons that Benveniste's formulations imply

even though Benveniste himself claims that the third person specifies a different linguistic function — could well undermine the unity of identity Lejeune presumes.¹⁷³

Lejeune appears to resolve his difficulty by shifting the conceptual center he inherits from Benveniste, moving in essence from the linguistic determinant of the person to its phenomenological parameters. The unity that could not be located within the linguistic modality of analysis is now anchored in the phenomenological person/identity of the ‘I.’ With this shift, the substitution of pronominal forms (*viz. I ↔ you ↔ he/she*), which under Benveniste — precisely because of the specific function identified with the third person — would have been impossible, can now occur:

¹⁷³ “The very terms we are using here, *I* and *you*, are not taken as figures but as linguistic forms indicating ‘person.’ It is a remarkable fact — but who would notice it, since it is so familiar? — that the ‘personal pronouns are never missing from among the signs of a language, no matter what its type, epoch, or region may be. A language without expression of person cannot be imagined.... [.] Now these pronouns are distinguished from all other designations a language articulates in *that they do not refer to a concept or to an individual.* [.] ...There is no concept ‘I’ that incorporates all the ‘I’s that are uttered at every moment in the mouth of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept ‘tree’ to which all the individual uses of *tree* refer. The ‘I,’ then, does not denominate a lexical entity. Could it then be said that *I* refers to a particular individual? If that were the case, a permanent contradiction would be admitted into language, and anarchy into its use. How could the same term refer indifferently to any individual whatsoever and still at the same time identify him in his individuality? We are in the presence of a class of words, the ‘personal pronouns,’ that escape the status of all other signs of language.” By qualifying the personal pronouns as demarcating neither object nor individual — namely their seeming referential ambivalence — it would seem that the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ appear to share that particular characteristic Benveniste identifies with the third person, i.e., a resistance to the logic governing grammatical persons. Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 225-26.

Indeed, by bringing up the problem of the author, autobiography brings to light phenomena that fiction leaves in doubt: in particular the fact that there can be identity of the narrator and the principal character in the case of narration “in the third person.” ... This procedure is consistent, to the letter, with the root meaning of the word “autobiography”: It is a biography, written by the person involved, but as a simple biography.¹⁷⁴

The possibility of autobiography in the third person indicates that we have left the strictures of Benveniste’s linguistic analysis, for in Benveniste’s typology of different planes of utterance the distinction between *je/tu* and the third person remain entrenched.¹⁷⁵ Lejeune, on the other hand, finds that all three pronouns can function within the autobiographical text — even if second and third person narration are rare instances within the genre. Underlying the reworking of

¹⁷⁴ Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” 6.

¹⁷⁵ In fact Benveniste illustrates the typology by recourse to the example of the different modes of pronominal function within autobiography and history: “The historical design of the utterance is recognized by the fact that it imposes a special delimitation upon the two verbal categories of tense and person taken together. We shall define historical narration as the mode of utterance that excludes every ‘autobiographical’ linguistic form. The historian will never say *je* or *tu* or *maintenant*, because he will never make use of the formal apparatus of discourse, which resides primarily in the relationship of the person *je:tu*. Hence we shall find only the forms of the ‘third person’ in a historical narrative strictly followed.” Benveniste identifies the third person with the historical narrative and *je/tu* with what he terms the “autobiographical linguistic form.” And, even though the third is to be found in discourse (i.e., the plane of utterance in which we find autobiography), it nonetheless fails to exhibit that specific linguistic feature proper to it. Again Benveniste: “Discourse freely employs all the personal forms of the verb, *je/tu* as well as *il*. Explicit or not, the relationship of person is everywhere present. Because of this, the ‘third person’ does not have the same value as it does in historical narration. In the latter, since the narrator does not intervene, the third person is not opposed to any other and it is truly an absence of person. But in discourse, a speaker opposed a non-person *il* to a *je/tu* person.” While for Lejeune there exists a relationship of equal value between all three pronominal forms as expressed within autobiography, for Benveniste, if there is equality within the genre, it comes at the cost of the specificity of the third person. Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics 206-07, 09.

Benveniste's analysis is the need, as Lejeune writes, "to keep us from confusing grammatical problems of person with the problems of identity."¹⁷⁶ Yet by undertaking this shift Lejeune accentuates the generic indistinctiveness to which autobiography is already prone.¹⁷⁷ This problem is twofold. On the one hand the specificity of the autobiographical form — if such specificity ever truly existed — is lost. While, on the other, Lejeune offers an inadequate account of the genesis of the third person within the genre. These two problems are connected inasmuch as the inadequate account of the delimitation of the third person within the autobiographical narrative makes it difficult to see what would formally/linguistically distinguish an autobiographical third person narrative from any other third person narrative.

From the range of issues that arise from his reorientation of Benveniste we can understand why the notion of the autobiographical contract assumes such importance for Lejeune, it becomes the only way in which the genre itself may delimited. But it also means that the transition from a linguistic determination to a phenomenological one is complete. Lejeune's definition of the autobiographical pact registers this final point of arrival:

¹⁷⁶ Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 7.

¹⁷⁷ Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 68.

Turning back from the first person to the proper name, I am therefore prompted to rectify what I wrote in *Autobiography in France*: 'How to distinguish autobiography from the autobiographical novel? We must admit that, if we remain at the level of analysis within the text, there is *no difference*. All the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative can be imitated by the novel, and often have been imitated.' This is accurate as long as we limit ourselves to the text minus the title page; as soon as we include the latter in the text, with the *name* of the author, we make use of a general textual criterion, the identity ('identicalness') of the name (author-narrator-protagonist). The autobiographical pact is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover.¹⁷⁸

Autobiography, whose indistinctiveness seemed almost a foregone conclusion, is redeemed as a genre by the contract. Identity acquires its defining status in relation to the autobiographical narrative and the signature emerges as that which anchors that identity: "The autobiographical pact comes in very diverse forms; but all of them demonstrate their intention to honor his/her signature. The reader might be able to quibble over resemblance, but never over identity ('identicalness'). We know all too well how much we each value his/her name."¹⁷⁹ We could analyse the various issues that render such a claim highly problematic; whether it be the narrow conception of the proper name with which Lejeune operates, the misguided understanding regarding the economy of the signature, or the difficulty

¹⁷⁸ Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 13-14.

¹⁷⁹ Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 14.

of anchoring identity within some form of intention.¹⁸⁰ But what I want to highlight here is the difficulty of delimiting the autobiographical and how it comes to hold the place for various modes of apprehension all because of the liminal space it occupies between the phenomenal and the linguistic.¹⁸¹ Autobiography assumes form within Lejeune's text, and within de Man's as well for that matter, as the site of a particular productivity. It exemplifies the theoretical contour through which the protocols attached to reading are established. Another way of putting this is to say that autobiography becomes the site where different modalities of reading, and by extension different assumptions regarding the foundations of knowledge — this will become clearer later — are adjudicated. Why does the narration of self acquire such an added burden? Why does it bring the question of knowledge to the fore? The answer I have been suggesting places itself at a significant distance from the entire paradox of 'self-knowledge' one might

¹⁸⁰ For a powerful analysis of all these issues see, Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, Limited Inc (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 1-23.

¹⁸¹ From this perspective de Man and Lejeune share a similar gesture towards the autobiographical. In both instances the genre emerges as the paradigmatic instance of the protocol of reading. For de Man this is not as simple as to say that autobiography articulates the logic attached to any strategy of reading. Rather, in de Man's case, autobiography rehearses the aporetic moment at the center of his protocol of rhetorical reading — what in another context Rodolphe Gasché has termed the "idiosyncratic singularity" that results from de Man's practice of rhetorical reading. In Lejeune's case autobiography illustrates in the clearest possible fashion the contract between reader and author/text that determines the appropriate protocol of reading. And further, it provides the basis for understanding the contracts that govern the protocol of reading in other genres. See Rodolphe Gasché, "In-Difference to Philosophy," The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul De Man (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 87. and Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 30.

presume to have been the site from which such questions are posed (i.e., can one truly 'know' oneself, let alone narrate that knowledge? How do I narrate the gap between the interests of my present memory and the actuality of the past event? etc.). Rather than inhabiting this frame of the question, perhaps it would be more productive to see autobiography as not pointing to a problem — be it self-knowledge or otherwise — but as itself structuring, through its very articulation, the problem as such. Autobiography appears privileged as the site in which the process of thinking through the conjunction of irreconcilable constituents takes place — if autobiography can submit to some form of definition this may well be it. And this precisely because the very possibility of the genre is predicated on the relation of the linguistic to the phenomenal, on the relation of these two apparently opposed registers, and of the negotiation of the latter in the former.

II.

How does one reconcile the linguistic structure of the autobiographical narrative with the phenomenological facticity seemingly subtending the individual life? In other words, how is the self inscribed within the narrative text? And why does this particular

linguistic/literary quandary have any bearing on the question of African American historiography? If we focus on solely the formal parameters of the problem, i.e., the relation of the literary to its extra-literary reference, we can recognize that this question, as far as the history of literary critical analysis is concerned, is far from new. Various schools of critical analysis have been defined by precisely how they chose to parse the questions of referentiality. By contrast, in the African American literary tradition the issue of the relation of self and text has not principally been adjudicated in relation to the question of reference. Even in those instances when referentiality arose as an issue of critical debate, at stake were less questions of 'literariness' than the politics of representation and the socio-political ramifications of specific aesthetic models.¹⁸² To understand how the terms that define autobiography come to condition, although in an altogether different way, texts of the African American literary tradition we must turn to that corpus considered to be at the origin of that tradition, the slave narrative.

At the center of debates regarding the relation of self to text, debates that within other traditions were defined in relation to referentiality or other primarily aesthetic criteria, there was within the tradition of Africans writing in the "New" World a different emphasis, a

¹⁸² See Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 993-1002. and his December 1926 review of Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* reprinted in Du Bois, "Books (Carl Van Vechten's 'Nigger Heaven') (1926)," 1216-18.

different avenue of reflection. It is not that the slave or freedwoman constructed a different vocabulary in which to conceptualize these issues. She in fact expressed her difference within an inherited vocabulary whose terminology resolved itself by reference to an accepted philosophical grammar. Rather, what compelled her particular alternative conceptual emphasis was the context in which she wrote. For the “New” World African, whose humanity as far as the European was concerned was an altogether open question, writing was an indication of her membership within the human community. At issue here was the African’s very humanity defined by her capacity to participate in civil society and of writing as the material illustration of her capacity for reasoned “civil thought.”¹⁸³ The slave narrative, the slave’s attempt to write herself into being, therefore became the manner by which the slave inscribed herself within, and reflected back, the terms of Western modernity.¹⁸⁴ But the issue of whether slaves could themselves authorize these narratives, of whether they had the capacity to truly relate claims of (self-)knowledge, never truly recedes into the background. On one level this problem registers through the framing narrative of the white guarantor whose presence is intended to certify that the narrative being propounded bears the

¹⁸³ Judy, (Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular 65.

¹⁸⁴ Judy, (Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular 88-89.

stamp of authenticity.¹⁸⁵ On a deeper level the question at hand pertains to the very possibility of what could be said to constitute 'slave knowledge.' In other words, if a slave's capacity for reasoned thought and therefore the feasibility of ascribing to her a rational faculty is itself a point of contention, thereby bringing into doubt the very basis from which any epistemological claim may be ushered, can we truly say that the slave's narrative is one of (self-)knowledge? And if not, then what is it? What then is a slave's knowledge? And, of course, there is the flip side of this proposition. These texts, precisely because written by subjects who were believed incapable of such production, become examples of the universalizability of Western modernity and its reason. Yet, what if they don't exhibit that which we ascribe to them. What if, in other words, the knowledge they produce is not the knowledge of reason?

Although Henry Louis Gates's work does not inaugurate the argument proposing the centrality of the slave narrative in the genesis of African American literature, it holds an unrivaled place of importance in the establishment of that reading of African American literary history.¹⁸⁶ Gates's scholarship connects the slave narratives produced by Africans in the "New World" to the presumptions

¹⁸⁵ Robert Stepto, From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 3-4.

¹⁸⁶ Robert Stepto and Arna Bontemps are two scholars (among others) who would have to be included on this list for their role in establishing the importance of the slave narrative in the development of African American literature

underpinning the ideology of literary culture circulating during the Enlightenment. Literacy, the production of writing as reason, acquires a profoundly important place in European Enlightenment culture. It is understood as a marker by which the measure of one's capacity for reasoned discourse can be gauged; and in that guise, it is applied to the slave as an indication of the absence of culture amongst the African and therefore of reason. In other words, its supposed absence is taken as a sign of the African's want of humanity. Within such a context the writing produced by the African presented something more than simply a curiosity. In producing writing, becoming 'literary,' and displaying a capacity for the arts and sciences, the African challenged the terms by which she had been defined in European discourse. This challenge of course was not left unaddressed, as various Enlightenment intellectual luminaries from Jefferson to Hume, Kant and beyond endeavored to dismiss the African as having produced nothing of value. Yet regardless of these attempts, the writing of the slave was taken to testify to the common humanity of the African, to her capacity for culture and therefore to her possession of reason.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ An example of the connection of literacy to reason is provided by Morgan Godwyn's defense of the African's humanity, where he frames his contention in terms of the slave's capacity for reason as evidenced by writing: "[A] disingenuous and unmanly *Position* had been formed; and privately (and as it were *in the dark*) handed to and again, which is this, That the Negro's though in their figure they carry some resemblances of manhood, yet are indeed *no* men.... [The] consideration of the shape and figure of our Negro's Bodies, their Limbs and members; their Voice and Countenance, in all things according with other mens; together with their *Risibility* and *Discourse* (Man's Peculiar Faculties) should be sufficient Conviction. How should

Thus the slave narrative functions as the African's response to the claims made against her and her inclusion in the family of rational beings. For Gates these narratives articulate the African's potential for 'reason' within terms legible to Enlightenment conceptions of proper discursive capacity. And, as the foundation of the African American literary tradition, they link the genesis of a recognizable African American literary productivity to the very possibility of the human within the African. This uniqueness does not go unremarked:

Unlike almost every other literary tradition, the Afro-American literary tradition was generated as a response to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century allegations that persons of African descent did not, and could not, create literature. Philosophers and literary critics, such as Hume, Kant, Jefferson, and Hegel, seemed to decide that the absence or presence of a written literature was the signal measure of the potential, innate humanity of a race. The African living in Europe or in the New World seems to have felt compelled to create a literature both to demonstrate implicitly that blacks did indeed possess the intellectual ability to create a written art and to indict the several social and economic institutions that delimited the humanity of all black people in Western cultures.¹⁸⁸

Through the production of a cultured self, the African submits to the terms by which humanity is granted and provides evidence of this

they otherwise be capable of Trades, and other no less manly employments; as also of Reading and Writing, or show so much Discretion in management of Business; ... but wherein (we know) that many of our own People are deficient, were they not truly men?" (Morgan Godwyn cited in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Literary Theory and the Black Tradition," Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 16.

¹⁸⁸ Gates, "Literary Theory and the Black Tradition," 25.

humanity through an autobiographical writing that bears witness to it. The slave narratives, in other words, testify to the African's capacity for the human. But as Ronald Judy reminds us, the correlation of reason with writing not only provides a frame through which the Enlightenment defines the 'truly' human, it also establishes the terms through which knowledge is produced and recognized as such. Having abandoned an understanding of the world anchored in the certainty of the divine order, the human subject now becomes the center around which a new conception of the world is posited. With this transformation "Reason," writes Judy, "becomes the sole grounds for achieving knowledge of both nature and man". Within this new context literacy makes a claim to the production of knowledge and "proper erudition [becomes] that which establishes the dominion of Reason... whose principal currency is writing."¹⁸⁹

The position outlined by Gates has assumed the status of a critical commonplace within African American literary criticism. In each of the recent important critical re-readings of the slave narrative, i.e., Baker, Judy, Chandler, — readings for whom in part the objective is a reassessment and reinterpretation of the discipline of African American studies itself — each author situates the narratives in

¹⁸⁹ Judy, (Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular 65.

relation to the Enlightenment conception of literacy.¹⁹⁰ Starting where Gates's formalism leaves off, Ronald Judy problematizes the capacity of the slave narratives to be included within the logic underpinning the Enlightenment's notion of literacy:

As an illegible autobiographical diary, Ben Ali's writing gestures the literariness of being that discombobulates the foundational claims of both literacy and being. Instead of bringing emancipation through literacy's intervention into being, Ben Ali's slave narrative brings forth signs whose materiality resists abjection through Reason.¹⁹¹

Through a focus on the conceptual difficulties that arise from the attempt to include the African Arabic narrative of Ben Ali into the dominant discursive pattern ascribed to the slave narratives, Judy argues for an alternative reading of these texts. The illegibility of Ben Ali's diary raises the question of how a text becomes configured as the articulation of universal reason and how the legibility of such a text determines its relation to reason. This reading would situate itself at that point of resistance where slave narratives bring into question the terms through which they have been determined as narratives of emancipation. Houston Baker, situating himself at a cautious distance

¹⁹⁰ Of course Gates's own reading of the slave narratives and his argument for a critical reading of African American literature that foregrounds form and the text as a system of signs is no less tied than these other scholars to a specific conception of the discipline. See Gates, "Literary Theory and the Black Tradition," 24-58. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁹¹ Judy, (Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular 24.

from what he implies are the consequences of Gates's formalism, submits a reading of the slave narratives that foregrounds their connection to the material culture in which they are embedded. Taking Olaudah Equiano's narrative as his example, Baker writes:

The ideological analysis of discursive structure that yields the foregoing interpretation of *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* is invaluable for practical criticism. It discovers the social grounding — the basic subtext, as it were — that necessarily informs any genuinely Afro-American narrative text. What I want explicitly to claim here is that all Afro-American creativity is conditioned by (and constitutes a component of) a historical discourse which privileges certain economic terms. The creative individual (the *black subject*) must, therefore, whether he self-consciously wills it or not, come to terms with 'commercial deportation' and the 'economics of slavery.' The subject's very inclusion in an *Afro-American* traditional discourse is, in fact, contingent on an encounter with such privileged economic signs of Afro-American discourse. The 'already-said,' so to speak, contains unavoidable preconditions for the practice of Afro-American narrative.¹⁹²

Baker argues for an interpretation of the slave narratives, and by extension of African American literary history, that situates the metaphor of "commercial deportation" at its center. The transactional nature of the slave's relation to herself and to freedom, all underpinned by a dominant commercial ethos, is the preeminent trope of Baker's reading. This interpretation allows Baker to maintain the possibility of a material criticism that does not immediately situate the

¹⁹² Houston A Baker Jr., Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 38-39.

slave narratives within the exclusive purview of a linguistically anchored theoretical apparatus. In other words, Baker refuses a critical modality that might otherwise preclude reference to the material inscription of the economics of slavery on the body and psyche of the slave. Baker's analysis seemingly requires a representational conception of the relationship between text and, in Baker's terms, "subtext" or "social grounding." The direction in which he would have us move the discipline maintains a somewhat tenuous relationship to his Black Arts Movement roots and in the end, proposes an alternative disciplinary trajectory than that favored by Gates. Of the more recent scholarship that reflects on the question of the slave narratives and their relation to the discipline of African American studies, Nahum Chandler's work occupies a unique position inasmuch as his focus is not primarily to engage a rereading of the slave narratives. Chandler's scholarship focuses on the conceptual revaluation he believes operative in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, and the significance of that revaluation for an understanding of the genesis of African American subjectivity and of modernity more generally. In this context Chandler's reading of the slave narratives is an illustration of the value of Du Bois's insights in analysing the products of African American culture and the narratives themselves the site

where one can detect the defining features of African American subjectivity and witness their operation:

Unfolding within this series of ironies, and at the core of the central irony (that is, that transforming Equiano's relation to property will change his relation to humans), is a paradox. I describe it in general as the play of the force of the double. In the context of Equiano's story, we can name it the paradox of donation or credit, or, alternatively, the paradox of recognition. On the one hand, African American discourse, writing, and subjectivity seem to emerge on the basis of an originary grant or credit of a kind of recognition of the African American slave by a political or legal authority of some kind. On the other hand, might not this recognition also mark the possibility and analytical responsibility of a space of reversal in the systems of domination and exploitation that organize the scene of production of the African American subject, especially as a writing subject?¹⁹³

Chandler offers a reading of Equiano that although indebted to a thematic drawn from Baker's own interpretation of Equiano's narrative (i.e., the purchase of property by property) nonetheless transforms it. By inscribing a Hegelian philosophical grammar at the site of the margin and pursuing the full ramifications of this transvaluation to its conclusion, Chandler proposes a conception of the African American subject that views it as conditioned by the "problem of the 'double,' of 'double consciousness.'" Equiano's text becomes an example of the emergence of the subject, an emergence determined by the

¹⁹³ Chandler, "Originary Displacement," 280.

ambivalence inscribed in the relation between subject and other. An example, in other words, of the logic that subtends the co-constitution of subject and other and illustrates the movement of the double that structures relation.¹⁹⁴ For Chandler this “force of the double” reveals a space of reversal at the very center of dominant discursive regimes, and, through the ironic modality of the marginalized figure, opens the possibility of critique. Despite the differences between these three scholars they accept the basic parameters of Gates’s reading, although each pushes the terms of Gates’s interpretation in various ways. The slave narratives are not only viewed as the attempt on the part of the African to write herself into being but, more importantly for our concerns, they are understood as determined by a — in some instances problematic — relation to knowledge, to knowledge as ‘truth.’ In this sense even the illegibility Judy ascribes to Ben Ali’s text does not displace or perhaps even undermine the possibility of the epistemological project. Ben Ali’s text and its betrayal of “discursivity’s indeterminacy” may well point to the arbitrariness that grounds

¹⁹⁴ Chandler clarifies the analytic burden his notion of the “double” assumes in the following: “This force that I have outlined is the ‘double’ of the will of the master. It not only delimits his will but specifies it as his, as that of a slave owner. It also organizes and directs it, in the quite specific sense that it forces him to act in the interest of another in order to act in his *own* interest, although we have just complicated any notion of exactly what this word means here. Again, we see the construction of a Europeanist subject in following the particular and quite specific story of the making of an African American or Diasporic subject. This is the movement of a ‘double consciousness,’ although we might be obliged to say at some point that this is a kind of redoubled unconsciousness.” Chandler’s proposition requires us to think the European and Diasporic subject together and to recognize the analytic necessity of doing so. Chandler, “Originary Displacement,” 282.

dogmatic formalism but its disruption of the representational logic of signification — the logic that reduces “linguistic referentiality” to intention — stops short of posing a challenge to the epistemological project itself.¹⁹⁵ In other words, the illegibility and structural misreading that necessarily infects all systems of signification and that Judy argues Ben Ali’s text illustrates still depends, even if in a negative fashion, on the order of signification that it questions. The text is still structured by the horizon of its readability even if it itself is not readable.¹⁹⁶ In trying to both conform to and challenge the logic defining the slave narrative, Judy’s reading suggests that the slave’s autobiography might also be an attempt to narrate something other than reason, to produce something other than the slave’s truth as knowledge. But foregrounding such an orientation within the text requires shifting the terms of the question and maintaining an even

¹⁹⁵ Judy, (Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular 28, 276.

¹⁹⁶ Fred Moten makes a similar point in his critique of Judy: “In his *(Dis)forming the American Canon*, Ronald A.T. Judy would deconstruct and abandon the Enlightenment, its subject and its oppressive sociopolitical manifestations, by way and in the interest of a valorized unreadability, an errant and essentially unapproachable textuality that carries the trace of another being, another subjectivity, another literacy, another politics: the Afro-Arabic. In so doing, however, he renews the temporal and ontological constitution — namely, the systematic relation and opposition of totality and singularity — which grounds the ‘old’ Enlightenment and its phantomic subject by his entrance into the nostalgic projection of an other, pre-oppositional (and thus deeply oppositional) origin.” Moten’s criticism questions Judy’s reading of the slave narratives, in particular his attempt to interpret them as manifestations of Enlightenment philosophical thematics. In using the slave narratives to challenge these philosophical determinations, Moten argues, Judy cannot himself fully escape them and manages to replicate their deepest logic. Fred Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom,” CR: New Centennial Review 4.2 (2004): 276.

greater scepticism toward the text's narration of reason, and its identification of knowledge and truth, than even Judy's interpretation presents.

The claim to reason that accompanies the Enlightenment's assertion of literacy, and therefore the possibility of membership within the human family, is inseparable from the claim of access to — and production of — knowledge. Slave narratives, in testifying to the slave's capacity for reason and thus her humanity, make of the slave a producer of knowledge. But 'knowledge' might not be the best term to describe what the slave asserts. The issue here is not whether the slave can assert a verifiable truth, although the presence of the genre's white guarantors, meant to vouch for the slave's 'truthfulness,' might suggest otherwise. The question of narrative truth, the issue of its very possibility, remains a contentious issue in the development of prose narrative as a genre in the early modern period and coincides with the transformation of romance and the emergence of the novel.¹⁹⁷

Determining what precisely constitutes narrative truth, of what criteria distinguishes history from 'fiction,' and whether romance was capable of expressing or approaching truth, were defining questions in the complex of issues governing the early modern emergence of the novel.

¹⁹⁷ My discussion of the early modern novel and the questions of narrative truth that accompany its development are indebted to Michael McKeon's exhaustive and incisive analysis. Michael McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 25-131.

Inseparable from these questions and providing the frame through which they acquire significance was the epistemological transition said to accompany and subtend them. That questions of verification and authentication should apply to the slave narrative as well, in and of itself, is of limited interest — how the writing of slaves circulate within these various ‘discourses of truth’ on the other hand is another issue altogether. Inserted within these transformations, the slave narratives evince the same problematic negotiation of narrative to truth witnessed by other genres of the period. Writing of the impact of this epistemological shift on the various genres of seventeenth-century biography Michael McKeon argues that:

[s]eventeenth-century narrative, whose general importance in the origins of the novel has long been accepted, are infiltrated by the appeal to the evidence of the senses and by the model of conflict which organizes competing claims to historical truth. As we might anticipate, these familiar forms — the saint’s life, spiritual autobiography, the picaresque, criminal biography, and the travel narrative — focus the broad-based experimentation with revolutionary notions of how to tell the truth in narrative upon the particular problem of how to tell the true story of an individual human life.”¹⁹⁸

Biography bears a specific burden in the development of these issues and not least for the important Anglo-African slave narratives published during the eighteenth century in which questions of

¹⁹⁸ McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740 89.

verification, authenticity, and narrative truth — given the terms through which their writings were viewed — provided the backdrop. Already questioned regarding her capacity for truth-as-knowledge, the slave produces writing within a genre, i.e., autobiography, whose own capacity for truth is highly problematic — and as we will see, perhaps for good reason.

Such issues as the relation between reason, truth and knowledge are precisely what orient Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, a text in which the production of knowledge through reason is juxtaposed to the figurality at the center of reason itself. In this text the autobiographical becomes the site in which the proper accounting and functioning of reason is the issue at hand and reason's "perversion" the accusation directed against the advocates of slavery. The text therefore not only presents evidence of the African's capacity for "reasoned discourse" through its articulation of a narrative of self, but also addresses the operation that establishes reason as the marker of the subject's humanity by his/her production of (self-)knowledge as the knowledge of reason.

Written as a moral critique of the Atlantic slave trade, Cugoano's text presents a religiously demarcated condemnation of slavery and situates itself within the religiously inflected abolitionist tradition. In

this sense his text subscribes to the same economy of religious signification that we see in other early Afro-Atlantic slave narratives written in English.¹⁹⁹ Yet unlike the other early slave narratives Cugoano's text focuses less on its author's life than on the very terms through which the slaveholder advances and sustains the argument for slavery. While attentive to the historical and religious distortion slaveholders present as argument, these claims, in and of themselves, are not Cugoano's principal target. Rather, Cugoano's concern runs to the proper use of reason:

For it must be a strange perversion of reason, and a wrong use or disbelief of the sacred writings, when any thing found there is perverted by them and set up as a precedent and rule for men to commit wickedness.²⁰⁰

And:

¹⁹⁹ I'm thinking in particular of the slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano, James Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Jea and John Marrant. See Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself (1791) (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995), James Albert Gronniosaw, "A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawasaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself (1772)," Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William L. Andrews (Washington, D.C.: Civitas, 1998), John Jea, "The Life History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself (1815)," Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William L. Andrews (Washington D.C.: Civitas, 1998), John Marrant, "Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black (1785)," Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William L. Andrews (Washington D.C.: Civitas, 1998).

²⁰⁰ Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787)," Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery, ed. Vincent Carreta (New York: Penguin Books, 1999) 29.

But to set up the ways of the wicked for an example, and to make the laws respecting their suppression, and the judgments that were inflicted upon them for their iniquity, and even the written word of God, and the transactions of his providence, to be reversed and become precedents and pretences for men to commit depredations and extirpations, and for enslaving and negotiating [sic] or merchandizing the human species, must be horrible wickedness indeed and sinning with a high hand.²⁰¹

Slaveholders display more than simply moral failure or an absence of Christian virtue, they also exemplify a perversion of the dictates of reason. It is not the lies, the distortions of historical fact or even the false picture of the African the defenders of slavery present that most incenses Cugoano. What Cugoano points to in these passages is the perversion structuring the slaveholder's logic. Within it what is base is made high, what is wicked is made the example, and the proper order(ing) of reason is reversed. Under slavery reason, Cugoano suggests, takes shape as something monstrous.

For this reason Cugoano's argument, while also challenging the false claims that circulate regarding the African and her history, focuses on the very nature of the logic being imposed. We see an example of Cugoano's strategy in his critique of James Tobin's defense

²⁰¹ Cugoano, "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787)," 47.

of African slavery.²⁰² In countering Tobin's claim of the African's willingness to sell his closest of kin — with Tobin using this claim to justify the need for the salvation of the African through slavery — Cugoano writes:

This specious pretence is without any shadow of justice and truth, and, if the argument was even true, it could afford no just and warrantable matter for any society of men to hold slaves.²⁰³

According to Cugoano it's not simply that the claim Tobin presents is untrue, or that it evinces not even the slightest hint of justice.

Cugoano's contention regarding Tobin's claim is quite clear: *even if it were true*, it would be insufficient to justify the slavery of the African.

With the insertion of this 'even if' the tenor and register of Cugoano's analysis changes. In other words, proceeding along traditional abolitionist lines of argument by providing either a corrective to the slaveholders' version of historical events or a challenge to their assertions regarding the African's character and suitability for slavery no longer constitutes a sufficient response Cugoano's text implies. The stakes have changed. It is now the very modality through which the slaveholder presents his argument that is challenged, the very terms of

²⁰² James Tobin was a West Indian planter and the author of the widely circulated *Cursory Remarks upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay* amongst other pro-slavery tracts.

²⁰³ Cugoano, "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787)," 23.

the slave power's reason. "[T]he light of nature [] and the dictates of reason," as Cugoano writes, "when rightly considered, teach us, that no man ought to enslave another."²⁰⁴ The abomination that is slavery, and the monstrosity that is its reason, in other words, should have always been evident. Yet, it clearly has not been and the question remains as to why this supposed self-evidence has been lacking.

Focusing on the various rationales advanced in support of African slavery Cugoano's interest falls on a claim that strikes him as not only most problematic but that also appears to express the very core of the perversion he finds constitutive of the slaveholder's reason. It is the argument that anchors the justification for slavery in the simple existence of slavery itself. This proposition extends and reinforces the argument that situates the defense of slavery in the practice's origin as an "ancient custom." But as Cugoano recognizes this proposition only tangentially relates to a misinterpretation or misappropriation of the historical record. At issue is the legitimacy granted to a practice by its mere actuality. The debate, in other words, centers on the rationality of the actual, on the rational design of the divine order and whether this order necessarily includes slavery. Showing that the existence of slavery within a rationally ordered and divinely sanctioned world perverts both reason and the divine requires

²⁰⁴ Cugoano, "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787)," 28.

that the function of slavery in this world be clearly defined. Cugoano begins to offer the beginning of such a clarification in the following:

Those things admitted into the law, that had a seeming appearance contrary to the natural liberties of men, were only so admitted for a local time, to point out, and to establish, and to give instruction thereby, in an analogous allusion to other things.²⁰⁵

In outlining the relation between the Law and “natural liberties” Cugoano has seemingly ushered us into a world in which the figural and the literal, the analogous and the example all have their part to play. The Law which governs and that emanates from the “Divine Law Giver” necessarily provides both the terms that guarantee “natural liberties” and its opposite, namely “those things” that appear contrary to such “natural liberties.” Of course Cugoano leaves the status of “those things” highly indeterminate, inasmuch as they only ‘seemingly appear’ contrary he implies that slavery conjoins with “natural liberties” at some point or in some sense. As if to say that to think slavery is not altogether different than to think freedom — and may well require it. The source of both “natural liberties” and slavery, in other words, appears to be the one and same divine Law. We are no clearer by the end of the passage at which time “those things,” of

²⁰⁵ Cugoano, "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787)," 38.

which slavery is the most prominent, are understood as “analogous allusions” referring to things other than themselves, and, we suspect, having migrated to a different discursive register than the purely referential.

In Cugoano’s attempt to present the contours of an understanding coincident with the Law, the thinking of difference assumes pride of place and provides the example through which a possible reconciliation of the seeming paradox of the Law is posited. At the center of Cugoano’s problematic is the question of how to *think* the seeming contradiction of the Law and the nature of the actuality it produces. How, in other words, does reason reason with the Law? Speculating on the logic motivating the great variety of the natural world Cugoano proposes an answer that grants to difference a constitutive role in the fabric of the real. “[I]f there had never been any black people among the children of men, nor any spotted leopards among the beasts of the earth,” the old testament prophet, Cugoano surmises, would be without the means to propose the following: “*Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then, may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.*”²⁰⁶ Here is the “analogous allusion” mentioned earlier. Difference, whether signifying as the leopard spots or the Ethiopian’s skin, refers to an order beyond itself,

²⁰⁶ Cugoano, “Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787),” 39.

providing the pathway through which an ethical universe is articulated and rendered ‘material’ for human beings. Neither the leopard’s ‘spottedness’ nor the Ethiopians ‘blackness,’ in other words, constitutes a marker of significance in and of themselves, only in their reference to an ethical whole do they acquire true validity. But, whereas we might conclude that difference is here recuperated into the ethical whole and through such recuperation reduced to it — with all the attendant consequences we have learned accompanies such erasures — Cugoano’s text moves us in a different direction:

To this I must again observe, and what I chiefly intend by this similitude, that the external blackness of the Ethiopians, is as innocent and natural, as spots in the leopards; and that the difference of colour and complexion, which it hath pleased God to appoint among men, are no more unbecoming unto either of them, than the different shades of the rainbow are unseemly to the whole ... It does not alter the nature and quality of a man, whether he wears a black or a white coat, whether he puts it on or strips it off, *he is still the same man. ... none of these differences alter the essentiality of the man.*²⁰⁷ (Italics mine)

The Ethiopian’s function as a marker and articulation of difference seems predicated on precisely the possibility of his recuperation by the totalizing metaphor we call “man.” Pigmentation, that feature

²⁰⁷ Cugoano, "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787)," 41.

supposedly defining the Ethiopian's difference, emerges as no more constitutive than coat or hat, neither essential nor perhaps quite desirable. To put this another way: it is inasmuch as the Ethiopian's difference signifies him *as like other men* that he can function as the signifier of a difference operating within an economy of metaphorical totalization. Yet there is a second order of difference posited by Cugoano's text, a modality identified with another order of the figurative. If the Ethiopian is chosen because of the sameness subtending his difference, i.e., because of his metaphorical substitutability, the 'actual' force of Cugoano's example derives from the metonymic relation that produces this 'exemplary' Ethiopian. Within the confines of Cugoano's example, not only is the Ethiopian metonymically substituted by his skin (in essence becoming nothing other than skin), the rhetorical force of the question ("Can the Ethiopian change his skin"?) presumes a permanence and an essence the passage above seems to deny. Predicated on the Ethiopian's difference from himself, the example, in its status as the illustration of the operation of the Law, places the figurative as that which motivates the Law itself.

The existence of slavery, the explanation for such a practice in a divinely ordained world and Cugoano's dismissal of its claim to being

divinely sanctioned, follows the logic that grounds the status of his example:

All men in their fallen depraved state, being under a spirit of bondage, sunk into a nature of brutish carnality, and by the lusts thereof, they are carried captive and enslaved; and the consequence is, that they are sold under sin and in bondage to iniquity, and carried captive by the devil at his will. This being the case, the thing proves itself; for if there had been no evil and sin amongst men, there never would have been any kind of bondage, slavery and oppression found amongst them; and if there was none of these things to be found, the great cause of it could not, in the present situation of men, be pointed out to them in that eligible manner as it is.²⁰⁸

Mired in their postlapsarian state, subject to vices, sin and all manner of depredation, the actuality of slavery mirrors another form of bondage — in fact re-presents — the human subject's actual moral condition and her inability to escape from it. Slavery therefore acquires significance as an analogy illustrating the reality of the subject's moral world. The tension here is between a notion of slavery posited as the actuality of a practice and slavery construed as the figuration of the 'real.' The "reality" of slavery appears located elsewhere and the Law inscribes this reality with the stamp of its own logic:

²⁰⁸ Cugoano, "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787)," 41-42.

Wherefore it was necessary that something of the bondage and servitude should be admitted into the ritual law for figurative use, which, in all other respects and circumstances, was in itself, contrary to the whole tenure of the law, and naturally is itself unlawful for men to practice.²⁰⁹

Law here situates itself as the source of slavery even though this brings it into contradiction with itself. But more importantly the Law seems determined by a necessary figurative operation without which its effectivity as Law would cease to exist. As Cugoano writes, if slavery had not been inscribed within the Law, slavery “could not have stood and become an emblem that there was any spiritual restoration and deliverance afforded us.” It’s not simply that slavery symbolizes the human subject’s sin and therefore reveals the possibility of redemption, after all it’s not inconceivable that another phenomena may well have substituted for it and assumed its symbolic value. Rather slavery articulates the necessity that conditions Law; a necessity identified with the figurative. Without slavery it seems, there is no freedom, and, without the figurative, no Law.

Rather than exhibiting the proper use of reason and the monstrosity of a reason that sanctions slavery, Cugoano’s analysis manifests the utter necessity of slavery to the thought of freedom and

²⁰⁹ Cugoano, "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great-Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa (1787)," 42.

of the figurative to the operation of the Law. All this was seemingly to counter the slaveholder's perversion of reason, the distortion of a reason inverted on itself. But it could be argued that a reason that substitutes the figurative for the literal and privileges the example over the actual simply produces its own perversion. In other words identifying the slave autobiography exclusively with the narration of reason might be to ignore those other tales the slave narratives are trying to tell.

Construed as evidence of the slave's capacity for reason (and therefore proof of her humanity), the slave narrative is meant to secure the African's place, if not as an equal at least as a member, of the human family. This membership requires not only the production of writing as reason but of truth as knowledge. Yet the African's production of knowledge through the writing of reason, the particular evidence of her humanity, encounters an obstacle. To substantiate one's humanity through the production of autobiography, in essence to *testify* to it, situates knowledge — or now what passes for it — on problematic ground (and perhaps on no *ground* at all). In claiming her humanity through *and as* the structure of testimony, the slave questions the very terms of knowledge-as-truth that governs the epistemological order. As Derrida reminds us:

one can *testify* only to the unbelievable. To what can, at any rate, only be believed; to what appeals only to belief and hence to the given work, since it lies beyond the limits of proof, indication, certified acknowledgment [*le constat*], and knowledge. Whether we like it or not, and whether we know it or not, when we ask others to take our word for it, we are already in the order of what is merely believable. It is always a matter of what is offered to faith and of appealing to faith, a matter of what is only “believable” and hence as unbelievable as a miracle. Unbelievable because *merely* “credible.” The order of attestation itself testifies to the miraculous, to the unbelievable believable: to what must be believed all the same, whether believable or not.²¹⁰

Derrida here identifies the operation through which testimony acquires its force. To testify is to reference a truth beyond the factual, to broach a claim for that which extends beyond the clearly verifiable, to gesture towards that which is precisely *not* believable; in other words, an expression of that which resists the strictly epistemological. From this perspective the slave’s *evidence* of humanity, her manufacture of knowledge-as-truth through the production of a (self) knowing subject, points not to a knowledge of self but to the absence of knowledge itself. Or at least of knowledge epistemologically construed.

The slave appears mired in a state of nature, what Hegel terms “an animal condition of innocence,” having failed in her ascension to

²¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, trans. Patrick Mensah, Cultural Memory in the Present, eds. Mieke Bal and de Vries Hent (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 20.

the seat of reason — yet things are not so simple.²¹¹ Of course, it is not that the slave *fails* to display the requisite criteria through which reason is evidenced, knowledge produced and humanity granted, the slave after all writes; rather, it is what that writing entails that raises difficulties. Surprisingly it is Hegel, the philosopher who focuses so intently on another type of writing, who presents to us the full scope of the problem the African encounters and the full measure of the challenge the African and her writing poses.

III.

Hegel begins his introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* by distinguishing between three forms of historiography (i.e. original history, reflective history, and philosophical history) with each respective form of historical writing representing a different stage in the development of spirit and its self-consciousness. But these three modes of historiography refer to more than simply stages in the progressive evolution of spirit; they purport to raise experience out of the realm of — to use Hegel’s phrase — “mere experience,” and thereby

²¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics, eds. Maurice Cowling, E. Kedourie, G. R. Elton, J. R. Pole and Walter Ullmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 178.

redeeming experience for the operations of spirit.²¹² The human being, Hegel argues, “appears on the scene as the antithesis of nature,” and is in Hegel’s estimation, “the being who raises [herself] up into a second world.”²¹³ The proper humanity of the human being, according to Hegel, resides in precisely this movement away from the sphere of nature and the subject’s seclusion in nature’s realm of “immediate existence.” This differentiation from nature, which marks the proper humanity of the human being, is also that feature which distinguishes the human from the animal world. Unlike the animal the human being, Hegel writes, “must realise [her] potential through [her] own efforts, and must first acquire everything for [herself], precisely because [she] is a spiritual being; in short, [she] must throw off all that is natural in [herself].”²¹⁴ For Hegel historical writing provides evidence of exactly such a transition from the domain of immediate existence characteristic of the natural world towards the essential mediation required for spirit and its gradual progression towards the realisation of freedom. The articulation of such freedom is, from Hegel’s perspective, the defining characteristic particular to the human being.²¹⁵ In other words, the absence of historical writing is sufficient

²¹² Hegel, Lectures 12.

²¹³ Hegel, Lectures 44.

²¹⁴ Hegel, Lectures 50-51.

²¹⁵ “The substance of the spirit is freedom. From this, we can infer that its end in the historical process is the freedom of the subject to follow its own conscience and morality, and to pursue and implement its own universal ends; it also implies that the subject has infinite value and

cause to bring into question the very humanity of the group under question and perhaps reduce the status of that group to the very animality that the development of spirit's self-consciousness (and its attendant freedom) extinguishes. Given the conceptual parameters Hegel elaborates regarding the importance of historiography and its relation to the evolution of spirit, the status of the African within his schema requires some attention.

The Africa of Hegel's text remains, he notes, "a continent enclosed within itself," consisting of three geographical sections each clearly distinguishable from the other. Hegel defines two of these sections as little more than tributaries, the first best defined according to Hegel as "European Africa" while the second is "the only valley land of Africa [and] is closely connected with Asia." But Africa proper, the Africa of which Hegel will write for the balance of the portion of his lecture dealing with the continent, is "the land south of the Sahara desert"; it comprises the third geographical section, and in this Africa, "history is in fact out of the question."²¹⁶ And what of the African who inhabits this truest Africa?:

The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has not yet succeeded in making a distinction between himself and his essential universality ... Thus,

that it must become conscious of its supremacy. The end of the world spirit is realised in substance through the freedom of each individual." Hegel, Lectures 55.

²¹⁶ Hegel, Lectures 173, 76.

man as we find him in Africa has not progressed beyond his immediate existence. As soon as man emerges as a human being he stands in opposition to nature, and it is this alone which makes him a human being. But if he has merely made a distinction between himself and nature, he is still at the first stage of his development: he is dominated by passion and is nothing more than a savage. All our observations of African man show him as living in a state of savagery and barbarism, and he remains in this state until the present day. The negro is an example of animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness...”²¹⁷

The African, lacking the most basic determinants of the human being, becomes for Hegel an example of “animal man,” a being whose existence is defined by the very ambivalence of his humanity.²¹⁸ Yet Hegel never completely subtracts humanity from the African, rather the African is characterized by his or her false beginning, by a “not yet” that seems to precede a proper beginning.²¹⁹ On closer inspection, “the animal condition of innocence” in which the African exists compares

²¹⁷ Hegel, Lectures 177.

²¹⁸ Although he does not specify the African directly, Giorgio Agamben in his most recent work has remarked on this relation between the slave and the animal: “Perhaps the body of the anthropophorous animal (the body of the slave) is the unresolved remnant that idealism leaves as an inheritance to thought, and the aporias of the philosophy of our time coincide with the aporias of this body that is irreducibly drawn and divided between animality and humanity.” Agamben extends his analysis in the following passage and introduces designations common among seventeenth and eighteenth century naturalists in their attempts to determine the specific status of the African: “The machine of earlier times works in an exactly symmetrical way. If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form.” Giorgio Agamben, The Open: Man and Animal, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 12, 37.

²¹⁹ An example of this strange incompleteness is found in the following: “...in the interior of Africa, the consciousness of the inhabitants has *not yet* reached an awareness of any substantial and objective experience.” And further: “The characteristic feature of the negroes is that their consciousness has *not yet* reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity...” Or, “The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has *not yet* succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an individual and his essential universality...” (italics mine) Hegel, Lectures 177.

less to a state of barbarity than the false perfection of an Adamic beginning. Defining the status of the African still further, Hegel writes that “[t]hus in Africa as a whole, we encounter what has been called the state of innocence, in which man supposedly lives in unity with God and nature ... The spirit should not remain permanently in such a state, however, but must abandon this primitive condition.”²²⁰ For Hegel, such a “primitive condition” belies the human being’s “true destiny” as the medium for the realisation of spirit in history.²²¹ The African, it seems, is less a barbarian than the example of a false perfection. Yet this illusion the African proffers appears oddly reminiscent of another conceptually unsteady offering Hegel proposes:

We must merely note for the present that the spirit begins in a state of infinite potentiality — but no more than potentiality — which contains its absolute substance as something as yet implicit, as the object and goal which it only attains as the end result in which it at last achieves its realisation. In actual existence, progress thus appears as an advance from the imperfect to the more perfect, although the former should not be understood in an abstract sense as merely imperfect, but as something which at the same time contains its opposite, i.e., what is commonly called perfection...²²²

The potentiality that subtends the trajectory of spirit bears a more than fair resemblance to the structure that Hegel claims defines, and

²²⁰ Hegel, Lectures 178.

²²¹ Hegel, Lectures 69.

²²² Hegel, Lectures 131.

limits, the African's claim to 'true' humanity. Those who would see in the African a state of natural perfection fail to realise, Hegel claims, that only when the human being has "experienced opposition, and become divided within [hersef]" does she achieve genuine humanity. In mistakenly privileging such false perfection these advocates confuse the "potential presence" of the human being's actual destiny "with its real existence."²²³ But we already detect here what may well be the source of the recurrent confusion. Writing again in relation to the African Hegel notes that:

...the concept of spirit is only potentially present, and it has wrongly been assumed that it already exists in reality. It is still only potentially present for us; but the purpose of spirit is to ensure that it is also realised in practice. *In real existence, this represents the final stage in history, although in terms of mere potentiality, it is equivalent to the first stage.*²²⁴ (Italics mine)

Within Hegel's construal both the operations of spirit and the definition of the African are afflicted by the same possible confusion. In each case the distinction between first and last, beginning and ending, potential and actual is prone to an embarrassing slippage. It is potentiality in particular that generates continued confusion; for on the one hand it leads us to apprehend a false perfection in the African

²²³ Hegel, Lectures 178.

²²⁴ Hegel, Lectures 178.

while on the other it informs the actuality of spirit and is an indicator of spirit's own perfection. Regardless of her pretension to an unearned and false perfection the African nonetheless poses a particular difficulty for Hegel. By confusingly presenting herself as both beginning and end, she purports to qualify not simply the onset of spirit's trajectory in its journey toward the realisation of freedom, but presumes to articulate spirit's completion of that journey as well.

The African of Hegel's text would seem then to inform the very possibility of history. While not "in history" herself, she assumes status as the outside that conditions the terms of what Hegel understands as the possibility of history. As potentiality constitutes the necessary possibility that inheres in spirit itself and determines its trajectory through history, so too the African signifies the potentiality that inheres in the human subject, making of that subject's action the realisation of spirit's freedom. Her false perfection signifies not a mistaken conceptual delimitation but the pure potentiality that Hegel unknowingly assigns to the African.²²⁵ It can come as no coincidence

²²⁵ Potentiality is being used here in the sense developed in the work of Giorgio Agamben. "Potentiality is not simply non-Being, simple privation," according to Agamben, "but rather *the existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence; this is what we call 'faculty' or 'power.' 'To have a faculty' means *to have* a privation. And potentiality is not a logical hypostasis but the mode of existence of this privation." Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality," trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Potentiality: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 179. The notion of potentiality, according to Agamben, requires extending ourselves beyond the oppositions (presence/absence, Being/non-Being, etc.) that ground our thinking. Potentiality is not the opposition of Being to non-Being, nor is it the enactment of a latent but absent possibility (the bringing to actuality of a given order, event, or thought), but rather the 'actual' "presence of an absence." Yet, the very structure of potentiality is determined by impotentiality, by the subtraction of possibility. Again Agamben: "What

therefore that the African exists not before history, as Hegel at times seems to imply, but clearly outside of it — a distinction that is not without significance.²²⁶ For, if it were simply a question of the African being, in some sense, ‘pre-historical,’ then we could not speak of potentiality at all, inasmuch as the ‘pre-historical’ remains determined by the historical as such. In other words, the African is truly without history, she inhabits — in an admittedly awkward phrasing — the ‘no-place’ of history. The erasure of the African from the field of history, in the sense and within the terms Hegel specifies, must then be viewed as coextensive with the demarcation of the African as the site of potentiality informing the movement of history. By assigning this particular status to the African Hegel’s text produces a quite unexpected result. It unites in the figure of the African both the non-Being articulated by the third person of Benveniste’s analysis (the pronoun characteristic of historical narration) with the non-Being Giorgio Agamben claims conditions the notion of potentiality. By returning to Benveniste we stumble back to the question with which

appears for the first time as such in the deactivation (in the *Brachliegen*) of possibility, then, is the *very origin of potentiality* — and with it, of Dasein, that is, the being which exists in the form of potentiality-for-being {*poter-esser*}. But precisely for this reason, this potentiality or originary possibilization constitutively has the form of a potential-not-to {*potenza-di-no*}, of an impotentiality, insofar as it is *able to* {*può*} only in beginning from a *being able not to* {*poter non*}, that is, from a deactivation of single, specific, factual possibilities.” Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* 67.

²²⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956) 111.

we haphazardly began: What is it for the African, this being which
subtends but who is without history, to write history?

CHAPTER 5

Fanon, Colonialism, and the Absence of (the Black) Man

How are we to think the other? Or is it possible to ‘think’ the other at all? At stake in the response to these questions are the operations of many of the notions (e.g. identity, sociality, etc.) that provide the governing terms for our understanding of ourselves. In the West, the relationship between self and other, the ascension to any form identity or sociality, or the rendering intelligible of phenomena is predicated on situating the other as the reflection of the subject. In short, the other assumes significance only through its negation. Yet, as much current scholarship has taught us, to think the other through the subject is not to think the other at all. The establishment of the subject requires the expulsion of all difference from itself so as to position itself as its own origin. Whether through a radical negation as with Descartes’ *Cogito* or with the subsumption of difference into itself as witnessed with Hegel’s *Geist*, under this dominant conceptual regime alterity becomes simply another index by which one maps the institution of the subject. The need to revisit this logic is the problematic that much recent theory has been attempting to interrogate.²²⁷ These efforts have

²²⁷ See for example, Judith Butler, *Theories in Subjection: The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds., *Who Comes after the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991),

been geared towards formulating a notion of the other in which the relationship between self and other is not reduced to the logic of a sovereign subject, not confined to an economy where the other is simply the pale reflection of the imperial self. But can a notion of alterity be configured that resists the apparent requirement that it be subsumed within/under the category of the subject? Or is such a desire simply to misunderstand the economy of the self/other relation and to define it in terms of discursive registers to which it does not speak. At issue here are several questions: What is the relation between the philosophical problematic of the subject identified by thinkers such as Heidegger and the economies of difference within culture?²²⁸ Can the notion of alterity derived from this philosophical problematic be articulated through an analysis of culture? If not, then what is the relation between the notion of alterity as it registers

Miami Theory Collective, ed., Community at Loose Ends (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

²²⁸ In Heidegger modernity is conceived as the emergence of a particular self-understanding in which the subject and the logic of representation through which it projects its world assume center stage. In his classic statement on the issue he writes that: "when man becomes the primary and only real *subiectum*, that means: Man becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded as regards the manner of its Being and truth. Man becomes the relational center of that which is as such." But this transformation only occurs once the human being's conception of his/her relation to the world has shifted terms. Again Heidegger: "Where the world becomes picture, what is, in its entirety, is juxtaposed as that for which man is prepared and which, correspondingly, he therefore intends to bring before himself and have before himself, and consequently intends in a decisive sense to set in place before himself. Hence world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture. What is, in its entirety, is not taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth." Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 128-29.

philosophically and the economy of the other that manifests culturally? And, how are the discourses that contend with culture implicated in the production of our inherited notion of the other? Another way of broaching this question might simply be to ask the following: what does it mean to speak the other and of which other do we speak?

Fanon is an interesting figure in this respect. Extending from *Peau noire, masques blancs* until *Les damnés de la terre*, his work was an attempt to provide an analysis of colonial experience and a critique of the terms through which one generally arrived at an understanding of that experience.²²⁹ (Fanon *Black Skin*; Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*; Fanon *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*; Fanon *Les Damnés De La Terre*) He did not simply offer an alternative interpretation of historical events, political psychology or cultural motivation, rather his critique produced a fundamental challenge to the terms through which the West defines experience — in particular the experience of the other. Fanon raises his challenge to the centrality of epistemology in the West's self-understanding and the consequent reflection of/on the other that it proposes. Seemingly anchored by the certainty of its own

²²⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952); *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1968) hereafter cited in text as *Peau*. Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1961); *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, (New York: Grove Press, 1968) hereafter cited in text as *damnés*. Where two pages references are given, the first refers to the text in the original language, the second to the translation unless otherwise indicated.

representations, the Western subject with its consistency of experience remains at a definite remove from the terms governing the phenomenology of colonial experience.²³⁰ Within the colonial context the ground of experience is a subject for whom the chaos, irruption, violence and Manichean structure of the social determines the very negotiation of its own self-relation. Cartesian certainty, under such conditions, lies truly elsewhere. Epistemology, that very specific and very modern posture that comes to define the West's relation to its world, relegates objects and beings to a status of dependency.²³¹ Construed as having no genuine capacity outside of their relation to the West's gaze, the experience of these beings is only legitimized through their proximity to a West that speaks of and for but never to them. Fanon's work contests the ground that legitimates this disengaged punctual self of epistemology, that subject that would define the other as nothing other than the ward of its own reflection(s). Whether with his understanding of violence and its relation to the formation of an emergent national consciousness, or of "spontaneity" as the unsteady ground of political praxis, at stake in Fanon's work is an attempt to rearticulate the conceptual economy within which the key terms of our politics operate. Retranscribing the notion of the

²³⁰ I use "consistency" here not in the sense of logical agreement but rather in the sense that one would use the term to describe a material substance or liquid, i.e., the way one might refer to an item's texture or solidity.

²³¹ See Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 469-72.

other is key in this respect. The question of how the West produces the other — whether as immigrant or citizen, enemy or friend, colonized or colonizer etc. — is central to stipulating the possibilities that might lie beyond our current horizons.

In recent years Fanon's various texts have become invested with great institutional and politico-symbolic value, they have materialized as contested ground, the site of disciplinary, political and at times quite personal points of disagreement. Fanon is either lauded by those who see in him a counter to the influence of the various 'posts-' that have dominated the humanities in the past generation or conversely praised by those for whom he is the conduit for an era of renewed theoretical and disciplinary sophistication.²³² Nowhere is this difference more clearly marked out than in his relationship to the work of Jacques Lacan. Of course it is Homi Bhabha's influential rereading of Fanon that proved the lightning rod for much of the debate regarding the relationship between Lacan and Fanon and it is in response to Bhabha's work that much of the argument regarding Fanon's legacy has been defined.²³³ Rather than frame the relationship between these two thinkers in terms of influence and rehearse the still

²³² For representative examples of both these positions see Alessandrini, ed., Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives and, Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting and White, eds., Fanon: A Critical Reader. The conflict over what constitutes the 'appropriate' legacy of Fanon's work — with all the disciplinary, philosophical, and generational differences at issue — can be witnessed in the introduction to the respective volumes.

²³³ See Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994).

ongoing debate regarding the prevalence or absence of a distinctly Lacanian influence on Fanon's text, I want to proceed from a somewhat different perspective. I'm less concerned with staking a claim to either the psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, postmodern Fanon, or the political, revolutionary, engaged Fanon, than in identifying how Fanon's thought challenges any such categorizations – – regardless of which side of the divide one falls. Fanon and Lacan, in their respective attempts to parse the question of the other, bring pressure to bear on the underlying logic from which the question of alterity is presented to them. But equally important, their attempted reconceptualization of the self/other relation occurs — and it would seem, *necessarily* — alongside their challenge to the respective disciplinary frames through which the question is asked and the privileged epistemological substrate on which these disciplines are grounded. It is from this perspective that Lacan's relation to Fanon assumes importance. Their respective work not only coincides with a particular historical moment, but Fanon (as evidenced throughout the range of his texts) and Lacan (most clearly in his earliest reformulation of Freud's project) identify an unusual discordance seemingly at the very heart of the subject. This discordance, or dehiscence as Lacan will name it, poses a challenge to the understanding of the subject and the very terms through which it is thought. Both Fanon and Lacan

attempt to articulate the terms through which this altered understanding of the subject stands revealed, but neither finds the available theoretical vocabulary altogether adequate to the task at hand. What is seemingly required is a reorientation (i.e., Lacan) or perhaps eruption (i.e., Fanon) of the disciplinary, and consequently, theoretical frames through which the subject is presented. At issue then is not simply the difficulty posed by the 'subject' understood in a broad philosophical sense, but the challenge posed to the languages that purport to speak to it in a disciplinary sense. It is through the question of method, of what constitutes the proper object of disciplinary inquiry and of the method appropriate to it that Lacan and Fanon take up the issue of alterity. Whether determined via the proper delimitation of the psychoanalytic object in the case of Lacan or the inadequacy of epistemology in the delimitation of the colonial actor in the case of Fanon, they each pose the question of alterity in oddly similar ways. In both cases the issue of the other is refracted through the frame of the epistemic status of the object Fanon and Lacan place under investigation. The question therefore becomes less, how psychoanalytic or Lacanian is Fanon, than how coincident are their respective critiques and in what sense do their respective voices intersect. Hopefully unpacking Fanon's critique on this question will contribute to moving us beyond the limitations of current debates.

I.

In recalling his introduction to psychoanalysis and the importance of his training with Gratian de Clérambault and the case study of Aimée in expanding his initial interest in Freud's work, Lacan reminisces that what truly caught his attention was the difference with which Clérambault appeared to frame the patient's symptoms. Clérambault's focus on articulating a different clinical sensitivity combined with the utter flamboyance of Aimée's symptomology led Lacan almost inevitably, he claims, to psychoanalysis and the questions that would prove his guide over the entirety of a career:

What happens, under such conditions, to this intertwining by which the identity of thoughts that stem from the unconscious offers its woof to the secondary process, by permitting reality to become established to the pleasure principle's satisfaction?

That is the question with which the reversed reprisal of the Freudian project, by which I have recently characterized my project, could be announced.

While we have the beginnings of it here, it could go no further. Let us simply say that it does not exaggerate the scope of psychoanalytic action [*l'acte psychoanalytique*] when it assumes that the latter transcends the secondary process to attain a reality that is not produced in it, even if it dispels the illusion that

reduced the identity of thoughts to the thought of their identity.²³⁴

Of course Lacan having had the luxury of writing these introductory remarks to his earlier essay, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," well after the fact perhaps should not be faulted for claiming a greater conceptual precision than might have been the case at the time. Even with this slightly generous later reappraisal, in which he frames the stakes of his earlier work in terms of the development of his later thinking, Lacan nonetheless identifies the significance of his early work. Lacan suggests here that his later formulation of the real and its relation to the symbolic and imaginary is already broached in his earliest essays. The question at the center of this passage simply reframes in slightly different terms Lacan's notion of the imaginary and its role in the genesis of the ego as specified in his essay on the mirror stage and foregrounds the difficulty its function in ego development requires us to think through. We will recall that the mirror stage refers for Lacan to that moment of the infant's development in which he/she identifies with an/its image and from which identification emerges a sense of self and the structuring of the ego. There are two key features of Lacan's formulation that bear

²³⁴ Jacques Lacan, "On My Antecedents," trans. Bruce Fink, Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English, ed. Jacques Lacan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006) 53.

remembering. First, the child identifies with an imago and therefore is inserted into a specular logic of identification. Second, at this stage of development the child remains incapable of motor control and yet the identificatory relation allows it to presume a possibility of bodily coherence that nonetheless remains elusively in the future. This initial gesture towards an ‘outside,’ the structuring of the ego as this illusory presence of itself to itself, forever defines its very contours. “[T]he important point,” Lacan writes, “is that this form [i.e., ideal-I] situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual”.²³⁵ By achieving its form through the assumption of an imago, the ego results from the child’s identification of itself as other and thus arises from the dynamic subtending the always-potential rivalry between self and other. The ego therefore establishes itself on the basis of a fiction that will on one level or another always govern its logic and the mirror stage points to the role of imagos in the ego’s negotiation of its social and psychological environment. What this indicates for Lacan is the “dehiscence at the very heart of the organism”; in other words, born “incomplete” the infant produces an ego reflective of this fundamental discordance and the dialectic of

²³⁵ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," trans. Bruce Fink, Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English, ed. Jacques Lacan (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006) 76.

rivalry that structures the ego's development will govern all its psychical relations.²³⁶

Given the importance of imagos in the ego's relation to its environment and their role in the infant's capacity to believe itself engaged in the phenomena of its world, the terms of this reality — or perhaps more accurately what passes for the experience of reality — acquires increasing importance for Lacan. If one follows Lacan's thinking, to conceptualize the anticipation of bodily wholeness on the part of the infant in terms of the eventual harmonization of its body/ego with reality would be to indulge in self-deception and ignore the significance of imagos in the emergent ego structure. On the other hand, to limit the understanding of the relation between infant and world by reducing it to the simple dissonance between infant and reality still naturalizes the structure of (self-)relation to which the fact of the imaginary should make us critical. This latter position presumably makes of birth a fundamental disruption that renders discordant what might otherwise have been a harmonious relation and therefore fails to register the determining importance that an ego structured through the imaginary signifies. Lacan's work suggests that to truly understand the relation of the imaginary in the development of the ego means recognizing its *constitutive* role in the formation of the

²³⁶ Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," 78.

subject. In other words, the lack identified in the infant's relationship to 'reality' is itself constitutive of the subject and requires that we rethink the prominence imparted to 'reality' in the determination of experience, particularly our understanding of psychoanalytic experience.

In "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'," the 1936 essay whose title deliberately echoes Freud's seminal metapsychological statement, Lacan takes up for the first time in a sustained form the consequences that ensue from the importance he accords to the imaginary. The essay, in part a reappraisal of the relation between psychoanalysis and psychology, begins by first conceptualizing the significance of the "Freudian Revolution." At issue is Lacan's challenge to the associationist school of psychology, itself a dominant influence in French psychiatric circles at the time and whose source can be traced back to the eighteenth century empiricism of Locke and Hume. A rival to psychoanalysis and its own understanding of psychological phenomena, associationism fails, in Lacan's estimation, to offer a genuine account of psychical phenomena. Unable to propose "an objective conception of psychical reality," the associationist understanding of psychical phenomena displays a "conceptual decline in which the vicissitudes of a specific effort that impels man to seek a

guarantee of truth for his own knowledge were retraced”.²³⁷ In other words, associationism situates its conception of psychic phenomena within a theoretical edifice whose foundation is, for Lacan, of questionable value. Lacan names this foundation the “function of truth” and it operates as the fundamental principle governing associationist conceptions of psychic experience. Tracing the genealogy of associationism back to its Lockean origins Lacan analyses how the particular position adopted by associationism privileges the point of intersection between “reality” and the senses:

with the thesis ‘*nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sense*,’ [Locke] reduces reality’s action to its point of contact with *pure sensation*, that mythical entity, in other words reduces it to being nothing but the blind spot of knowledge, since nothing is recognized there ... as the dialectical antinomy of an incomplete thesis, the primacy of pure mind, insofar as it constitutes the *true moment* of knowledge, through the essential decree of identification, recognizing the object at the same time that it asserts it.²³⁸

The “function of truth” according to Lacan is derived from a notion of truth grounded in a conception of adequation in the relation of self to reality, determined in other words by privileging the reality principle. In Lacan’s interpretation, the operation of Lockean ideas are anchored in the ‘proper’ relation between sense and reality, a proposition that

²³⁷ Lacan, "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'," 59.

²³⁸ Lacan, "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'," 61.

necessarily assumes a great deal about the constitutive parameters of this reality. Associationism draws its conception of correct psychological functioning from this assumption. This is why phenomena such as hallucinations or images pose such a problem for it, if the phenomena under discussion cannot be linked to reality in a concrete and conventionally recognizable fashion then the status of that object becomes problematic. In accordance with this presupposition associationism considers illusion an error of the senses while the image is either defined as an illusion or more readily “as a weakened sensation insofar as it attests less surely to reality.”²³⁹ This particular conception relegates most psychic phenomena, i.e., “feelings, beliefs, delusions, assents, intuitions, and dreams,” to insignificance.²⁴⁰ According to Lacan associationism submits phenomena to its account of reality and within this frame, Lacan argues, genuine psychological phenomena have no place. Because such phenomena are neither grounded in subjective intentionality, “rational knowledge,” nor readily reducible to a notion of reality as adequation, associationist psychology can find no place for them.

Psychoanalysis distinguishes itself from associationism on precisely the point of what it believes constitutes psychological reality. This difference is no more clearly illustrated than in Freud’s willingness to

²³⁹ Lacan, "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'," 62.

²⁴⁰ Lacan, "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'," 63.

consider the subject's own account of his/her experience and to grant a "reality" to psychic symptoms associationism would otherwise have dismissed. Rather than viewing these symptoms as "illusory" expressions whose "real signification, cannot be psychological except 'in appearance,'" and are therefore to be "distinguished from the ordinary register of psychical life," psychoanalysis recognizes in them pathways to genuine psychical experience.²⁴¹ In adhering to what Lacan terms the two laws of analytic experience — the law of non-omission and the law of non-systematization — Freud granted a new status to the patient's narrative. By requiring of the patient a full account of all aspects of his narrative regardless of how trivial or inconsequential the event or recollection might seem while granting equal status to each element or event of the patient's narrative, Freud demarcated a new conceptualization of psychical experience. This alternative conceptualization allowed for the inclusion not only of phenomena traditionally considered psychological (i.e., dreams, delusions, etc.) but also those excluded from the realm of the "properly" psychological (i.e., slips of the tongue, etc.). Freud's law of free association, according to Lacan, results from Freud's novel conception of the relation between subject and reality.

This transformation initiated a shift not only in our understanding of what constitutes a psychical phenomena or event,

²⁴¹ Lacan, "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'," 65.

but also, argued Lacan, required an alteration in our conception of the cause of these phenomena. In this sense psychoanalysis offered the possibility of a genuinely psychological account of psychical phenomena, an account according to Lacan, other theories of psychical experience failed to match. His critique of Henry Ey's organo-dynamic theory of mental illness, first presented at Bonneval in 1946 and published a year later, targets precisely this failing.²⁴² Ey, a leading figure in French psychiatric circles during the 1940s and 1950s, developed a theory of mental illness that refused to ascribe it any relation to a fundamentally psychic causality; mental illness, in Ey's view, always arose from essentially organic determinants.²⁴³ Ey's work comes to represent more than simply another theory of mental illness; it articulates for Lacan the fundamental resistance of psychiatry to the psychical itself. In his "Presentation on Psychical Causality" Lacan revisits concerns consistently at the center of his thinking from the period of the "Mirror Stage" up until the Rome discourse. This return, foregrounds the two central reference points of Lacan's thinking at this stage: the distinction between psychoanalysis and science and his recurrent preoccupation with defining the proper

²⁴² Lacan, "Presentation on Psychical Causality."

²⁴³ "[Ey's] theory is an attempt," in David Macey's words, "to synthesize a psychodynamic model, which sees mental illness purely as a product of mental conflict, the sociogenetics which reduces it to a reflection of social conflict, and an organico-mechanistic model which relates mental symptoms to organic lesions." David Macey, Frantz Fanon: A Biography (New York: Picador, 2000) 142.

delimitation of the psychoanalytic object and the practice appropriate to it.²⁴⁴

From the perspective of the latter objective Ey's work would well constitute a particular affront inasmuch as he dismisses the possibility of the psychical (as opposed to organic) origins of mental illness. Of the consequences that ensue from Ey's position the one that articulates the stakes of the debate between Ey and Lacan most clearly can be discerned from the following passage:

It may surprise some of you that I am disregarding the philosophical taboo that has overhung the notion of truth in scientific epistemology ever since the so-called pragmatist speculative theses were disseminated in it. You will see that the question of truth conditions the phenomenon of madness in its very essence, and that by trying to avoid this question, one castrates this phenomenon of the signification by virtue of which I think I can show you that it is tied to man's very being.

As for the critical use that I will make of it in a moment, I will stay close to Descartes by positing the notion of truth in the famous form Spinoza gave it: "*Idea vera debet cum suo ideato convenire*. A true idea must" (the emphasis falls on the word "must," meaning that this has its own necessity) "agree with its object."

Ey's doctrine evinces the exact opposite feature, in that, as it develops, it increasingly contradicts its original, permanent problem.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ I do not mean to imply that Lacan abandons these questions after 1953 but rather that the terms through which he chooses to articulate them undergo a gradual change which as a consequence affects the way he construes these issues.

²⁴⁵ Lacan, "Presentation on Psychical Causality," 125.

Similarly to his “Beyond the Reality Principle,” at issue for Lacan is the nature of truth as it applies to psychoanalysis. In this instance the definition of truth relies not on a notion of adequation to reality but rather situates truth in terms of the conformity between problem and object. In other words, the truth must occupy the register from which the problem, to which it is a response, originates. For example, a problem that registers at the level of the psychological must be addressed within those terms and not reduced to a modality of experience alien to it. This places a great burden on defining precisely the nature of the problem and the object at its center. The refusal within psychiatric circles to grant a truly psychological answer to the problems raised by the issues it investigates — as opposed to their reduction to biological or neurological causes — is one of Lacan’s recurring points of contention. This insistent theme in Lacan’s early work, namely his focus on the truth (and by extension method) appropriate to specific phenomena (in this case psychical phenomena) allows us to read him as part of a broader debate regarding the scientificity of interpretive methodologies.

The questions surrounding the precise genesis of madness become the example through which Lacan chooses to focus his disagreement with Ey and the larger issue regarding the determination of the psychical object. To outline the inadequacy of Ey’s account of

mental illness and the conception of psychical activity upon which it was based Lacan took recourse to a notoriously perplexing case of mental and functional incapacity. Johann Schneider, a young German soldier injured in the First World War, became better known as the famous patient “Schn.” Suffering from injuries inflicted by mine-splinters that reached his brain, over the next several months Schn began to exhibit symptoms that were eventually diagnosed by Kurt Goldstein and Adhemar Gelb — in February 1916 — as “psychic blindness.” The significance of Schneider’s case was the difficulty it presented to clinician attempting to account for the range and paradoxical nature of his visual incapacity. With today’s more advanced diagnostic tools the extent of Schn’s brain damage would have been more easily recognizable. But the difficulty of delimiting the psychical from the organic, the issue at the center of reflection on Schn’s case at the time, is still a reference point in contemporary analyses of the case.²⁴⁶ Using the example of Gelb and Goldstein’s famous patient whose complexly interrelated range of symptoms seemingly crossed the intersection of the organic and the symbolic, Lacan put the question pointedly to Ey: “How can he distinguish this

²⁴⁶ This continuing reference to the tension between the organic and the psychical, even in a discipline as apparently divorced from such concerns as neuropsychology registers, albeit negatively, continued preoccupation “authenticity” of Schn’s symptoms. My summary of the case of patient Schn is drawn from J.J. Marotta and M. Berhmann, “Patient Schn: Has Goldstein and Gelb's Case Withstood the Test of Time?,” *Neuropsychologia* 42 (2004).

patient from a madman? If he cannot give me an answer in his system, it will be up to me to give him one in my own.” In Ey’s reduction of madness to a species of error Lacan identifies the appropriation of a particular conception of truth as the source of Ey’s conceptual failure. Rather than error, Lacan defines madness as a species of misrecognition. “Delusional belief [i.e., madness] is misrecognition,” Lacan writes, “with everything this term brings with it by way of an essential antinomy.”²⁴⁷ Misrecognition, the term through which Lacan conceives madness, is also ascribed to the ego’s normative negotiation of its environment. As such, it wouldn’t seem to constitute the ideal notion through which a differentiation of madness from other psychological negotiations of one’s environment could be defined. But for Lacan madness constitutes a particular type of misrecognition, a specific species of attachment that compels an unwarranted transparency between ego and imago:

This misrecognition can be seen in the revolt through which the madman seeks to impose the law of his heart onto what seems to him to be the havoc [*désordre*] of the world. This is an “insane” enterprise — but not because it suggests a failure to adapt to life ... It is an insane enterprise, rather, in that the subject does not recognize in this havoc the very manifestation of his actual being, or that what he experiences as the law of his heart is but the inverted and virtual image of that same being. He thus doubly misrecognizes it, precisely so as to split its

²⁴⁷ Lacan, "Presentation on Psychological Causality," 135.

actuality from its virtuality. Now, he can escape this actuality only via this virtuality.²⁴⁸

The issue here is not that of the subject being unable to properly adapt to reality. Lacan frames the issue in entirely different terms. Rather than referring to the distance of a proximal reality, “virtual” and “actual” designate the subject’s relation of identification to the range of imagos that constitutes its awareness of its world. Thus, the subject’s madness stems from the nature of its identificatory bonds and its inability to circumvent, even in the slightest degree, the immediacy of this relation.²⁴⁹ Defined within Lacanian terms the ego is irreducible to the “reality principle,” to the purported proper functioning of the organism in its negotiation of the ‘real world. It is inasmuch as there is such a reduction of the ego to the “reality principle” that one can speak of error. “A subject’s history,” suggests Lacan, “develops in a more or less typical series of *ideal identifications* that represent the purest of psychical phenomena in that they essentially reveal the function of imagos.”²⁵⁰ Madness constitutes a point of departure, what Lacan calls “turning point,” in the subject’s relation to these identificatory relations.

²⁴⁸ Lacan, "Presentation on Psychical Causality," 140.

²⁴⁹ “For the risk of madness is gauged by the very appeal of the identifications on which man stakes both his truth and his being. [...] Thus rather than resulting from a contingent fact — the frailties of his organism — madness is the *permanent* virtuality of a gap opened in his essence.” (Italics mine) Lacan, "Presentation on Psychical Causality," 143-44.

²⁵⁰ Lacan, "Presentation on Psychical Causality," 145.

In articulating his conception of madness Lacan provides not only a critique of Ey but of the conceptual basis on which psychology rests its foundations and from which it produces its object. For Lacan “psychology’s true objet,” i.e., the imago, derives its status from the function of ‘illusion’ — at least in its capacity as a determinant of psychical action — that informs it.²⁵¹ Illusion therefore brings with it the functional capacity Ey identifies with reality. But to construe the imago as the object around which psychology defines itself means going beyond an alteration of the theoretical reference points of the discourse, it requires reconsideration of what constitutes the truth of the discourse. To return to an earlier citation:

You will see that the question of truth conditions the phenomenon of madness in its very essence, and that by trying to avoid this question, one castrates this phenomenon of the signification by virtue of which I think I can show you that it is tied to man’s very being.

As for the critical use that I will make of it in a moment, I will stay close to Descartes by positing the notion of truth in the famous form Spinoza gave it: “*Idea vera debet cum suo ideato convenire*. A true idea must,” (the emphasis falls on the word ‘must,’ meaning that this is its own necessity) “agree with its object.”²⁵²

Yet to agree with the object in this instance means to withdraw from the very objectivity that constitutes the defining condition through

²⁵¹ Lacan, "Presentation on Psychical Causality," 146.

²⁵² Lacan, "Presentation on Psychical Causality," 125.

which the object is made available for knowledge. The object of psychology, as defined by Lacan, must be thought otherwise than through the formula that, according to Charles Taylor, defines the epistemological tradition: “knowledge is to be seen as the correct representation of an independent reality.”²⁵³ From this perspective what kind of knowledge can be drawn from an ego that does not derive its coherence from its relation to reality, or whose normative condition is determined by the function of illusion? Lacan demonstrates how displacing or supplanting the disciplinary object requires addressing the very terms through which the object is produced as such. At the heart of Lacan’s argument remains a concern to define what precisely constitutes psychological phenomena, what distinguishes it and what methodology can be said to register cognizance of its truth — the nature its truth being the principle issue at hand.

In turning to Fanon we will see that although couched in quite different terms and with substantially different points of reference, the fundamental analytic problem Fanon confronts is quite similar to that addressed by Lacan. Both Lacan and Fanon, in their respective work, attempt to think the presence of seemingly irreconcilable constituents. For Lacan, this thinking is defined through his reconceptualization of psychoanalysis and its interrogation of the relation between the

²⁵³ Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 466.

primary process and reality.²⁵⁴ In Fanon this thinking is marked by a different necessity.

II.

Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*, written after Sétif but before the All-Saints Day uprising, and therefore produced outside the symbolic scope of events that would define the greater balance of Fanon's political life, has often been read as if somehow it articulated this distance.²⁵⁵ One finds barely a mention of it in Lewis Gordon's critical introduction to *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, a volume that, if we follow Gordon, defines itself against the interpretation of Fanon found in "Postcolonial studies," a field in which *Peau noire, masques blancs* is

²⁵⁴ In his reappraisal of his early essays Lacan situates his work in terms of the relation between the primary process and reality and the need to correctly circumscribe this relation before proceeding to other questions: "Although everyone agrees, in fact (even those who are dumb enough not to realize that they agree), that the primary process encounters nothing real except the impossible, which in the Freudian perspective remains the best definition that can be given of reality [*réel*], the point is to know more about what Else [*d'Autre*] it encounters so that that we can concern ourselves with it." Lacan, "On My Antecedents," 53-54.

²⁵⁵ Sétif is the Algerian market town that erupted in violence during V-E Day celebrations in 1945 when the French *colons* opened fire on Muslim Algerians who were demonstrating against French colonial occupation. After the bloodletting had subsided the tally read: 103 Europeans dead while the estimates for the number of Algerian Muslims that were killed in the ensuing French repression range from 1300 to 45000. See, Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York City: New York Review Books, 1977) and, Benjamin Stora, *Algeria 1830-200: A Short History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

presumed to be central.²⁵⁶ Even in a text as insightful as Ato Sekyi-Otu's *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* a distinction is drawn — although in this particular instance, implicitly — between *Peau noire, masques blancs* and what constitutes the genuine concern of Fanon's corpus:

Who will abrogate the rights of a hermeneutic situation for which Fanon is the first and foremost author of *Black Skin, White Masks*, first and foremost the dramatist of cultural racism construed as exemplar of the violence and ambivalence of desire and discourse...

But what if your return to Fanon is solicited by a somewhat different situation in the world, a somewhat different geopolitical affiliation? In the following pages I undertake a rereading of Fanon prompted by the postcolonial condition, here understood as the determinate experience of postindependence African societies, in relation to contemporary world history.²⁵⁷

Although not explicitly stated here the target of Sekyi-Otu's criticism is clear, but Bhabha's reading (and all that come in its wake) isn't faulted for a specific interpretive or philological failure. Central to Sekyi-Otu's charge against those who would propagate "this Fanon of the postmodernist imagination" is its elimination of the concrete materiality of the political from the sphere of Fanon's concerns.

Alongside this materiality, contends Sekyi-Otu, resides the promise that inhabits a truly "human" politics, it is this seeming erasure of

²⁵⁶ Lewis R. Gordon, Dean T. Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White, "Introduction: Five Stages of Fanon Studies," *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon, Dean T. Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 6.

²⁵⁷ Sekyi-Otu Ato, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 11.

hope and its possibilities that Sekyi-Otu decries.²⁵⁸ But is this all there is to be said? Does the early Fanon somehow refuse the question of the political because of an unfortunate preoccupation with things psychoanalytic? Do any of these distinctions actually hold: that between the young and the mature Fanon, the political and the psychoanalytic Fanon, or the postmodern and the revolutionary Fanon? An answer to any one these propositions requires returning and defining the question that seemingly guides Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, that of the 'other.'

Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*, notorious for its generic ambiguity partakes of a theoretical Catholicism that makes the actual ground of its claims even that much more difficult to ascertain.²⁵⁹ Couched in a myriad of theoretical languages from which it seemingly cannot escape, *Peau noire, masques blancs* evinces within its pages echoes of Sartre's existential-Marxism, Merleau Ponty's phenomenology, and the recurrent psychoanalytic formulations that

²⁵⁸ Ato, Fanon's Dialectic of Experience 45-46.

²⁵⁹ Writing of the subdued response to the initial publication of Fanon's study, David Macey surmises that: "*Peau noire* was and is an elusive book, not the least because it is so difficult to categorize in terms of genre. It is difficult to think of any precedent for it, and it did not establish any new genre or tradition. It had no sequel. Fanon did not write the study of 'Language and aggressivity' which was, he claimed, in preparation, and the style of his later writings is very different. Although written largely in the first person and although rich in autobiographical source, *Peau noire, masques blancs* is not a pure autobiography: the 'I' that speaks in it is often a persona. ... It is in part an account of colonialism in Martinique but it is a very partial one ... It contains no description of the island's political institutions, though it does vividly capture the place's profound alienation. It does not offer any real solution to Martinique's problem's and is by no means a pro-independence manifesto." Macey, Frantz Fanon: A Biography 161-62.

for some define Fanon's text in its distance from questions political.²⁶⁰

That this entire theoretical infrastructure is directed towards the establishment of a 'true' humanism, towards providing a renewed foundation for a universal notion of 'Man,' seems readily apparent.²⁶¹

Toutes les formes d'exploitation se ressemblent. Elles vont toutes chercher leur nécessité dans quelque décret d'ordre biblique. Toutes les formes d'exploitation son identiques, car elles s'appliquent toutes à un même "objet": l'homme. A vouloir considérer sur le plan de l'abstraction la structure de telle exploitation ou de telle autre, on se masque le problème capital, fondamental, qui est de remettre l'homme à sa place. (*Peau*, 71; 88)

Or,

Il y a un drame dans ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler les sciences de l'homme. Doit-on postuler une réalité humaine type et en décrire les modalités psychiques, ne tenant compte que des imperfections, ou bien ne doit-on pas tenter sans relâche une compréhension concrète et toujours nouvelle de l'homme? (*Peau*, 17; 22)

²⁶⁰ Ato, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* 5.

²⁶¹ I retain Fanon's use of the term "Man" here and throughout the text for two reasons. First it articulates a significant limitation inscribed within Fanon's own project and draws attention to the necessity of reframing Fanon's intervention. Second, Fanon's usage of the term resonates with the philosophical heritage with which the term is weighted. Commenting on the relationship between the notions of self-consciousness and 'man' Jean-Luc Nancy writes: "[b]eing the very movement of proper self-consciousness, identity — or the Self that identifies itself — therefore makes difference itself, difference *proper*: and this property designates or denotes itself as 'man.'" To renew the conception of 'man,' to restore "man to his proper place," as Fanon calls for, requires addressing both its role as a conceptual support for the project of imperial expansion and, as Nancy reminds us, the signifier of difference in the movement of an appropriative self-consciousness. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Identity and Trembling," trans. Brian Holmes, *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 10.

These citations can be placed alongside the more famous last line of *Les damnés de la terre* where Fanon pleads: “Pour l’Europe, pour nous-mêmes et pour l’humanité, camarades, il faut faire peau neuve, développer une pensée neuve, tenter de mettre sur pied un homme neuf” (*damnés*, 376).²⁶² Fanon’s claim regarding the need for a restatement of the question of ‘Man’ is an undeniable aspect of his thought, yet situating his thought in terms of the fashioning of a ‘new humanism’ has often required privileging one particular theoretical language within Fanon’s text over its neighbors.²⁶³ It has come to mean, in other words, ascribing a univocal character to Fanon’s work and imposing a consistent if ill-fitting logic to his text. But perhaps, rather than choose one particular theoretical language over and against its competitors it might be more useful to ask a somewhat different question: what if the proliferation of these languages articulates a critique of theoretical discourse itself?²⁶⁴ Fanon’s

²⁶² Suzanne Gauch, unlike Farrington’s translation of this passage, captures the play of Fanon’s French and the nuance signified by ‘skin’ in her own rendering of this passage: “For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must slough off our old skins, develop a new thought, and attempt to set afoot a new man.” Suzanne Gauch, “Fanon on the Surface,” *Parallax* 8.2 (2002): 124.

²⁶³ For an example of such a reading which proposes to see Fanon as the purveyor of a reenergized phenomenological tradition see Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

²⁶⁴ I am here leaning on Christopher Fynsk’s conception of theory developed in his “Community and the Limits of Theory.” By ‘theory,’ Fynsk means “all critical analysis of cultural or social representation and all reflection on that analysis itself.” Although this definition is clearly crafted in relation to the conception of theory that circulates within the academy and thereby serves primarily a heuristic function in this essay, it nonetheless overlaps with its own ‘other,’ the philosophical notion most

analyses are at their most powerful at those moments when he places pressure on the epistemological logic on which these various theoretical languages are grounded. It is the very productivity of the theoretical, i.e., the terms through which it projects and produces its object, which Fanon places under review. Articulated through his analysis of the subject/other relation present under the colonial regime (a regime that extends well beyond the border of the colony), Fanon's critique increasingly finds itself grasping beyond the terms or logic available to it. The failure to register the content of this relation within an individual theoretical vocabulary marks an incapacity within

commonly associated with Heidegger's reflections on *techne*. Theoretical discourse's failure to think community, contends Fynsk, results principally from its very structure, from its inability to register what it cannot represent. Fynsk, while recognizing the necessity of theory for the critical negotiation of our life-world is equally cognizant of the limitations and perhaps dangers that proceed from an unexamined adherence to the theoretical posture. "It would be misleading," he writes, "to suggest that the voice of community (which today says the absence of community and is thus calling for another thought of community) is not speaking in all sorts of ways and at all sorts of sites in the field of theory. The problem is rather that in general it is not heard as such and meditated upon as a testimony of community and as saying something about our historical situation. It would also be misleading, indeed it would be misguided, to suggest that the only discourse contributing to the struggle to liberate the communication of existence in its historicity and materiality is one that seeks to effect that communication. We cannot do without theory: that is to say, we cannot do without a *representation* of our sociohistorical situation and we cannot do without the forceful representation of political positions. But if we limit our understanding of critical discourse to its representational or interpretive function, then we cannot conceive of its political import outside the bounds of what Richard Rorty has called 'edification.'" In other words, although theoretical discourse (i.e., the representational mode of discourse) necessarily constrains our capacity to think community otherwise, it nonetheless remains an inescapable gesture. Yet, what Fynsk illustrates in his essay is the limitation that attends any attempt to think community from the site governed by the representational function of critical discourse. What theory resists are those possibilities that reside beyond, are withdrawn from, or that fail to cede to, the logic of representation. Christopher Fynsk, "Community and the Limits of Theory," Community at Loose Ends, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 19-21.

these vocabularies themselves, an incapacity incarnated by Fanon's notion of the colonial subject and the constitutive role of the other within it. Fanon's analysis takes us on a journey of limits, both epistemological and theoretical, that seemingly defines the political as a limit challenge to the epistemological.

In the central chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, "The Lived Experience of the Black," Fanon seeks to circumscribe the problem that attends the constitution of the colonized "I" within the colonial context.²⁶⁵ The phenomenological surface of Fanon's analysis, his detailed attention to the unfolding bodily and psychical responses on the part of the Black to the White gaze, might prevent us from recognizing the deeply autobiographical tone and frame through which Fanon presents the various turns of this drama:

Enfermé dans cette objectivité écrasante, j'implorai autrui. Son regard libérateur, glissant sur mon corps devenu soudain nul d'aspérité, me rend une légèreté que je croyais perdue et, m'absentant du monde, me rend au monde. Mais là-bas, just à contre-pente, je bute, et l'autre, par gestes, attitudes, regards, me fixe, dans le sens où l'on fixe une préparation par un colorant. Je m'emportai, exigeai une explication... Rien n'y fit. J'explosai. Voici les menus morceaux par un autre moi réunis. (*Peau*, 88)

Locked up in this crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to the other. His liberating gaze, creeping

²⁶⁵ Frantz Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black," trans. Valentine Moulard, *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001). Hereafter cited in text as *Lived*.

over my body which was thereby suddenly smoothed out, gives me back a lightness that I had thought lost and, by removing me from the world, gives me back to the world. But over there, right when I was reaching the other side, I stumble, and through his movements, attitudes and gaze, the other fixes me, just like a dye is used to fix a chemical solution. I lost my temper and demanded an explanation... But nothing came. I exploded. Here are the fragments put together by another self. (*Lived*, 184)

The journey here is that of an “I” attempting to come to knowledge of itself and through this development present itself as exemplary of a certain type of ‘knowledge,’ one that informs the constitution of a self. Explaining that his *arrival* into the world was conditioned by a desire to attain a plenitude of meaning — “to be at the origin of the world” in his words — Fanon quickly encounters an obstacle: he realizes that he is but “an object among other objects.” And, perhaps more importantly, that he is but an object among (white) men. Confined by this objecthood he seeks recognition from the other. But the process, already arrested once, stops a second time when the gaze of the other fixes him. The fragmentation that results, Fanon relays to us, can only be articulated by a subsequent “self.” Seemingly arrested by the recognition of difference — whether as the recognition of difference from oneself *qua* object or as difference from the other — Fanon’s description specifies an apparent misfiring of subjectification. However, the difficulty of the passage arises from Fanon’s implicit claim that the Black’s ascension to subjectivity, twice arrested, now

finds itself without motor, relegating the “I” to a searching recuperation of the fragments of itself that remain. Fanon’s ‘blackness’ fixes him twice, first as the site of the various stereotypes that define its representation within the social field (“‘Dirty nigger!’ or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’”) and second as the site of subjectification written as failure. With the latter the “I” comes to an awareness of itself, a process that constitutes a return to “world” that is also a retrieval of *its* world (“[he] gives me back a lightness that I had thought lost”). But as he approaches “the other side,” an errant step forces a confrontation with the discordance of *its* world, the balance of the chapter being an attempt to define this discordance by name. Combined here it seems are two issues: the strictures that condition the Black’s introduction into the realm of the social and the revelation, through an analysis of its operation within the Black, of the economy of subjectification. Although the two are linked, they would appear to each relate to quite different areas of significance. The former alluding to the myths and stereotypes that determine the perception of the Black in White society and the latter presenting the Black as an example of the constitution of the subject. And yet something else seems at work here. For doesn’t this process result, not in the unified subject of philosophy’s epistemological ideals, but in the fragmented self of a perhaps less exalted subject of knowledge? Doesn’t the journey of Fanon’s “I”

conclude with an interminable wait for its own arrival?²⁶⁶ All this would seem to indicate that the trajectory Fanon maps leads to an altogether unexpected point of arrival.

The lack of ontological resistance Fanon claims governs the representation of the Black within the social field draws its capacity in part from this doubled moment of arrest.²⁶⁷ The dynamic Fanon proceeds to illustrate is akin to the double bind that Girard formulates as a condition of mimetic desire, “[i]t is not a question of the Black being Black,” Fanon suggests “but rather, of his being black opposite the White.”²⁶⁸ In other words, he must not only conform to the stereotypes that fix him as something *less* than human, an object that registers within the social field as such, but he is also a subject produced by/as the logic of representation that grounds that field. Inasmuch as the Black is black, the defining context of his ‘blackness’ manifests itself within the social field as the stereotypes and myths that come to represent him. But inasmuch as the Black is also subject, and the drama of “The Lived Experience of the Black” is precisely the telling of a coming to subjectivity — whether failed or not —, the Black in its incarnation as subject constitutes the ground of

²⁶⁶ Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black," 200, Fanon, Peau Noire, Masques Blancs 113.

²⁶⁷ Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black," 184, Fanon, Peau Noire, Masques Blancs 88.

²⁶⁸ Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black," 184, Fanon, Peau Noire, Masques Blancs 88.

this sociality as well. This dual status of the Black entails difficulties. His assimilation to the social order depends on his status as object — the means by which he becomes presentable to the other even if only through the distortions to which the other in its perception must subscribe. Yet the Black is not found as object but must be made one, *be acted upon*, in order to accede to the social order:

Les nègres, du jour au lendemain, ont eu deux systèmes de référence par rapport auxquels il leur a fallu se situer. Leur métaphysique, ou moins prétentieusement leur coutumes et les instances auxquelles elle renvoyaient, étaient abolies parce qu'elles se trouvaient en contradiction avec une civilisation qu'ils ignoraient et qui leur en imposait. (*Peau*, 89)

Overnight, Negroes have had to situate themselves with regard to two frames of reference. Their metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, their customs and the instances to which they referred, were suppressed because they were found to be in contradiction with a civilization that they did not know anything about and that was impressive to them. (*Lived*, 184)

The Black becomes definable once submitted as object to the projection of intelligibility constitutive of the logic of representation governing our modern self-understanding. This suppression of customs and culture that accompanies the Black's alteration is also a transformation, as if one moved from the perception of the Black *and* its objects to that of the Black *as* its objects. It renders these

“instances” as objects of knowledge available to the particular fields (i.e., anthropology, history, ethnology, etc.) to which they refer. And yet the Black, within Fanon’s text, also acquires status as the signifier of the logic of representation that grounds such knowledge. He purports to be the exemplar of the arrival to subjectivity as evidenced through both the narrativization of its becoming and the promise in its aspirations (“mon âme pleine du désir d’être à l’origine du monde”/“my soul filled with the desire to be at the origin of the world”). These two moments, the Black as object and subject — as object within and subject grounding the social field — articulate the paradox the Black inhabits. The cleavage that inheres within the colonial subject marks the space proper to this subject as well: colonialism comes to be figured as the site of sociality proper to the Black. Yet within this frame, the colonial *socius* challenges the logic of representation and the subject that it produces. For the Black must fulfill two opposing demands: he must be black (i.e., object) and the Black (i.e., subject), ground of a specific sphere of sociality, the colony. It seems the Black is in the odd position of having to assume the guise of an other who is none other than itself. And although this situation would appear to follow a quite recognizable trajectory for the constitution of the subject, it arrives with this proviso: that this reflection, rather than legitimizing, identifies an impoverishment in the Black’s capacity as

subject. The object that it supposedly produces from its position as subject defines the colonial subject's truth as always already the object that it beholds.

By locating the paradox within and to a certain extent as the colony, Fanon appears to distinguish it, in its essence, from having any consequential relation to the purity of the European *socius* or its subject. Yet, Fanon's work, regardless of its apparent claims to the contrary, seems to harbor the suspicion that the discordance identified with the colonial subject extends well beyond it:

Il y a bien le moment de "l'être pour l'autre", don't parle Hegel, mais toute ontologie est rendue irréalisable dans une société colonisée et civilisée. Il semble que cela n'ait pas suffisamment retenu l'attention de ceux qui on écrit sur la question. Il y a, dans la *Weltanschauung* d'un peuple colonisé, une impureté, une tare qui interdit toute explication ontologique. Peut-être nous objectera-t-on qu'il en est ainsi de tout individu, mais c'est se masquer un problème fondamental. L'ontologie, quand on a admis une fois pour toutes qu'elle laisse de côté l'existence, nous ne permet pas de comprendre l'être du Noir. Car le Noir n'a plus à être noir, mais à l'être en face du Blanc. (*Peau*, 88)

There is of course the moment of the "Being-for-others", of which Hegel speaks, but ontology is unrealizable in a colonized and civilized society. It seems that this fact has not sufficiently retained the attention of those who have written about the question. There is an impurity in the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people, a defect that forbids any ontological explanations. It might be objected that that is the case for every individual, but it would merely cover up a fundamental problem. When one has admitted once and for all that ontology leaves existence

aside, one sees why it does not allow for understanding the being of the Black. It is not a question of the Black being black anymore, but rather, of his being black opposite the White. (*Lived*, 184)

The issue here is not whether the European shares the ontological defect that afflicts the Black; after all, Fanon posits a seeming equivalence between “colonized and civilized society” in regards to this question. Without this equivalence the objection — one Fanon never truly manages to dismiss — expressed by those who would demur from Fanon’s articulation of the issue, i.e., that all individuals might suffer from such an “impurity,” could not be raised. It seems, therefore, that circulating within this passage is another “question” to be situated between the Black and colonization. If we focus on the temporality of the Black’s double bind, that “anymore” which structures the key sentence, we find that we are reduced to one of two possible interpretations. In one possible reading the temporality that structures the Black’s situation would appear to both point back to moment in which the Black was black “with his own” and gesture to the present, construing it as the result of the transformation initiated by the Black’s encounter with the White gaze. From this perspective “being black opposite the White” means being black in an altogether different way. But this would seem to contradict the explicit claim that ontology remains “unrealizable in a colonized and civilized society,”

and the implicit assertion, that this “is the case for every individual.” It is this latter assertion that distracts from the “fundamental problem,” not because it is false but because it *deceives*. Fanon, in other words, never claims that this defect is *not* “the case for every individual.” Rather, he states the problem in different terms by drawing attention to the manner in which it is figured, *qua* problem, within discourse. Moulard in her translation renders the passage as “it would merely *cover up* a fundamental problem,” yet the word Fanon uses, *masquer*, not only connotes to hide but to do so via some manner of disguise or deceit, fundamentally, to dissemble. With this slightly altered meaning, the “question” that innocently begins and frames the ‘blackness’ of the Black requires further attention, because it is precisely the “question” that dissembles. It dissembles not in terms of its content, that is, the answers that it provides, but in its mere status as question, as the form through which beings are registered.²⁶⁹ In

²⁶⁹ My development of the notion of question relies on Heidegger’s reflections on the operations and legitimizing gesture of modern science. For Heidegger, the modern scientific posture does not situate itself in relation to an object already constituted in the phenomenal world but projects a sphere in which it operates. It projects, in other words, an order of coherence in which the phenomena that inhabit the field acquire intelligibility. However, they assume intelligibility only insofar as they are categorized in reference to the governance of science. This projection of coherence binds the intelligibility of phenomena to the terms of modern science (and the elements through which it is articulated, i.e., projection, rigor, methodology, and ongoing activity) and thereby strengthens the link between modern science and the form of self-understanding of which it is a product. In other words, modern science does not reconfigure phenomena in terms of an understanding that emerges from the nature of phenomena; rather it imposes the logic of its form of understanding. The Black must submit to a gaze that is both scientific and informed by the regime of the subject whose emergence Heidegger analyses. Question here articulates this dual frame, that of a disciplinary/discursive modality, i.e., the terms through which

producing the Black as its blackness (i.e., its objecthood), the question circumscribes the space from which the Black registers and is produced, partaking of that logic through which the Black is defined. It would seem that Fanon's "anymore" refers as much to the question at the beginning of his sentence, as to any other element within it. And, if so, then it is the question that requires changing as much as anything else. What is required in other words, is a reconsideration of the Black as the site in/of question(s). Understood within these terms, Fanon's Black ceases *to be* in any sense in which discourse would make that being representable ("It is not a question of the Black being black *anymore*").²⁷⁰ And, yet to withdraw the Black from the sphere of representation means to also displace the "question" that subtends it, gives it form, and articulates it within that sphere ("It is not a *question* ... anymore"). In other words, the Black must be submitted (if this is even the correct word) to another form of opening, to a different articulation of its world.

particular spheres of knowledge operate and the establishment of a regime, that of the subject, with its attendant economy of representation. See Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 118-26.

²⁷⁰ Fanon's syntax registers the discordance that I'm emphasizing through its use of the negative: "Car le Noir *n'a plus à être noir...*" (Italics mine). Fanon, Peau Noire, Masques Blancs 88.

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