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ARTICLES

Theory in Black

Teleological Suspensions in Philosophy of Culture

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My aim in this essay is to explore some challenges in the philosophy of culture that emerge from its often repressed but symbiotic relationship with what Enrique Dussel calls "the underside of modernity."[1] Philosophy of culture and its forms in various disciplines of the human sciences have often avowed French, Germanic, and Scottish roots, through a repression or denial not only of the African, Native American, and Oceanic peoples who function as sources of taxonomical anxiety but also of such sources from "within," so to speak; Spanish influences, for instance, with their resources from Jewish and Muslim social worlds, acquired a peripheral status. Throughout, as I have shown in *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, there have been those who thought otherwise, and their stories reveal the centering of the question of "man" in the modern world in a movement that led from his definition to his conditions of possibility.[2] To study these conditions calls for identifying the subject of study, the main difficulty in studying such a subject, and the reasoning behind such claims. In studying culture we study the being or beings that create culture, which, drawing upon the work of Ernst Cassirer, I argue is a phenomenon marked by a transition from signification to symbol. Cassirer's articulation of the distinction is worthy of a lengthy quote:

> we must carefully distinguish between signs and symbols. That we find rather complex systems of signs and signals in animal behavior seems to be an ascertained fact. We may even say that some animals, especially domesticated animals, are extremely susceptible to signs. A dog will react to the slightest changes in the behavior of his master; he will even distinguish the expressions of a human face or the modulations of a human voice. But it is a far cry from these phenomena to an understanding of symbolic and human speech. The famous experiments of Pavlov prove only that animals can easily be trained to react not merely to direct stimuli but to all sorts of mediate or representative stimuli. A bell, for example, may become a "sign for dinner," and an animal may be trained not to touch its food when this sign is absent. But from this we learn only that the experimenter, in this case, has succeeded in changing the food-situation of the animal. He has complicated this situation by voluntarily introducing into it a new element. All the phenomena which are commonly described as conditioned reflexes are not merely very far from but even opposed to the essential character of human symbolic thought. Symbols—in the proper sense of this term—cannot be reduced to mere signals. Signals and symbols belong to two different universes of discourse: a signal is a part of the human world of meaning. Signals are "operators"; symbols are "designators." Signals, even when understood and used as such, have nevertheless a sort of physical or substantial being; symbols have only a functional value.[3]

No doubt most readers will confirm Cassirer's observation on signs and our sharing their communication with animals. Signs are more referential here; they lack a schism between meaning and referent. But symbols emerge at the breakdown of such isomorphism. The symbolic, which Cassirer ultimately explores in his philosophy as *symbolic forms*, exemplifies the relationality of signs at more complex levels. These levels of meanings offer relations constitutive of reality in ways that could also be understood as *grammar* and *structure*.[4] This "being," the human being, distinguished by its immersion in this world of meaning, however, is also both signifying and symbolic, and is so in a way that challenges study, as

W. E. B. Du Bois showed in his article "Sociology Hesitant";[5] it is a free being, a being with a future, who constructs meaning in a world already created by other such beings, a social world.

The approach I thus use in this essay is not a linear narrative but rather a series of observations and reflections touching upon several problems raised by this initial one about the social world. My reason for doing so is that philosophy of culture, as I understand it, is systematic in a paradoxical way: it is a systematic account of "open systems," of modes of being whose formalization always collapses or results in failures of formalization or systematization—in other words, a systematic account of that which resists systematic accounts. It requires, then, a celebration of contradictions not for the sake of elusiveness or a callous disregard for rigor but, instead, for that of illumination. Such an approach could thus be called *dialectical*, *psychoanalytical*, and *existential*.

Philosophy of culture involves the complexity of integrating at least two notions that may at first not seem compatible—namely, *reason* and *culture*. The latter, as is well known, is often governed by myth, aspirations, and the constellation of relations that facilitate a world in which the human being can be at home, whereas the former is governed by a commitment to reality and truth often with a consequence of displacement and realized contradictions. That the former is an expression of the world human beings forge, the struggle and at times folly of human existence, is exemplified by Karl Jaspers, echoing Hegel: "truth is in league with reality against consciousness."[6] A commitment is, however, not identical with the realization of that to which it is made. One of the paradoxical and ironic dimensions of reason, at least as understood in its human manifestation, is the ability to synthesize the anomalous and even what at first may offer itself more aggressively as antinomy.[7]

The context for this discussion is what has become known as *Africana thought* and *black thought*. There are those who object to such designations, seeing them as particularized loci for practices that in fact have universal potential. I could have chosen not to admit such a location of thought, especially since throughout my career I have also characterized my work as "radical thought," not only in its historical political specificity but also in the sense

of thought devoted to getting to the roots of phenomena and to a level of self-critique that includes subjecting the method of self-critique itself to inquiry. That I am a black (specifically Afro-Jewish) person doing theoretical work, however, makes the ascription of blackness unavoidable because of the context: I, and many others like me, do something that, under an interpretation of theory that was unfortunately held by a good number of giants of modern thought, we should not be able to do. As Frantz Fanon put it in *Black Skin, White Masks*, in the modern imagination reason takes flight whenever the black enters the scene.[8]

Theory in black, then, is already a phobogenic designation. It occasions anxiety of thought; it is theory in jeopardy. On one hand this is not a surprise given the story of the emergence of blackness in the modern world. Its roots, as many in race theory have shown, emerge at first from the theological naturalism of Christian efforts to exorcise Medieval Christendom of Jews and Moors—as attested to in the medieval Spanish word *raza*, which referred to breeds of dogs, horses; Jews and Moors.[9] My formulation separates the series with a semicolon between "horses" and "Jews," but that the original form did not do so exemplifies the point: Jews and Moors were to be understood at the level of dogs and horses, levels beneath the human being, personified here as Christian. Yet, as at least Sigmund Freud might observe in the choice of animals, the dog and the horse—a beast of scent and proximity in terms of the dog; another on which one rides in terms of the horse—both point to the closeness and distance from which medieval theological naturalism organized the human, subhuman, and nonhuman world into an order that would encounter its contradictions in the expansion succeeding the reassertion of Christendom.[10] The native populations of lands that were not Jewish, Christian, nor Muslim strained the anthropological categories in those prototypical years of the late fifteenth century, and the alignments that followed revealed the theological dimensions of theory itself, whose origins are, after all, in similar language: *theorein*, from which we receive the word *theory*, did not only mean "to view" but also to view, as the root *theo* suggests, what G-d or the gods would see. That to see Jew, Moor, (New World) Indian, and eventually black as an affront

to things holy meant, in effect, that to see what G-d (in such a presumption) saw was to see that which should not be seen. There is a form of illicit seeing, then, at the very beginnings of seeing black, which makes a designation of seeing in black, theorizing, that is, in black, more than oxymoronic. It has the mythopoetics of sin.

Although the subsequent unfolding of theory claimed other sites of legitimacy, where G-d fell to systems of thought demanding accounts of nature without an overarching teleology—instead elevating what could be thought through inescapable or insurmountable resources of understanding, as Kant subsequently argued—the symbolic baggage of prior ages managed to reassert themselves at subterranean levels of grammar. As Derrida correctly observed, what it means to do things "right" still brings along with it theological *forms*, such as those found in the theodicy of systems.[11] The modern world, in other words, is sustained by the mythic life that the age claims to have transcended but instead has simply repressed.

The many uses of the term *repression*, from its political to its psychological forms, point to the problem faced by any effort at self-reflection. As Freud, and all subsequent psychoanalysts, observed, reflecting on the self is no easy task. Albeit the most praised, it is also the most feared; *really to know the self* is a dangerous undertaking since it requires acts of "uncovering." That something is "covered" in the first place substantiates Freud's point. Even "recovery" becomes problematic when revealed in hyphenated form, as Sara Ahmed has shown, as "re-cover."[12] As Freud, and supporters such as Norman Brown, observed, there could be a neurotic dimension to efforts at historical recovery: think of how much of history is, at the methodological level, the delineating of events for recovery, that is, the resituating of it as an even more rigorous assertion of covering.[13] The task of laying bare, of bringing out in the open, becomes the activity it resists, hiding paradoxically by offering itself for exposure: hidden by virtue of being seen.

We have come, then, to the important challenge raised by theory in black: it is, in effect, for theory to face itself. Theory, in other words, faces doing what Freud attempted to do with Freud, namely, *really analyze itself*. Blackness, in all its metaphors and historical submergence, reaches out to theory, then, as theory split from

itself. It is the dark side of theory, which, in the end, is none other than theory itself, understood as self-reflective, outside itself. These are very abstract reflections, but I hope they make some sense as I proceed.

This story of theory leads to at least three problematics, as I suggested at the outset but now make more specific. The first raises problems of identity and identification. The second raises problems of freedom, transformation, and transcendence. The third questions the justificatory practices of the first two and even itself. All three then take a reflective form that leads eventually to these formulations: theoretical or philosophical anthropology; freedom and liberation; and metacritiques of reason. I make the first "anthropological" since the questioner, the being asking "What am I?" is the proverbial "we," which is as we understand it or ourselves, human beings. But the humanity of human beings is not easily defined and it could be such that it transcends its own subject. Philosophical anthropology should, then, be understood beyond empirical anthropology. These three problematics relate to theory in black as follows: (1) the black is a site of questioned humanity, (2) the black emerged as a site whose freedom is challenged, and (3) the black is a site without reason or worse—a threat to reason. Addressing these three troubled forms of emergence—and we should remember that emergence is but another way of stating appearance or manifestation, which in turn, at least in the formulation of standing out, is another way of saying *existence*—requires addressing the relationships they manifest, namely, relationships with *human being*, *freedom*, and *reason*. In this, we see a movement from theory to metatheory. Since the focus of this essay is theory, and since theory is wedded to reason, I center the rest of this discussion on reason, with the other two serving a contextualizing role.

So first, let us distinguish reason from rationality. Rationality calls for maximum consistency. This is because to be rational requires consistency with a principle or "reason" for action or thought, and since to be inconsistent there need only to be one instance of contradiction, the demand for completeness is also one of maximization. Maximum consistency is, however, identical with hyperconsistency (otherwise consistency, at some point in its series,

could be inconsistent).[14] To be hyperconsistent is, however, to be unreasonable. Rationality thus faces the problem of its own reasonableness. This means that the scope of reason must also include the evaluation of rationality. That reason must evaluate rationality means, however, that its scope exceeds rationality. Reason must be able to enter the realm that the rational must avoid; to be reasonable, one must be willing, at times, to be inconsistent. Although seemingly weighted down by logic, this observation has enormous consequences. In logic, the exemplars are those such as Gottlob Frege, Alfred North Whitehead, and Bertrand Russell, each of whom (save later on for Whitehead) waged the good fight in defense of consistency maximization and against the collapse threatened by Gödel's observation of the incompleteness of self-referential logical systems. Although some logics are complete, metalogic, which includes the logic of logic, is incomplete. This observation at first seems to be of little consequence until one realizes that reason is also a self-referential activity, an activity that involves self-evaluation. This means that incompleteness can emerge in a heavily lived, existential sense made concrete by the observation that only gods are complete. We human beings face, this analysis suggests, the negation at the heart of our emergence.[15]

The distinction between reason and rationality raises the question of the effort to ground reason in rationality in the first place. Besides the limitations of formal efforts, there is also that which echoes the emergence of modern science as the governing epistemic approach to the study of nature. Science promised to emancipate the human being from the tyranny of nature, but in such conquest was the problem of the legitimacy of its own scope.[16] Limits on science suggested limits on rationality, so in the expansion of rationality was the hope of an ever-expanding reach of epistemic security. In more prosaic form, in the effort to make rationality complete, its scope reached beyond itself to reason. In that effort a special form of epistemic practice followed, which I would like here to call *the colonization of reason*, or at least its attempt. This phenomenon was identified early on by thinkers such as Rousseau in the eighteenth century and Schopenhauer in the nineteenth. Their legacy from Nietzsche to Jaspers, Sartre, Freud, and even Claude

Lévi-Strauss, is well known. Oddly enough, Jaspers, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss made contributions in the life sciences and social sciences, and all three were willing to look at the limits of reason and the problems of rationalistic imposition on it. I have been speaking of Freud throughout, but we could add Jaspers's observation on philosophy as a hymn to reason in his *Philosophy of Existence*, which he calls "mystification for the understanding," and Lévi-Strauss's posing of the mythic dimensions of reason in response to efforts to rationalize mythic life.[17] To all this I should like to add the significance of Fanon's contribution. Fanon, after all, made the colonial aspirations of such a conception of rationality, of expanding the imperial scope of rationality even over reason, visible in his reflections on method. For Fanon, the methodological challenge of addressing colonization even at the level of method required a suspension of method. This is because, as he argued in the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, colonization is also manifested by its means of implementation. Such instruments are also epistemological, and if the disciplinary practices that construct the modern colonized subject as subhuman are to be interrogated, that includes, as well, the presuppositions of unprejudiced interrogation.[18] This observation led Fanon to advance the paradox of a method of no method.

The paradoxical method that is not a method or nonmethod that is a method brings to the fore the importance of phenomenology in a critical discussion of the metacritique of reason, especially the dimension that focuses on metatheory. Although Husserl is much attacked among postmodern scholars, especially with regard to the Heideggerian attack on philosophies of consciousness, there is much in Husserl's thought that is misunderstood, especially the aspect of it that responded to the problem of completeness that I have raised here.[19] Husserl understood, in stream with what I have outlined in Fanon, that there was a constant threat of the colonization of reason by relativized or relativizing orders of rationality and logics.[20] Similar as well to Freud, Husserl took the critical path not only outward but also inward, radically inward, even to the level of his own methodological assumptions. By placing everything, even phenomenology, in the category of that which cannot

be presumed but must be posed as an object of critical evaluation, he in effect advanced a demonstrative proof instead of a formal one. This is so because no inquiry, no study, can be made without *something* being an object of investigation. And this relationship was all Husserl needed to show in order to prove his point: that relationship was no less than intentionality itself. This is the basic premise of phenomenological investigation—to appeal not to a psychological notion of consciousness but rather to a relational understanding of what it means for any inquiry to take place. Thought—any thought—must be *of* something, and that relationship is *performed* in any act of reflection.

Returning to Fanon, his refusal to presuppose a method brought problems of method to the forefront. It also advanced an early version of the problem of what I call *disciplinary decadence*, a phenomenon in which method facilitates the epistemic rejection of reality.[21] There is a neurotic dimension in how human beings have come to relate to reality, as Freud and Jaspers observed—namely, to avoid it. It stands, after all, as those uncontrollable elements of life that stimulate insecurity. For many of us, reality is something we can take only in small doses, mediated or often covered by the rich sauce of culture. Some might wonder why any dose of reality is needed, why, in fact, culture could not simply sever the link and leave us in the world of floating signification, of long chains of fabricated relationships whose governing principle is the fragile self. The answer is that for some of us, that is exactly what happens. We know it as psychosis or, simply, madness. Although often inspired by the hope of agency and motivations for security, such a path collapses into dependency on the continued play of delusions. In the world of comedy, this insight is often brought to the fore through the bit of a protagonist constructing a false world in which to convince a loved one, often a disappointed parent, of his or her success. The subtext is, of course, that in attempting to fool others, the trickster becomes the fool.

One of the tricks of method, where method in itself functions on a par with magic, is its elevation to the status of ontology. This is apparent in the sociological phenomenon of disciplinary professionalism, where many evaluators seek the meticulous adher-

ence to method as though it were Kant's Categorical Imperative.[22] This is not accidental since Kant himself brought such formality to practical reason, even though he encountered antinomies of reason in his first critique. The legacy of Kant is such, however, that this turn to method as a condition of possibility is no less than the misguided presupposition of methodological transcendentalism. The problem, however, is that such an achievement of method could only have been possible if there were an isomorphic relationship between the conditions that formed the method and all of reality. The method, in other words, would have to have had omniscient and omnipotent origins.

These phenomenological reflections reveal themselves to be grounded, then, if and only if it is impossible to reject them without instantiating phenomenology. The rejection of phenomenology must, in other words, discount itself as anything—including as a rejection—to lay claim to the absence of an object of reflection. It must, in other words, not present itself as what it is in order to assert a claim against being anything within the framework of a phenomenological critique. The whole rejection falls apart under the weight of its own reduction, and even the accusation of logicism cannot work as a counter-argument since, as Husserl, and also Fanon as I have been reading him, demanded at the outset that logic, too, cannot be the source of such legitimacy. This may seem overly abstract, but it is crucial to understanding that phenomenology is premised upon a relationship of and with phenomena, a position shared by even its structuralist and poststructuralist critics, as Peter Caws and Hugh Silverman have shown, and that even the transcendental ego, in this reading, cannot be a neat, closed substance, as critics such as Sartre presupposed, but instead bears a formal relationship to, proverbially, all there is, which is in turn another series of relationships or, to put it differently, a potentially infinite open series.[23]

Methodological decadence, whose correlate is disciplinary decadence, encounters its limits in a variety of ways. Fanon advocated the position of embodied interrogatives, of the human being reentering a relationship of questioning.[24] Nelson Maldonado-Torres characterizes this, and Fanon's initial critique of method, as a

"decolonial reduction."[25] By this he means laying bare the mechanisms of colonial imposition. To this I have advocated teleological suspensions of disciplinarity, including methodology. Teleological suspensions take purpose seriously and offer a respect for, and realization of, the scope of reality. This recommendation has been misinterpreted as a plea for interdisciplinarity. The problem with interdisciplinarity is that it carries with it a presupposition of the completeness of the disciplines, which leads to a form of disciplinary solipsism, where the discipline becomes the world onto itself, the effect of which precludes actual meeting on the tasks at hand. Instead, a teleological suspension of disciplinarity suggests a *transdisciplinary* movement, where engagement with reality may demand disciplinary adjustment, transcendence, or the construction of new disciplines. Teleological suspension demands being willing to go beyond one's disciplinary presuppositions for the sake of reality. In philosophy it is when a philosopher goes beyond philosophy, which sometimes has the ironic consequence of, instead of discarding philosophy, creating new philosophy. "Teleology" is, however, not here meant to be in the form of an over-imposing force or superstructure but as a generative consequence of intelligent life. Although some postmodernists have objected to teleological reasoning as essentialist, a problem with such a counter-claim is that it appeals to an a priori anti-essentialism, where the scope of essential claims is presumed and rejected without demonstration. Such a position exemplifies the contradiction of an essentialism of anti-essentialism. The thought process by which assessments can be made is precluded here, since to go through it would require purpose, which is ruled out by a presumption of essentialized purpose in all teleological reasoning. What is reason without purpose?

Recently, Jane Anna Gordon and I have been working on the question of purpose in intellectual life through what we call the *pedagogical imperative*, by which we mean that teaching and learning require the constant articulation of reality's vastness.[26] The effort to yoke reality under a single-size-fits-all schema encircles such vastness in itself at the cost of an "outside." The price of such recalcitrance is a loss of freedom through the abrogation of humility, in the good sense of remembering that one is *part* of the world

instead of its whole. Theory, in other words, signifies beyond itself, and even when it is self-referential, the distancing inaugurated by the displacements of self-reference points to an ever-larger context of thought. Teleologically suspending disciplinary decadence also requires an expansion of disciplinary languages, which raises several considerations.

Kwasi Wiredu recently argued, in his *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, that postmodern criticisms of universal claims across cultures in favor of cultural particularism creates a false dilemma and a misrepresentation of facts of language and those about the human species.[27] So long as a human being has learned a language, Wiredu argues, he or she is capable of learning other languages and thus understanding concepts from other languages, including those that cannot be translated into his or her base language. This is so, he explains, because of the necessity of human communication with each other. Even if there were not other cultures with other languages, the same problems would arise internal to a given culture and language: The expansion of learning requires a point of nontranslation and simply apprehension and comprehension. The evidence for this is all around us. English, for instance, has many words from other languages that have become simply part of how an English-speaking person speaks and thinks. The error many critics of human universals have made, Wiredu concludes, is that they focus on *translation* instead of *learning*.

Wiredu's argument reveals a great deal of indebtedness to Kant, as do Husserl's and Fanon's, even though these thinkers disagree with him in many important ways. It was Kant who stressed the importance of transcendental argumentation for a constructive relationship with reason. Kant asked for the conditions by which certain received concepts are possible. We could prosaically refer to these as the conditions of possibility of questions and answers. The impact of this argument has pretty much been the orientation of all subsequent thought, as seen by efforts to demonstrate historical, linguistic, semiotic, and increasingly cultural conditions of possibility for everything from knowledge to culture itself.

Although Wiredu showed that the underlying human subject, even though open with possibility, must be premised on its capac-

ity to learn and to communicate, there is an odd consequence of this kind of demonstration when radicalized as an evaluation of its own condition of possibility. If we return to the demonstration of the relationship of intentionality as a condition of possibility for any phenomenon as an object of study, we cannot from this point make conclusions of universality or particularity, which would require a presupposed conceptual framework into which to place the stage of evaluation. Since even that framework must not be presupposed in our effort to evaluate the process, it affords no domain or set into which its status as universal *or* particular could be established. In effect, this is a demonstration *beyond* universal and particular claims. It, in other words, simply *is*.

This is not to say that more cannot be said about the type of subjects that could learn to communicate and in doing so manifest a series of open relationships constitutive of world and culture. A critic may ask, for instance, about what is involved in talking about intentionality in a way that does not render it as a psychological phenomenon, psychological consciousness, or mind. There is already much research on mind as a relational activity and on how our minds work as embodiments of consciousness.[28] I will say straight out that disembodied consciousness makes no sense to me. But an embodied consciousness reminds us of our condition as biological entities. We all experience degrees of alertness and clarity, and we know that things get murky as we grow fatigued to the point of near loss when we are asleep, but awareness disappears only at the most severe collapse of brain and other bodily activity. At each stage, we are capable of multiple levels of thinking instead of a unilateral, linear structure. The mind, in other words, functions like the performance of a jazz drummer or pianist: much is going on simultaneously, and decisions are made through the rhythmic and melodic flow of each limb. Just as there is not a conscious gap between our brain and our entire body (the whole thing is consciousness), the same argument about the flow of the levels of conscious pertains to their symbolic interaction. All this amounts to remembering that consciousness is manifested, even symbolically, as a "here" by which we relate to the world as "there," and that this phenomenon is always embodied as "whole." If we were but

a dot, for instance, we would be a whole dot. This is to say, then, that alternative models of mind and its semiology are needed, other than the ones that structure who and what we are on a linear path of a reflection needed before reflection. There is much of what we do, in other words, that is a spontaneous convergence of significant and symbolic activity.

At this point, much of what I have focused on is the dimension of philosophy of culture through theory in black that involves the metacritique of reason. I should now like simply to outline some considerations that follow from the effort to negotiate the elements of identity and freedom, of philosophical anthropology and liberation, that have emerged from the idea of theory in black.

Two are considerations from Du Bois. Racism and colonization lead to conceptions of the self in which the self becomes a rejected standard of itself for some groups versus others. For blacks, as Du Bois and also Fanon have argued, this meant being placed in the neurotic situation of being measured by standards they could never achieve because they are standards not of actions but of *beings*. To be legitimate, antiblack racism demands that blacks become white or at least cease to be blacks. This stimulated the first stage of double consciousness, namely, seeing the self through the eyes of hostile others. Paget Henry has shown in his essay "Africana Phenomenology," however, that Du Bois and Fanon also identified a second, dialectical and phenomenological stage—the realization of living by a false standard.[29] In other words, the contradictions of a system that props up a set of human beings as gods are revealed in a critique of the system that forced people to measure themselves so neurotically. This leads, second, to the posing of blackness as a problem, as Du Bois showed, often exemplifying a movement from people with problems to problem people.[30] The consequence has been an effort to "fix" black people.[31] The structure of this fixture has, however, been historically neurotic and violent, since it has posed to black people their own elimination as a condition of progress. This negative path has produced, as Abdul JanMohamed has shown in *The Death-Bound-Subject*, a form of subjectivity conditioned by a suprastructural expectation of its elimination—namely, a death-bound subjectivity.[32] He

rightly explores the psychoanalytical dimensions of this situation, for it should be clear, as Fanon showed with his philosophical psychoanalytical explorations, that the sociogenetic conditions of its emergence demand social conditions and socially oriented strategies for its transformation. Fanon, in other words, de-ontologized psychoanalysis by revealing the social conditions of the generation of symbols in the colonial context and the normative expectations that demand the elimination of certain subjects for systemic consistency. Although Fanon offered a critique of psychoanalysis, he also affirmed an aspect of it, shared here by JanMohamed and emphasized by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that superstructural or super-egological impositions on how human beings can live as agents in the social world must be transformed for the possibility of healthy human existence. Put differently, what is caused by the social world requires a change in the social world for it, too, to change. We live, however, in a world that demands the change of individuals instead of a changed society. The response in the modern world has been the prioritizing of ethics as the condition of the better possibility of a more just world. The additional problem, however, as Freud has argued, is that ethics and justice, two expectations of modern liberal social and political thought, often have the consequence of producing more radicalized forms of alienation as cultural equivalents of an aim-inhibiting, neurotic, guilt-laden super ego. Although Freud received many criticisms for this claim, including those against his postulate of destructive threats from nonsexual forms of aggression, the argument itself is particularly pertinent to any project of decolonization, again understood through considerations from Fanon.

Fanon had observed a form of ethical derailment occasioned, paradoxically, by the modern prioritizing of ethics amid its structural repression. Ethics and the ethical depend on a set of relations of recognition between human beings that have been submerged for some people in the modern world. On one hand, ethics demands a self-other dialectic, one in which the self could be posed to the self as another. In effect, the other, then, is part of the continuum of relations constitutive of the self, which affords obligation to others as also obligations to the self. Racism, however, locks

a group of beings below the self-other dialectic, which means in relation to them there is neither self nor other; there is no-self, no-other. This subterranean realm, referred to by Fanon in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* as a "zone of nonbeing," leads to a strange relation to ethics. The antiracist struggle becomes one, not against otherness, but of *becoming other*. The problem is that as neither self nor other, the assertion of appearance becomes a violation instead of an affirmation of the ethical order. It is, in other words, *violent*. This meant as, Fanon argued in *Les Damnés de la terre*, that talk of the ethical conditions of social justice and politics misses the point.[33] The legacy of colonialism is the necessity of a politics for an ethics. The political preceding the ethical means, in effect, a relation of suspended ethics and justice; as something fought *for*, they can no longer be conditions of possibility.

The connection that this kind of argument has with Freud is that he, too, argued that it would be better for society to construct livable conditions for healthy life than to focus on idealized concepts of ethics and justice, two ideals productive more of anxiety and neurosis than of social well-being, as witnessed recently, for instance, in the debates over public-run healthcare in the United States.[34] Freud's conclusion is no doubt shocking in a world enamored with ethics, especially in academic settings. Ethics, after all, is being taught everywhere, and argumentation in terms of ethics is profuse. Even postmodernist arguments, as found in those that dominate many works in cultural studies, often boil down to conclusions of ethical condemnations and recommendations. The contemporary global social, political, and ecological situation suggests that ethics seems to have acquired the status of a fetish rather than an effective exemplar of practical reason.

Freud's and Fanon's critiques point to a dimension of mature life that is unfortunately discomforting and discomfiting. The point can be illustrated as follows: each of us should ask ourselves, which would bother us more—our community (whether professional, personal, or public) considering us "unethical" or "stupid"? As intelligence is prized more than ethics in our age, the futility of pushing ethics becomes apparent: how could people be expected to behave ethically in a world that makes doing so silly? In other words, any

system that makes it more rational to act unethically is destined to produce the kinds of problems by which humanity is besieged today. In the colonial context, the situation was, as Aimé Césaire and Fanon observed, a matter of microcosmic portents of the future: colonialism made it *stupid* for colonized people to act according to the ethics of the system, since ethics in such a system demanded the preservation of that system.[35] Ethics in that context meant to remain colonized, and the parasitic dimensions of that kind of ethical argumentation into postcolonial settings have resulted in the persistence of a grammar of ideals of systemic preservation.

This is not to say that becoming sociopaths is the way to go. It is to say that perhaps the formulation of ethics versus sociopathology is a false dilemma. The suspension of prioritizing ethics and the focusing on expanding the conditions of agency in the social world could have an effect on the meaning of normative life by making life itself and ethical life more meaningful.

These philosophical psychoanalytical reflections raise the problem of whether whole areas of thought, whether particular kinds of theory, have been subverted by the conditions they were developed to overcome. A form of didacticism of values accompanies colonial culture and its dialectical movement from decolonization to neocolonization. Didacticism, as its etymological namesake Daedalus suggests, is an organizing trope of sacrifice and impaired development among intellectuals. Recall that Daedalus built the labyrinth in which hid the Minotaur waiting to consume lost and confused souls. Such is the threat of overly moralized theory today.[36]

I should now like to conclude by simply touching on several themes I have been working on that are of relevance to the topic of this essay: (1) the meaning of the face in an antiblack world, (2) the melancholy of reason, (3) the significance of home for any discourse of freedom, (4) the significance of disastrous culture, and (5) the humanizing role of art. Speech, which is crucial for social appearance, is expressed through the complex set of bones, nerves (including the eyes), muscles, teeth, and skin that constitute the face, accompanied by the gesturing force of hands. It is no surprise that antiblack institutions demand the distortion of black faces to the point of near speechlessness or emotive cacophony, in short, facelessness.

For black speech (not ebonics) to appear as speech requires a relationship to reason that brings its melancholy to the fore.

As we have seen, black people, among other groups of color, struggle against unreason in the modern world, but it is an unreason that poses as reason. It is "reason," as I indicated earlier, not being reasonable. Our neurotic situation is one of having to fight an unreasoning reason *reasonably*. If melancholy could be understood as the loss born of our subjectivity, we face such a condition as a productive loss. The phenomenon of theory in black is born in the modern world; it is, in other words, indigenous or, for some, endemic to it. Black suffering, then, involves having to transcend a world that is the condition of black being. That suffering involves the paradox of black people living as exiles in the world from which they are born. They are homeless in their home.

Freedom, a precious aspiration brought to heightened attention in the modern world, ultimately demands going home. For it is in one's home that one can really speak freely, can really appear. There is not enough space to spell it out here, but in our recent book, *Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age*, Jane Anna Gordon and I explored the problem of cultural disaster, a phenomenon in which a culture is frozen in its past as a consequence of colonization. This leads to a subversion of dynamics ordinarily apparent in living culture, such as the creative possibilities of creolization in its future. It renders a group of people homeless in the present because they are only able to live in the past.

Art, as I see it, is the construction of human presence in space that transforms it into place and thereby makes us more at home in the world. Even the most abstract art exemplifies human presence, however small, in the cosmos. The face, loss, emplacement, disaster, and attunement accompany our very human query, "Where do we belong?" Although theory begins, always, with the recognition of a displacement, its task, as ironically Charles Sanders Peirce and Du Bois, two greats from radically different racial perspectives, observed in the past century, is to offer an understanding of the place to which we wish never to return because of the one we have found.[37] And what could provide a more fitting end to this reflection than such a question?

Notes

This talk was presented at the University of California, Berkeley on April 16, 2009, as the inaugural Chancellor Lecture. I thank Abdul JanMohamed for coordinating this event, which consisted of a two-month seminar on some of my work, a discussion meeting between the participants and me, and this public lecture, with Paget Henry from Brown University offering a response. I also want to thank the graduate students and faculty who participated in the seminars and public lecture.

1. See Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996).
2. Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Hereafter cited as *AP*.
3. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944), 31–32. Hereafter cited as *EoM*.
4. For Cassirer's more detailed account, see his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3 vols., trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953–1955). For a discussion of its relation to structuralism, see Peter Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International Press, 1988), hereafter cited as *SAT*, and Kenneth Panfilio and Drucilla Cornell, *Symbolic Forms* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).
5. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 37–44.
6. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. and intro. Richard F. Grabau (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 43. Hereafter cited as *PoE*.
7. The famous demonstration of this is Kant's articulation of antinomies of reason in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965).
8. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967), chapters 6 and 7, hereafter cited as *BS*. For discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, "When I Was There, It Was Not: On Secretions Once Lost in the Night," *Performance Research* 2, no. 3 (September 2007): 8–15.
9. See David Nirenberg, "Race and the Middle Ages: The Case of Spain and Its Jews," in *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, ed. M. R. Greer, W. D. Mignolo, and M. Quilligan (Chicago: University of Chi-

cago Press, 2007): 71–87. For an excellent philosophical introduction to and summary history of race theory, see Paul Taylor, *The Concept of Race* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004), hereafter cited as *CoR*.

10. For Freud's observation on dogs: "It would be incomprehensible, too, that man should use the name of his most faithful friend in the animal world—the dog—as a term of abuse if that creature had not incurred his contempt through two characteristics: that it is an animal whose dominant sense is that of smell and one which has no horror of excrement, and that it is not ashamed of sexual functions." See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, ed. and intro. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 52, in the continued note 1. Hereafter cited as *CD*. The psychoanalytical dimensions of the horse, with symbols of speed and strength, also face counterbalance with, for the human being, its rear end at face level in a world, as Freud saw it in that chapter (IV), premised upon the subordination of anal eroticism. The theological considerations emerge in the various hierarchies of being in the Middle Ages and those adopted in hierarchical taxonomies of early modernity. For discussion, see Taylor, *CoR*, and also Lewis Gordon, "Race Theory," in *The Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Mark Bevir and Naomi Choi (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, forthcoming).
11. See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. with intro. and additional notes by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) and *Margins of Philosophy,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
12. See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 103–6.
13. See Norman Brown, *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959).
14. This understanding of consistency is from formal logic, although its intuitive and informal elements come to bear on the argument. For a discussion of consistency and the effort to maintain it at meta and higher-order systems of logical evaluation, see Susan Haack, *Philosophy of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), hereafter cited as *PoL*.
15. For discussion, see *PoL* and *PoE*.
16. See *EoM*, *PoE,* and Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954).
17. See *PoE*, 60, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*,

trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), and Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*, with a new foreword by Wendy Doniger (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

18. See also Walter Mignolo, "Philosophy and the Colonial Difference," SPEP Supplement, *Philosophy Today* 43, no. 4 (1999): 36–41.
19. The discussion of Husserl here draws upon Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy: Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, trans. and intro. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 71–147; Husserl, *Cartesian Mediations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960); and Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969).
20. For discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995), especially chapters 2 and 3. Hereafter cited as *FC*.
21. See *FC*, chapter 5, and Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006).
22. See, e.g., Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobs-Merrill, 1959).
23. See Caws, *SAT*, and Hugh Silverman, *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
24. See the concluding paragraphs of *BS*.
25. See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
26. See Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, "On Working through a Most Difficult Terrain: Introducing *A Companion to African-American Studies*," in *A Companion to African-American Studies*, ed. and intro. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), xx–xxxv; Jane Anna Gordon, "Beyond Anti-Elitism: Black Studies and the Pedagogical Imperative," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 32, no. 1 (forthcoming); Lewis R. Gordon, "A Pedagogical Imperative of Pedagogical Imperatives," *Thresholds in Education* (forthcoming).
27. Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
28. This is the standard position in the phenomenological tradition, in

which the most prominent formulations are from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. See his *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2005), and *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968). More recent neuroscience and work in philosophy of mind are supporting his (and many other phenomenologists') position. See, e.g., Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

29. Paget Henry, "Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications," *C. L. R. James Journal* 11, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 79–112. See also Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), chapter 4. Hereafter cited as *EA*.
30. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Study of Negro Problems," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11 (January 1898): 1–23, reprinted in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 56 (March 2000): 13–27, and *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), hereafter cited as *SBF*.
31. See *EA*, chapter 4: "What Does It Mean to Be a Problem?"
32. Abdul JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
33. I prefer to use the French title for this text since *Wretched of the Earth*, albeit also a reference to the "*L'Internationale*," does not quite capture his argument about the subjects at hand. See my discussion of this matter in *AP*, 90.
34. For Freud on ethics and justice, see, e.g., *CD*, 100–103.
35. For Césaire's discussion, see his *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).
36. For discussion, see Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis R. Gordon, *Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009), chapters 1 and 5.
37. For Peirce, see his influential essays, "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, selected and ed. with intro. by Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 5–41. For Du Bois's thoughts on the same, see *SBF*.