

Black Bodies, White Gazes

THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE

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The Return of the Black Body: Seven Vignettes

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

—Ralph Ellison

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

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

To theorize the Black body one must “turn to the [Black] body as the radix for interpreting racial experience.”² This particular strategy also functions as a lens through which to theorize and critique whiteness; for the Black body’s “racial” experience is fundamentally linked to the oppressive modalities of the raced white body. However, there is no denying that my own racial experiences or the social performances of whiteness can become objects of critical reflection. In

this chapter, I describe and theorize a variety of instances in which the Black body is reduced to instantiations of the white imaginary, resulting in what I refer to as “the phenomenological return of the Black body.” These instantiations are embedded within and evolve out of the complex social and historical interstices of whites’ efforts at self-construction through complex acts of erasure and denigration of Black people. These acts of self-construction are myths or ideological constructions predicated upon maintaining white power. As James Snead explained, “Mythification is the replacement of history with a surrogate ideology of [white] elevation or [Black] demotion along a scale of human value.”³

I do not hold the view that Blacks only offer *experiences* while whites provide the necessary *theoretical* framing of those experiences. Consistent with my own theorizations on the subject, Lewis Gordon recognizes the historical impetus of this move toward experience and how such a move as such is not problematic. “After all,” as Gordon argues, “for a long time there was the denial of black inner life, of black subjectivity; the notion of a black person’s point of view suggested consciousness of the world, which would call for dynamics of reciprocal recognition.”⁴ Of course, the objectives are 1) to avoid reducing Blacks to experience and 2) to avoid making whites the oracle interpretative voices of Black experiences. By implication, it is important to avoid a relationship of dependency and to assert an agential Black exegetical role in rendering their experiences meaningful.

Ossie Davis

To have one’s dark body penetrated by the white gaze and then to have that body returned as distorted is a powerfully violating experience. The experience presupposes an anti-Black lived context, a context within which the lived experience of the Black unfolds. Late writer, actor, and activist Ossie Davis recalled that at age six or seven two white police officers told him to get into their car and took him down to the precinct. They kept him there for an hour, laughing at him and eventually pouring cane syrup over his head. This humiliation only created the opportunity for more laughter, as they *looked* upon the “silly” little Black boy. If he was able to articulate his feelings at that moment, think of how the young Davis was returned to himself: “I am an object of white laughter, a buffoon, a clown, a nigger.” Davis no doubt appeared to the white police officers in ways they had approved. They set the stage, created a site of Black buffoonery, and enjoyed their sadistic pleasure without blinking an eye. As Sartwell explains, “The [white] oppressor seeks to constrain the oppressed [Blacks] to certain approved modes of visibility (those set out in the template of stereotype) and then gazes obsessively on the spectacle he has created.”⁵ Davis noted that he “went along with the game of black emasculation, it seemed to come naturally”; after that, “the ritual was complete” and he was then sent home with some peanut brittle to eat.⁶ Even at that early age and without the words to articulate what he felt, Davis knew he was an innocent victim of vicious white supremacy.

He referred to the ritual as the process of “niggerization,” and noted that America had already told him what his response “should be: not to be surprised; to expect it; to accommodate it; to live with it. I didn’t know how deeply I was scarred or affected by that, but it was a part of who I was.”⁷

Davis, in other words, was made to feel that he had to accept who he was, that “niggerized” little Black boy, an insignificant plaything within a system of ontological racial differences. The trick of white ideology is operative in this context, giving the appearance of fixity, where the “look of the white subject interpellates the black subject as inferior, which, in turn, bars the black subject from seeing him/herself without the internalization of the white gaze.”⁸ On this score, white bodies are deemed agential, configuring “passive” Black bodies according to their will. But it is no mystery; for “the Negro is interpreted in the terms of the white man. White-man psychology is applied and it is no wonder that the result often shows the Negro in a ludicrous light.”⁹ While walking across the street, I have endured the sounds of locking car doors. I have endured white women clutching their purses or walking across the street as they catch a glimpse of my approaching Black body. During such moments, my body is given back to me in a ludicrous light, where I *live* the meaning of my body as confiscated. Davis also had the meaning of his young Black body stolen. One might argue that Davis (like me) is “called on for more”;¹⁰ called on to be the superlative instantiation of the *raced Black* body. The surpluses whites gain in each case are not *economic*. Rather, the surpluses extracted can be said to be ontological through *existential* exploitation; they are “semblances of determined presence, of full positivity, to provide a sense of secure being.”¹¹

Personal Experience

When I was seventeen or eighteen, my white math teacher initiated such an invasion, pulling it off with complete calm and presumably self-transparency. Given the historical construction of whiteness as the norm, his own raced subject position was rendered invisible. After all, he lived in the real world, the world of the serious man, where values are believed anterior to their existential founding. As I recall, we were discussing my plans for the future. I told him I wanted to be a pilot. I was earnest about this choice and had spent a great deal of time not only reading about aerodynamic lift and drag but also the requirements involved in becoming a pilot, such as accumulating flying hours. After taking note of my firm commitment, he *looked* at me and implied that I should be realistic (a code word for *realize* that I am Black) about my goals. He said I should become a carpenter or a bricklayer. I was *exposing* myself, telling a trusted teacher what I wanted to be, and he *returned* me to myself as something I did not recognize. I did not intend to be a carpenter or a bricklayer (or a janitor or elevator operator for that matter).

The situation, though, is more complex. The teacher did not simply return me to myself as a carpenter or a bricklayer when all along I had had this image

of myself as a pilot. Rather, he returned me to myself as a *fixed entity*, a “niggerized” Black body whose epidermal logic had already foreclosed the possibility of being anything other than what befitted its lowly station. He was the voice of a larger anti-Black racist society that “whispers mixed messages in our ears,” the ears of Black people who struggle to think of themselves as a *possibility*.¹² He mentioned that there were only a few Black pilots and again implied that I ought to face reality. (One can only imagine what his response would have been had I said that I wanted to be a philosopher, particularly given the statistic that Blacks constitute about 1.1 percent of philosophers in the United States.) Keep in mind that this event did not occur in the 1930s or 1940s, but around 1979. The message was clear: because I am Black, I had to settle for an occupation suitable for my Black body, unlike the white body that likely would have been encouraged to become a pilot. As with Davis, having one’s Black body returned as ontologically problematic, one begins to think, to feel, to emote, even if unconsciously: “Am I a nigger?” The internalization of the white gaze creates a doubleness within the Black psyche, leading to a destructive process of superfluous self-surveillance and self-interrogation.

This moment was indeed a time when I felt ontologically locked into my body. My body was indelibly marked with this stain of darkness. After all, he was the white mind, the mathematical mind, calculating my future by factoring in my Blackness. He did not “see” me, though. Like Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, I occupied that paradoxical status of “visible invisibility.” Within this dyadic space, my Black body phenomenologically returned to me as inferior. To describe the phenomenological return of the Black body is to disclose how it is returned as an appearance to consciousness, *my consciousness*. The (negatively) raced manner in which my body underwent a phenomenological return, however, presupposes a thick social reality that has always already been structured by the ideology and history of whiteness. More specifically, when my body is returned to me, the white body has already been constituted over centuries as the norm, both in European and Anglo-American culture, and at several discursive levels from science to philosophy to religion.¹³ My math teacher’s whiteness was invisible to him, just as my Blackness was hypervisible to us both. We should keep in mind that white Americans, more generally, define themselves around the “gravitational pull,” as it were, of the Black.¹⁴ The *not* of white America is the Black of white America. This *not* is essential, as is the invisibility of the negative relation through which whites are constituted. All embodied beings have their own “here.” My white math teacher’s racist social performances (for example, his “advice” to me), within the context of a white racist historical imaginary and asymmetric power relations, suspends and effectively disqualifies my embodied *here*. What was the message communicated? Expressing my desire *to be*, to take advantage of the opportunities for which Black bodies had died in order to secure, my ambition “was flung back in my face like a slap.”¹⁵ Frantz Fanon wrote that within the lived context of the white world he “was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger. I shouted a

greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged."¹⁶

According to Bettina Bergo, drawing from the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, "Perception and discourse—what we see and the symbols and meanings of our social imaginaries—prove inextricable the one from the other."¹⁷ Hence the white math teacher's perception, what he "saw," was inextricably linked to social meanings and semiotic constructions and constrictions that opened up a "field of appearances" regarding my dark body. There is nothing passive about the white gaze. There are *racist* sociohistorical and epistemic conditions of emergence that construct not only the Black body but the white body as well. So, what is "seen" when the white gaze "sees" "my body" and it becomes something alien to me?

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

Charles Johnson has noted that one can become blind to seeing "other 'meanings' or profiles presented by the object if the perceiver is locked within the 'Natural Attitude,' as [Edmund] Husserl calls it, and has been conditioned culturally or racially to fix himself upon certain 'meanings.'"¹⁸ On my reading, within the framework of an anti-Black racist world, the meaning of the Black body is a synthesis formed through racist distal narratives that ideologically inform whites of their "natural superiority," that enable whites to flee their part in constructing a "racial regional ontology" fit for Blacks only. Phenomenologically, I experience myself as "the profile that their frozen intentionality brings forth."¹⁹ After all, whiteness is deemed the horizon of all horizons, unable to

recognize the imaginary “racial” dualism that it has created. The white gaze has constructed the Black body “as the specular negative images of itself and that hence, abstracts the white person into an abstract knower.”²⁰ The meaning of my lived body is phenomenologically skewed when white consciousness negatively intends me as my Black (read: inferior, evil) body. I become alienated, thrown outward, and assigned a meaning not of my intending. In my everydayness, I live my body from an existential *here*. Wherever I go, I go embodied. As Gordon writes, “*Here* is where I am located. That place, if you will, is an embodied one: it is consciousness in the flesh. In the flesh, I am not only a point of view, but I am also a point that is viewed.”²¹ In my phenomenological return, however, I am reduced to a point that is viewed. My *here* is experienced as a *there*. The experience of being reduced to one’s “Black exteriority,” rendered thing-like, through processes of meaning intending acts of white racist intentional consciousness, is insightfully described by Charles Johnson:

I am walking down Broadway in Manhattan, platform shoes clicking on the hot pavement, thinking as I stroll of, say, Boolean expansions. I turn, thirsty, into a bar. The dimly-lit room, obscured by shadows, is occupied by whites. Goodbye, Boolean expansions. I am *seen*. But, as black, seen as stained body, as physicality, basically opaque to others Their look, an intending beam focusing my way, suddenly realizes something larva in me. My world is epidermalized, collapsed like a house of cards into the stained casement of my skin. My subjectivity is turned inside out like a shirtcuff.²²

In the face of my white teacher’s racism, I could have decided to lose myself in laughter, but, like Fanon, I was aware “that there were legends, stories, histories, and above all *historicity*.”²³ My dark embodied existence, my lived historical being, became a chain of signifiers: inferior, nigger, evil, dirty, sullen, immoral, lascivious. As Fanon wrote, “In the unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality.”²⁴ When phenomenologically returned to myself, I appeared no longer to possess *my* body, but a “surrogate” body whose meaning did not exist anterior to the performance of white spectatorship.

Frantz Fanon

“The Black has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”²⁵ Again, this involves the asymmetry of representational power. From the perspective of the somatic regulatory epistemic regime of whiteness, the Black body appears to have no resistance. The Black body becomes ontologically pliable, just a thing to be scripted in the inverse image of whiteness. Cutting away at the Black body, the Black person becomes resigned no longer to aspire to his or her own emergence or upheaval.²⁶ Blacks undergo processes of ontological stagnation and epistemological violence while standing before the one “true” gaze. In very powerful discourse describing how he was “unmercifully imprisoned,” how the

white gaze forced upon him an unfamiliar weight, Fanon asked, "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?"²⁷

The burden of the white gaze and the insidious reality of anti-Black racism were responsible for Fanon's "difficulties in the development of my bodily schema," where his embodiment was no longer "a definitive structuring of the self and the world."²⁸ Rather, his body was thrown back, returned, as an object *occupying* space. "Below the corporeal schema," Fanon wrote, "I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by 'residual sensations and perceptions of a primarily tactile, vestibular, kinaesthetic, and visual character,' but by the other, the white man [or woman]."²⁹ In other words, Fanon saw himself through the lens, as it were, of a historico-racial schema. Fanon had become the threatening "him" of the Negro kind/type. Under pressure from and assailed by anti-Black racism, the corporeal schema was collapsing. It was giving way to a racial epidermal schema. The white gaze constructed the Black body into "an object in the midst of other objects."³⁰ Furthermore, Fanon noted, "I took myself far off from my presence, far indeed, and made myself an object."³¹ Note that there was nothing intrinsic to his physiology that forced his corporeal schema to collapse; it was the "Black body" as always already *named* and made sense of within the context of a larger semiotics of white bodies that provided him with the tools for self-hatred. His "darkness," a naturally occurring phenomenon, became historicized, residing within the purview of the white gaze, a phenomenal space created and sustained by socio-epistemic and semiotic communal constitutionality. The Black body evolves from within a space of constitutionality, that is, the space of the racist white *same*, the *one*. Against the backdrop of the sketched historico-racial (racist) scheme, Fanon's "darkness" returned to him, signifying a new genus, a new category of man: A Negro!³² He inhabited a space of anonymity (he is *every* Negro), and yet he felt a strange personal responsibility for his body. "I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors," Fanon explained. "I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'sho' good eaten."³³

Fanon wrote about the Black body and how it can be changed, deformed, and made into an ontological problem in relation to the white gaze. Describing an encounter with a white woman and her son, Fanon narrated how the young boy screamed, "Look at the nigger! . . . Mama, a Negro!"³⁴ Fanon:

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a Negro, it's cold, the Negro is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is

quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up.³⁵

The white imagery of the Black as a savage beast, a primitive and uncivilized animal, was clearly expressed in the boy's fear that the "cannibalistic" Negro would eat him. "The more that Europeans dominated Africans, the more 'savage' Africans came to seem; cannibalism represented the nadir of savagery."³⁶ Of course, the boy may someday come to "confirm" his fears through reading an "authoritative" voice such as Georg Hegel, who linked the supposed contempt Africans/Negroes held for man to their failure to make historical progress. "To the sensuous Negro," Hegel argued, "human flesh is purely an object of the senses, like all other flesh."³⁷ To Hegel, Africans/Negroes apparently lacked the capacity of representation that tells them that human flesh, though identical with animal nature, is distinctive and identical with our own bodies, which are bodies of beings capable of representation and self-consciousness. African/Negro bodies are tethered to the immediate, the arbitrary, and the sensuous and have not "reached the stage of knowing anything universal."³⁸

Presumably, the young boy did not know his words would (or how they would) negatively affect Fanon. However, for Fanon, the young white boy represented white society's larger perception of Blacks. The boy turned to his white mother for protection from impending Black doom. The young white boy, however, was not simply operating at the affective level; he was not simply haunted, semiconsciously, by a vague feeling of anxiety. Rather, he was operating at both the affective and the *discursive* level. He said, "Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up." This locutionary act carries a perlocutionary force of *effecting* the phenomenological return of Fanon to himself as a cannibalistic threat, as an object to be feared. Fanon, of course, did not "want this revision, this thematization."³⁹

One is tempted to say that the young white boy saw Fanon's Black body "as if" it were cannibal-like. The "seeing as if," however, was collapsed into a "*seeing as is*." In Fanon's example, within the lived phenomenological transversal context of white racist behavior, the "as if" reads too much like a process of "conscious effort." On my reading, what appears in the uninterrupted lived or phenomenological flow of the young white boy's racist experience is "young-white-boy-experiences-nigger-dark-body-cannibal-evokes-trepidation." There is no experience of the "as if." Indeed, the young white boy's linguistic and nonlinguistic performance indicates a definitive structuring of his own self-invisibility as "white-innocent-self-in-relationship-to-the-dark-nigger-self." This definitive structuring is not so much remembered or recollected as it is always present as the constitutive imaginary background within which the white boy is both the effect and the vehicle of white racism; indeed, he *is the orientation* of white epistemic practices, ways of "knowing" about one's (white) identity vis-à-vis the Black other. The "cultural white orientation" is not an "entity" whose origin the white boy needs to grasp or recollect before he performs whiteness. He is not a tabula

rasa, one who sees the Black body for the first time and instinctively says, "Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up."

The boy *did* indeed undergo an *experience* of the dark body as frightening, but there is no concealed meaning, as it were, inherent in the experience qua experience of Fanon's body as such. Rather, the fright that he experienced regarding Fanon's dark body was always already "constructed out of . . . social narratives and ideologies."⁴⁰ The boy was already discursively and affectively acculturated through microprocesses of "racialized" learning (short stories, lullabies, children's games,⁴¹ prelinguistic experiences, and so forth) to respond "appropriately" in the presence of a Black body. His racist actions were not simply dictated by what was going on in his head, as it were. His racism, though he is young, was "'in' the nose that smells, the back, neck, and other muscles that imperceptibly tighten with anxiety, and eyes that see some but not all physical differences as significant."⁴² The gap that opened up within the young white boy's perceptual field as he "saw" Fanon's Black body had already been created while innocently sitting on his mother's lap.⁴³ His habituated perceptions were "so attenuated as to skip the stage of conscious interpretation and intent."⁴⁴ His mother's lap constituted a raced zone of security, a maternal site of racist pedagogy.

Learning about taboos against masturbation and associating with Negroes, and how both of these taboos were associated with sin, guilt, and a sense of deserved punishment, Lillian Smith has described these forbidden acts as the first lessons she learned as a young white girl raised in Southern society. Such taboos were "ideological pabulum," as it were, fed to Smith as a young child. She notes that such lessons "were taught us by our mother's voice, memorized with her love, patted into our lives as she rocked us to sleep or fed us."⁴⁵ Smith's father also played a formative role in this process of racist tutelage. Her father scolded her for her sense "of superiority toward schoolmates from the mill and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that 'all men are brothers,' [but] trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male."⁴⁶ This point acknowledges the fundamental "ways the transactions between a raced world and those who live in it racially constitute the very being of those beings."⁴⁷ In the case of the young white boy in Fanon's situation, the association of Blackness with "nigger" and cannibalism is no mean feat. Hence, the young white boy is already attending to the world in a particular fashion; his affective and discursive performances bespeak the (ready-to-hand) inherited white racist background according to which he is able to make "sense" of the world. Smith knows that how she came to see the world, to make sense of her place within it, was based upon lies about skin color, and lies about white adults' "own fantasies, of their secret deviations—forcing decayed pieces of their and the region's obscenities into the minds of the young and leaving them there to fester."⁴⁸

Like moving my body in the direction of home, or only slightly looking as I reach my hand to retrieve my cup of hot tea that is to the left of my computer screen, the young white boy dwells within/experiences/engages the world of

white racist practices in such a way that the practices qua racist practices have become invisible. The young boy's response is part and parcel of an implicit knowledge of how he gets around in a Manichean world. *Being-in* a racist world, a *lived* context of historicity, the young boy does not "see" the dark body as "dark" and then thematically proceed to apply negative value predicates to it, where conceivably the young boy would say, "Yes, I 'see' the dark body as existing in space, and I recognize the fact that it is through my own actions and intentions that I predicate evil of it." "In order even to act deliberately," as Hubert L. Dreyfus maintains, "we must orient ourselves in a familiar world."⁴⁹

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

Fanon underwent the experience of having his body "given back to him." Thus, he experienced a profound phenomenological experience of being disconnected from his body schema. Fanon felt his body as flattened out or sprawled out before him. And yet his "body," its corporeality, was forever with him. It never left. So, how can it be "given back"? The physical body that Fanon had/ was remained in space and time. It did not somehow disappear and make a return. But there is a profound sense in which his "corporeality" was interwoven with particular discursive practices. Under the white gaze, Fanon's body was not simply the *res extensa* of Cartesian dualism. Within the context of white racist practices toward the Black body, there is a blurring of boundaries between what was "there" as opposed to what had been "*placed* there." Hence, the body's corporeality, within the context of lived history, is shaped through powerful cultural schemata. The above line of reasoning does not mean that somehow the body does not exist. After all, my body forms the site of white oppression. To jettison all discourse regarding the body as "real," being subject to material forces, and such, in the name of the "postmodern body," is an idealism that would belie my own philosophical move to theorize from the position of my real *lived embodiment*. The point here is that *the* body is never given as such, but

always “appears there” within the context of some set of conditions of emergence.⁵⁰ The conditions of emergence for the phenomenological return of Fanon’s body qua inferior or bestial were grounded in the white social imaginary, its discursive and nondiscursive manifestations. Having undergone a gestalt-switch in his body image, his knowledge/consciousness of his body had become “solely a negating activity. . . . a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.”⁵¹

Linda Alcoff discusses this phenomenological sense of being disjointed as a form of “near-incommensurability between first-person experience and historico-racial schema that disenables equilibrium.”⁵² Here, Alcoff emphasizes Fanon’s notion of the “sociogenic” basis of the “corporeal malediction” Blacks experience.⁵³ On this score, “the black man’s [and woman’s] alienation is not an individual question.”⁵⁴ In other words, the distorted historico-racial schema that occludes equilibrium takes place within the realm of sociality, a larger complex space of white social intersubjective constitutionality “of phenomena that human beings have come to regard as ‘natural’ in the physicalist sense of depending on physical nature.”⁵⁵ Of course, within the context of colonial or neocolonial white power, the objective is to pass off what is historically contingent as that which is *ahistorically* given.

Invisible Man

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

The invisible man knows himself as embodied flesh and blood, and yet he is invisible. His body is, and yet he is not. The invisible man observes, “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people [in this case white people] refuse to see me.”⁵⁶

In Fanon’s example, the Black body is *seen* as hypervisible; for Ellison, the Black body is *seen* as invisible. In the case of hypervisibility, the Black body becomes excessive. Within this racially saturated field of hypervisibility, the Black

body still functions as the unseen as it does in the case of its invisibility. Perhaps in the case of invisibility, though, one has a greater opportunity of not being seen while taking advantage of this invisibility. Think here of those whites who may have disclosed pertinent information in the company of Blacks that had been rendered invisible, information that may have functioned to empower them in some way. The ocular frame of reference in both cases is central. "Seen invisibility" suggests the paradoxical sense in which the Black body is a "seen absence." In either case, the Black body "returns" distorted.

A fundamental phenomenological slippage occurs between one's *own* felt experience of the Black body and how others (whites) understand/construct/experience/see that "same" Black body. Ellison also raised the issue of how the Black other is a reflection of the white *same*. Ellison says in *Invisible Man* that when whites "see him" they see "themselves, or fragments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."⁵⁷ The invisible man's invisibility is a racialized invisibility. The white one sees everything and anything vis-à-vis the Black other, but not the Black. Fanon asked, "A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence."⁵⁸ Felt invisibility is a form of ontological and epistemological violence resulting from "the construction of their *inner* eyes with which they [whites] look through their physical eyes upon reality."⁵⁹

Ellison's reference to inner eyes that look through physical eyes suggests that the "inner eyes" are precisely those white racist, epistemic perspectives, interlocked with various social and material forces, from which whites "see" the world and violate Black subjectivity. The "inner eyes" that Ellison refers to as "a matter of construction" raise the issue of the sociogenic. Ellison's invisible man is "seen" against the unthematized backdrop of everyday forms of white coping. To be "seen" in this way is not to be seen at all. Gordon writes, "The black is invisible because of how the black is 'seen.' The black is not heard because of how the black is 'heard.' The black is not felt because of how the black 'feels.'"⁶⁰ Within this context, Blacks are trapped, always already ontologically closed. In each case, the totalizing power of whiteness holds Blacks captive. When Blacks speak or do not speak, such behavior is codified in the white imaginary. To be silent "confirms" passivity and docility. To speak, to want to be heard, "confirms" brazen contempt and Black rage. The point here is that no matter the response, Black emergence outside of whiteness's *scopic* power is foreclosed. Ellison's invisible man knows the frustration of being "seen" and yet "not seen." There is an upsurge of protestation whereby the Black body begins to make itself felt. "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful."⁶¹ Again, note that even as the invisible man protests, he is "seldom successful," which may be partly why he decides to "walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers."⁶²

Throughout the text, the invisible man finds himself objectified/distorted by the white gaze. Hence, like Fanon, he has difficulties in the development of his

bodily schema. Consider the Black men who are made to participate in the battle royal—a site constructed for white men only, indeed, for white eyes. During the fight, the Blacks are all blindfolded. Symbolically, the blindfolds replicate the larger socioeconomic powerlessness of Blacks in relation to whites. The Black body is *looked at*. The Black body does not return the gaze. The white body *looks at*. The battle royal is a spectacle, a visual (or ocular) power zone within which Black male bodies are mere surfaces. Before they are instructed to fight like animals for the pleasure of *the lookers*, however, a naked blond white woman, with a small American flag tattooed on her abdomen, sensuously dances before them. One might say that she is “dangled” before them like a piece of white flesh they dare not touch or look at. Indeed, “some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling.”⁶³ Some of the white men threatened them if they actually looked, while others were threatened if they did not look. After all, she is a white woman and therefore taboo. She is not to be looked at by Black males, and yet some of the white men forced them to look, creating a psychosexual “complex fusion of desire and aversion.”⁶⁴

The battle royal is a site of pain, pleasure, hatred, misogyny, and white myths interwoven into a sadistic and erotic spectacle. It is a site of white male terror, anxiety, and desire. The white men—the “bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants”⁶⁵—create a context of sexual intensification through the unthinkable juxtaposition of Black male bodies with white female bodies, creating an erotic space in which the white male imaginary is able to “get off” at the thought of watching a Black male desire a white woman. The erotic ritual is designed to intensify white men’s pleasure as they imagine one of the Black men having sex with the blond white woman. Referring to the early days of Malcolm X’s career as a hustler, Sartwell notes, “Thus interracial sex has a very intense and particular erotic/specular power, an erotic power that draws the white men . . . to stare obsessively at black men fucking white women.”⁶⁶

Black men are also rendered invisible through the eyes (inner eyes) of white women. Ellison explores this theme through the female character, Sybil, who never really sees Ellison’s protagonist. All that she sees is her own distorted and sexually perverse projections upon the Black male body. The invisible man describes himself as “Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible”⁶⁷ Sybil is interested in literally playing the role of the white innocent victim in relation to the myth of the “Black rapist.” Indeed, the invisible man jokingly references D. W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation*, invoking the memory of the filmic narrative construction and semiotics of the Black male as rapist. He asks, “What’s happening here . . . a new birth of a nation?”⁶⁸ Sybil wants him to take her against her will, to play at being raped by a Black “buck.” “But I need it,” she says, uncrossing her thighs and sitting up eagerly. “You can do it, it’ll be easy for *you*, beautiful. Threaten to kill me if I don’t give in. You know, talk rough to me beautiful.”⁶⁹ She describes him as “ebony against pure snow.”⁷⁰ She describes her husband as “forty minutes of brag and ten of bustle.”⁷¹ She describes the protagonist, however, as having unbelievable sexual endurance,

whom she wants “to tear [her] apart.”⁷² Playing into her fantasies, and playing within his own invisibility, he says, “I rapes real good when I’m drunk.” She replies, “Ooooh, then pour me another.”⁷³ In a state of mythopoetic (and masochistic) frenzy she says, “Come on, beat me, daddy—you—you big black bruiser. What’s taking you so long?” she said. “Hurry up, knock me down! Don’t you want me?” Annoyed, he slaps her, but this only leaves her “aggressively receptive.” He never rapes her, but constructs the moment with a different semiotic spin, writing on her belly with lipstick: “SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED BY SANTA CLAUS, SURPRISE.”⁷⁴ The invisible man has unveiled the core of Sybil’s projections. What she wants is a *fantasy* that does not exist. The point here, though, is that Ellison provides a rich narrative portrayal of the psychosexual dynamics involved in the *erasure* of Black male identity in relationship to white female desire for the Black body as phantasmatic object.

Throughout the text, Ellison’s protagonist is never really in charge of who he is, which is another manifestation of his invisibility and powerlessness. When he joins the Brotherhood, which is where he thinks he will finally gain recognition, he is still treated as amorphous, invisible.⁷⁵ During a moment in the text where he is *used* to give a speech at a rally, the invisible man notes, “The light was so strong that I could no longer see the audience, the bowl of human faces. It was as though a semi-transparent curtain had dropped between us, but through which they could see me—for they were applauding—without themselves being seen.”⁷⁶ The influx of light is significant here. In one way or another throughout the text, the protagonist has had to contend with the blinding light of whiteness, its power to see, to gaze, to control. Here again, the protagonist cannot return the gaze; he is seen, but cannot see. Indeed, he cannot see that he is being tricked by the Brotherhood. Beneath the façade of an intrinsic interest in the invisible man, the Brotherhood wants him as a political and ideological *speaking* Black body, a mere verbal Black surface. For example, a character named Emma asks, “But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?”⁷⁷ His subjectivity and humanity are not valued. Rather, it is his *Blackness* that functions as a site of political semiosis; he is a manipulated political tool. The invisible man notes, “Maybe she wants to see me sweat coal tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite. What was I, a man or a natural resource?”⁷⁸ Perhaps the history of American slavery offers the answer: he is a means to a larger *white* purpose, a “natural resource” to be exploited.

Ellison explores the dialectics of how whiteness is constructed through the reconstruction/negation of Blackness in a brilliant example where the protagonist gets a job working for a paint plant. As the invisible man arrives at the plant, he sees a large sign that reads: “Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints.”⁷⁹ Working under Mr. Kimbro, the invisible man learns how to make the paint. He is instructed to open each bucket of paint and put in ten drops of a liquid that is black. To his surprise, as the black liquid disappears, the pure white paint appears. After the invisible man completes a few buckets, Mr. Kimbro exclaims, “That’s it, as white as George Washington’s Sunday-go-to-meetin wig and as sound as the all mighty dollar! That’s paint!” he said proudly. “That’s

paint that'll cover just about anything!"⁸⁰ Another white employee, Lucius Brockway, later describes the pure white paint as "Optic White." Describing how he helped create the slogan for Optic White paint, Brockway says, "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White."⁸¹

The symbolism regarding the black liquid raises the dynamics of Black erasure in relation to whiteness. Just as the paint's quality of pure white needs the black drops, "racialized" whiteness as normative, moral, good, and pure is dependent upon the projection of the Black body as "inferior," "stained," and "impure." Of course, by the time the paint has become pure white, there is no trace of Blackness. This symbolism is characteristic of white America's denial that its very existence is inextricably linked to the presence of Black people. The large sign rings true, America must be kept pure. The pure whiteness of the paint can "cover just about anything." Hence whiteness "covers" that which is sullen, dirty, evil. It does away with the unclean. As demonstrated in chapter 6, the tragic character Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* believes that whiteness can "cover" over her Black ugly features, permanently washing from her the stain of Blackness. Think here too of how white America "covers" the cultural productions by Black people. To acknowledge Blackness, after all, might lead to the uncovering of whiteness. It might also be said that the power and normative structure of whiteness, through the denial of its own history, "covers" over its acts of injustice and brutality through an ideological structure that gives the appearance of all things proceeding as normal.

Optic White literally can be translated as "eye white" or "seeing white" or figuratively as "I white," where the verb is deleted. Of course, the term *optic* raises the issue of the gaze. Optically, the protagonist is rendered invisible. Optically, whites either refuse to see him or see him as if he was the reflected image given back as a result of being "surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass."⁸² As Optic White is "*Right White*," the white gaze, as it renders the protagonist invisible/distorted, is exempt from critique because white is always right. Moreover, since optics is the science that deals with the propagation of light, which Europeans historically brought to so-called backward cultures of "darkness," Optic White is "*Right White*." Consistent with this symbolism, Africa became "dark" as "explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of 'savage customs' in the name of civilization."⁸³

Malcolm X

Felt invisibility is a form of ontological and epistemic violence, a form of violence initiated through white spectatorship, a generative gazing that attempts to violate the integrity of the Black body. The white gaze is capable of seeping into my consciousness, skewing the way I see myself. But the gaze does not "see" me, it "sees" itself. This experience is similar to what happened early in Malcolm X's life with his English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski.⁸⁴ At Mason Junior

High School, Malcolm was the only Black student in the eighth grade. Although Malcolm mentioned in his autobiography that he had not given thought to it before, he said that he disclosed to Mr. Ostrowski that he wanted to be a lawyer. Malcolm made it clear that Ostrowski always provided encouragement to white students when asked for his advice regarding their future careers. But to Malcolm, Ostrowski replied:

Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A Lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something that you *can* be. You're good with your hands—making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don't you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person—you'd get all kinds of work.⁸⁵

Note the perverse construction of “We all here *like* you.” Ostrowski was attempting to obfuscate the fact that he was a racist. He wanted to clear his conscience by stating upfront his “affections” for Malcolm right before he violated Malcolm's body integrity, reducing him to a *nigger*, as someone who must learn to live with mediocrity and accept his place within the “natural” order of things. The young Malcolm was returned to himself qua *nigger*. “To forcibly strip someone of their self-image,” as Drucilla Cornell argues, “is a violation, not just an offense.”⁸⁶ At this time, Malcolm had already been elected class president and was receiving grades among the highest in the school. Yet all that Ostrowski “saw” was a *nigger*. Despite the countervailing empirical evidence, Ostrowski “saw” more of whiteness's *same*. As Malcolm noted, “I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever *I* wanted to be.”⁸⁷ Malcolm's point is consistent with what has been theorized thus far. First, within a white racist order of things, for the Black, there is apparently no being-as-possibility beyond the totalizing white gaze. As argued above, it is here that perception, epistemology, and ontology are collapsed. Second, Malcolm's first-person perspective (“I desire,” or “I have my own perspective on the world”) is disrupted and rendered void in relation to the third-person (white) perspective that has negatively overdetermined his Blackness.

Malcolm also described his history teacher, Mr. Williams, as one who was fond of “nigger jokes.”⁸⁸ Of course, such “nigger jokes” were told at Malcolm's expense and no doubt “confirmed” many of the circulating myths white students consciously or unconsciously held. Malcolm noted:

We came to the textbook section on Negro history. It was exactly one paragraph long. Mr. Williams laughed through it practically in a single breath, reading aloud how the Negroes had been slaves and then were freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless. He added, I remember, an anthropological footnote of his own, telling us between laughs how Negroes' feet were “so big that when they walk, they don't leave tracks, they leave a hole in the ground.”⁸⁹

Although Malcolm *heard* these racist jokes, one might say, in keeping with Alexander Weheliye, that “the white subject’s vocal apparatus merely serves to repeat and solidify racial difference as it is inscribed in the field of vision.”⁹⁰ Whether through the ritualistic practice of Ostrowski putting Blacks in their “natural” place or through the racist jokes Mr. Williams told, whites “adjusted their microtomes” and objectively cut away at Malcolm’s reality.⁹¹ After such racist acts, Malcolm later admitted, “I just gave up.”⁹² Along the same lines, Fanon wrote, “I slip into corners, and my long antennae pick up the catch-phrases strewn over the surface of things—nigger underwear smells of nigger—nigger teeth are white—nigger feet are big—the nigger’s barrel chest—I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me.”⁹³ Malcolm was reduced to the anonymous Black other. He was returned to himself as an absence. Although “accepted” by whites, he was accepted only on their terms. “We [whites] will sweep you up into significance; we offer you a name: *our* name. But as we inscribe ourselves on you, we erase you.”⁹⁴ Hence, there was no genuine acceptance, only further distancing from the Black body. Only as a mascot did Malcolm come to experience his “acceptance” (erasure) by whites.

They all liked my attitude, and it was out of their liking for me that I soon became accepted by them—as a mascot, I know now. They would talk about anything and everything with me standing right there hearing them, the same way people would talk freely in front of a pet canary. They would even talk about me, or about “niggers,” as though I wasn’t there, as if I wouldn’t understand what the word meant. A hundred times a day, they used the word “nigger.”⁹⁵

Malcolm was cognizant of the hidden questions residing at the heart of white acceptance: To what extent are you (the Black) willing to erase yourself? To what extent are you willing to conform to our (white) stereotype of you? How much can you hate yourself, while forgetting that it came from us? Within the context of an anti-Black racist context, white acceptance comes at an existential ontological price for Black people: a mode of nonbeing.

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

What I am trying to say is that it just never dawned upon them that I could understand, that I wasn’t a pet, but a human being. They didn’t give me credit for having the same sensitivity, intellect, and understanding that they would have been ready and willing to recognize in a white boy in my position. But it has historically been the case with white people, in their regard for black people, that even though we might be *with* them, we weren’t considered *of* them. Even though they appeared to have opened the door, it was still closed. Thus they never did really see *me*.⁹⁶

When one thinks about the long-term negative impact of Ostrowski's and Mr. Williams's racism on young Malcolm, one better understands the dynamic of Black self-hatred. Self-surveillance or getting the Black body to regulate itself in the physical absence of the white gaze is a significant strategy of white racist ideology. Malcolm had internalized the white gaze. Through the act of conking his hair, he policed his Black body in the image of whiteness:

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are "inferior"—and white people "superior"—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look "pretty" by white standards.⁹⁷

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

W. E. B. Du Bois

In his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois, on my reading, also located the problem of white *racism* within the realm of the socio-genic. As I will show, Du Bois's conceptualization of double consciousness attests to the significance of the *lived* experience of race. Du Bois's work provides a revealingly profound example of how "Blackness" gets negatively configured within a (white) gestural, semiotic space. In the following example, there is a phenomenological moment of slippage resulting from the white gaze/glance, between how he may have understood himself and how he suddenly experienced himself as different from the other (white) children. "In a wee wooden schoolhouse," Du Bois wrote, "something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards,—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil."⁹⁹

When I've taught this part of Du Bois's work, I have had many white students immediately jump to the conclusion that Du Bois was mistaken, that he was just a child. Indeed, they typically argue that the newcomer's refusal is simply an example of the way in which children react to each other, how little girls generally treat little boys. However, the tall newcomer did not apparently negatively react to any of the other (white) boys. This refusal was not about Du Bois's gender. Even if we grant that as a newcomer she felt uncomfortable around the new students, she apparently only expressed this toward Du Bois. Hence it is obvious that there is a fundamental link between racial reification of the young Du Bois and the girl's callous rejection. As for my students, one could argue that they failed to show empathy toward Du Bois because of the more general ways in which contemporary American society has become profoundly atomized, where social actors' imaginative capacities have become dulled. While this explanation may very well help account for why my students rarely see any problem with the newcomer's response to Du Bois, perhaps there is something that they also refuse to face or are afraid to face. I am thinking here of what one white male student of mine, Andrew Thomas, pointed out. After hearing so many responses that aimed to reinterpret Du Bois's experience for him, Thomas introduced a very significant point: "I think that many whites might feel the need to reject what Du Bois is saying because they are perhaps reminded of situations where they've treated a Black person in the way that the newcomer treated Du Bois. The Du Bois example reminds them of something that they don't want to see in themselves. They don't want to admit that they too harbor such racism."

Du Bois's example suggests that he was in some sense similar to the other (white) children. In "heart," "life," and "longing" he appears to have felt a kindred relationship. Indeed, the pain and trauma of rejection was probably all the more intense because he thought that he shared certain similarities. But something went awry. There was a sudden annoying feeling of difference, which presumably did not exist prior to this encounter. Hence Du Bois underwent a distinctive phenomenological process of coming to *appear* to himself differently as one who is expelled. He moved from a sense of the familiar to the unfamiliar. A slippage occurred in his corporeal schema. In this example, Du Bois's body schema has become problematic. He is forced to deal with the *meaning* of a racial epidermal schema as a result of (or introduced by) the meaning-constituting activities of the young girl's racialized consciousness. As with Fanon, Ellison's invisible man, and Malcolm X, Du Bois was "taken outside" of himself and *returned*. Surely, Du Bois is the same self he was prior to the gestured glance the tall white girl performed. Surely, he was classified "Black" prior to his encounter that day with the tall newcomer, though he may not have experienced this classificatory designation as something problematic or as a mark of disdain. But is he the same? As the tall white girl refused him, she sent a semiotic message, a message whose constructive meaning was immediately registered in the consciousness of the young Du Bois. Her body language, her refusal, involved a ritual that had tremendous power. The *ritual* glance/refusal

took place within a pre-interpreted space of racial meaning. This precondition formed the basis upon which the glance's meaning registered for Du Bois that something had become problematic at the level of his epidermis. In order for Du Bois to have understood the specific racial meaning of the glance he had to have a certain level of racial narrative competence. In short, part of his horizon involved an awareness of difference, but also an awareness of difference in an exclusionary sense.

The ritual glance is both a product of this space and a vehicle through which racial and racist performances are perpetuated. Du Bois wrote that the tall white girl "refused it peremptorily, with a glance." This refusal involves the arrogance and self-centeredness of whiteness, a form of white narcissism articulated through a look. The performance of whiteness, then, is not restricted to a set of articulated propositional beliefs or in the deployment of various rhetorical strategies. White racism can be expressed through the modality of physical comportment, a way of inhabiting physical space, a way of glancing/not glancing. "Seen" through the eyes of the newcomer, Du Bois's Black body was already *coded* as different, as a problem, as that which should be avoided. Though young, the tall white newcomer had already learned complex ways of white coping, ways of seeing the Black body as a site of avoidance, ways of not seeing her body as raced, different. Her whiteness as norm is reinforced through this exclusionary act. Her racial status as white remains paradoxically unmarked and yet marked in this communicational space, though she never spoke.

The unspoken power of whiteness reflects the effective transmission of racism, not only through words but also through subtle actions. "We learned far more from acts than words, more from a raised eyebrow, a joke, a shocked voice, a withdrawing movement of the body, a long silence, than from long sentences," Smith notes.¹⁰⁰ Within the context of this highly racial and racist communicational space, Du Bois's body came to matter. He was the materialization of darkness with all its normative and typological associations, "the colored kid, monkeychild, different."¹⁰¹ Indeed, the newcomer's ritual glance "produced bodily effects through immediate [non]verbal acts that reify racial difference."¹⁰² Through her refusal to exchange with Du Bois, he returns to himself as excluded. The white girl, however, returns to herself as the center; her glance policed her whiteness as a privileged (unspoken) site.¹⁰³ She never says in a declarative voice, "I'm white!" Du Bois did not say in the indicative, "*You're white!*" Williams writes, in America "whiteness is rarely marked in the indicative there! there! sense of my bracketed blackness. And the majoritarian privilege [of whites] of never noticing themselves was the beginning of an imbalance from which so much, so much else flowed."¹⁰⁴ The newcomer's whiteness is interpellated, performed, claimed, through a nonverbal gesture of negation. Although young and "innocent," her actions reflect larger political hallmarks of white racism: the audacity and power to relegate nonwhites to the margins, to segregate them, to instill in them the sense of existing outside the space of white normalcy and normativity.

The tall white newcomer has been situated (and situates her own identity) in the role of a member of a "superior" group. Describing the importance placed upon whiteness as a symbol of group purity and superiority, Smith observes, "There, in the land of Epidermis, every one of us was a little king."¹⁰⁵ As within a dramaturgical narrative (as *homo histrio*), she plays her assigned role well. One might say she has been given a rôle to play from within a *distal* narrative (an influential narrative of white supremacy that extends back into her past) that comes replete with assumptions regarding how to act in the presence of a dark body qua other. In other words, she has become a prisoner, so to speak, of a distal anti-Black racist hermeneutic that informs her actions in relation to differentially raced bodies. Through the performative act of refusal, though words were presumably never spoken, Du Bois became, even if unknowingly, "a damn nigger." Through her glance and her refusal, she reduced Du Bois to his Blackness, a mere surface, *a thing of no particular importance*, though important enough to reject and avoid. Du Bois was no longer within the group, but outside it, left looking upon himself through the newcomer's eyes. One might say the meaning-giving acts of his own consciousness in terms of his own dark body for all intents and purposes functioned as an instantiation of white racist consciousness intending the Black body as other. Hence, he became, if only momentarily, other to himself.

Like Fanon, who described the phenomenological dimensions of corporeal malediction, Du Bois underwent a similar process, one that he termed *double consciousness*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹⁰⁶

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

At the heart of each of the aforementioned experiences emerges a question. The question is posed from within what Du Bois calls "the veil." Whether interpreted as symbolic of systemic racism/structural segregation or as that which "indicates, rhetorically, a knowledge of difference that is itself discursive"

sively based," the veil is fundamentally linked to the hegemonic performances of whiteness, performances that can lead to deep societal fissures or to profound levels of existential phenomenological fracture.¹⁰⁷ I emphasize the latter here. So what is this question? It is not a question born of solitude, but of racist discriminatory practices, oppression, white lies and white myths, embodied struggle and sustained existential and ontological tension, a struggle that emerges within the interstices of a powerful racializing white regime. It is not born of hyperbolic doubt, a questioning of all things that fail the test of epistemological indubitability, though it may involve, as Du Bois wrote, "incessant self-questioning and the hesitation that arises from it."¹⁰⁸ The question is: "What, after all, am I?"¹⁰⁹ Aware of the systematic negation of Black humanity under colonialism, Fanon argued that "colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?'"¹¹⁰ Similarly, theorizing what he refers to as the "Negroes greatest dilemma," which he sees as the ambivalence regarding an identity that is both African and American, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, "Every man must ultimately confront the question 'Who am I?' and seek to answer it honestly."¹¹¹ Unlike René Descartes, who asked a similar question—"But what then am I?"—after arriving at the indubitable *cogito* argument and who reached the eventual conclusion that he was a *thing* that thinks, Du Bois's question is linked to his having been racially marked and relegated to the domain of the wretched.¹¹² Far from a *disembodied* thing that thinks (*res cogitans*), Du Bois is cursed precisely in terms of his racially epidermalized embodiment. The internalization of this cursed wretchedness helps mystify the various ways in which white racism systematically encourages this form of pathology. Stuart Hall writes, "It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge,' not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm."¹¹³ Hence one plausible answer to the question might be: "I am a problem! Who I am as an embodied Black body *is* a problem!" This response to the question would indicate Hall's conceptualization of the "inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the [white] norm."

The connection between Blackness and the concept of "being a problem" is central to Du Bois's understanding of what it means to be Black in white America. Du Bois revealed how whites engage in a process of duplicity while speaking to Blacks. They often approach Blacks in a hesitant fashion, saying "I know an excellent coloured man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?"¹¹⁴ Du Bois maintained that the real question whites want to ask is: "How does it feel to be a problem?"¹¹⁵ Du Bois also pointed out that some whites greet Blacks with a certain amicable comportment. They talk with you about the weather, while all along performing hidden white racists scripts: "My poor, unwhite thing! Weep not nor rage. I know, too well, that the curse of God lies heavy on you. Why? That is not for me to say, but be brave! Do your work in your lowly sphere, praying the good Lord that into heaven above, where all is love, you may, one

day, be born—white!”¹¹⁶ With regard to the notion of being a problem, whites do not ask, “How does it feel to *have* problems?” The question is raised to the level of the ontological: “How does it feel to *be* a problem?”

As a problem from the perspective of white mythopoetic constructions, Du Bois was aware that it is the “stained” Black body at both the phenotypic and the consanguineous level that is deemed criminal. “Murder may swagger, theft may rule and prostitution may flourish and the nation gives but spasmodic, intermittent and lukewarm attention,” he noted. “But let the murderer be black or the thief brown or the violator of womanhood have a drop of Negro blood, and the righteousness of the indignation sweeps the world.”¹¹⁷ The question regarding how it feels to be a problem does not apply to people who have at some point in their lives felt themselves to be a problem. In such cases, feeling like a problem is a contingent disposition that is relatively finite and transitory. When whites ask the same question of Blacks, the relationship between being Black and being a problem is noncontingent. It is a necessary relation. Outgrowing this ontological state of being a problem is believed impossible. Hence, when regarding one’s “existence as problematic,” temporality is frozen. One is a problem *forever*, fixed, permanent. However, it is important to note that it is from within the white imaginary that the question “How does it feel to be a problem?” is given birth. To be human is to be *thrown-in-the-world*.

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

Du Bois, like Toni Morrison after him, was aware of the strategic significance of averting the critical gaze from the racial “object” (the Black) to the racial “subject” (the white). In 1920, in his powerful and engaging essay entitled “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois wrote:

I see these souls [of white folk] undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious! They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness,

they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped—ugly, human.¹¹⁸

At this juncture, I will delineate what Du Bois's "tired eyes" saw of whiteness "ever stripped." As stated earlier, in my view, critical whiteness theorists have not given the attention to this pivotal essay that it deserves. Du Bois said of whites that he was "singularly clairvoyant."¹¹⁹ He claimed to be able to see the working of their entrails. In short, Du Bois was claiming that he could see their psychological "innards" or the unconscious operations of whiteness. Du Bois's project was to *demystify* whiteness, to reveal "the mechanisms by which whiteness has reproduced its foundational myths."¹²⁰ Hence, Du Bois might be said to have been working within the critical space of ideology exposure, revealing that which is hidden. Historically situating the whiteness of Pan-Europeanism, Du Bois wrote, "Today . . . the world in a sudden, emotional conversion has discovered that it is white and by token, wonderful!"¹²¹ Blacks, under this "religion of whiteness," as Du Bois said, come to see themselves as inferior, often resulting in a powerful form of psychological deformation.¹²² Within the context of white power and brutality, Black people have come to internalize negative images of themselves, thus resulting in what I have previously referred to as epistemic violence.

Aware of how myths harden into "empirical truths," Du Bois wrote, "How easy, then, by emphasis and omission to make children believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man's soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was a white man's thought; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man's dream."¹²³ Many Blacks, through white "emphasis and omission," have come to internalize the myth, at their own psychological peril, that whiteness is supreme. This raises the larger issue of how whites exclude nonwhites from playing significant roles in the movement of human history. Through the deployment of "metanarrative" historical constructions, white (read: Western) civilization is unified across space and time to represent the apex of human genius, scientific thought, political organization, philosophical speculation, and ethical behavior. As Du Bois noted, though, this is achieved through "emphasis and omission," which points to the interest-laden, self-referential dynamics of whiteness. Black children are taught to believe that "Blackness" is an aberration, that Black people, those who carry *the human stain*, are stupid by nature, uncivilized, and uneducable. Blackness is said to be that which sullies the "purity" of whiteness. Indeed, all is beautiful without Blackness; all is rational without Blackness; all, indeed, is perfect without Blackness. "In fact," Du Bois wrote, "that if from the world were dropped everything that could not fairly be attributed to White Folk, the world would, if anything, be even greater, truer, better than now."¹²⁴

Du Bois's "tired eyes" saw even more. As long as Blacks resign themselves to "naturally" assigned stations in life, whites are content to provide them with gifts for minimal sustainability. As long as Blacks remain docile and thankful for "barrels of old clothes from lordly and generous whites, there is much mental

peace and moral satisfaction.”¹²⁵ However, as soon as Blacks begin to question the entitlement of whites to the best things that life has to offer, and when their “attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity,” whites charge Blacks with impudence. They say “that the South is right, and that Japan wants to fight America.”¹²⁶ Du Bois internationalized the rationalizations of whiteness with regard to the Japanese, the so-called Yellow Negro. Whiteness, within this context, functions as a trope of capitalist domination, exploitation, and cultural imperialism.

Du Bois noted that as whites began to think Blacks were insisting upon their right to human dignity, as John Jones did, and as whites subsequently began an unapologetic wage of brutality and oppression against Black people, “the descent to Hell is easy.”¹²⁷ This “descent to Hell” is a powerful image. Du Bois saw whiteness as a form of misanthropy, a form of hatred and evil that lusts for Black blood. Du Bois:

I have seen a man—an educated gentleman—grow livid with anger because a little, silent, black woman was sitting by herself in a Pullman car. He was a white man. I have seen a great, grown man curse a little child, who had wandered into the wrong waiting-room, searching for its mother: “Here, you damned black —.” He was white. In Central Park I have seen the upper lip of a quiet, peaceful man curl back in a tigerish snarl of rage because black folk rode by in a motor car. He was a white man.¹²⁸

Notice the refrain, “He was a white man.” Du Bois used this refrain to establish a deepening and deafening portrayal of anti-Black racist hatred.

One tragic way in which this hatred has historically expressed itself is in the form of lynching, that spectacle of white fear, anxiety, desire, and sexual psychopathology, with its attendant pleasure reserved for the white racist scopophilic. “These lynchings, then, formed a crucial part of the black subject’s ecology both as physical threats and media representations,” according to Weheliye, “making them subject to the look of white folks, yet unable to return the look.”¹²⁹ Within this context, Du Bois spoke of the “lust of blood” that fueled the madness of lynching Black bodies, that “strange fruit” about which Billie Holiday sang. Du Bois was aware of how it really did not matter whether the Black person that was lynched had actually done anything wrong. All that mattered was that some Black, any Black, had to pay. Blood must be spilled to satisfy and appease the white demigods. With deep psychological insight into the “entrails” of whiteness, Du Bois observed:

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

orgy, cruelty, barbarism, and murder done to men and women of Negro descent.”¹³⁰

Du Bois placed a level of responsibility on whites to be honest about their anti-Black racism. He wrote, “Ask your own soul what it would say if the next census were to report that half of black America was dead and the other half dying.” Du Bois’s response, a clear indictment of the misanthropy that appears to reside in the souls of white folk, indicates that he was aware that whites are prisoners of something deeper than false beliefs. “I suffer,” he responded, “And yet, somehow, above the suffering, above the shackled anger that beats the bars, above the hurt that crazes there surges in me a vast pity—pity for a people imprisoned and enthralled, hampered and made miserable for such a cause, for such a phantasy!”¹³¹ Du Bois pitied whites because they live with the myths of being “greater” than nonwhites by virtue of “natural design”; they live their whiteness in bad faith, covering over the truth that whiteness is not beyond interrogation. They are imprisoned by years of performing whiteness and having whiteness performed on them to the point that “it is a matter of conditioned reflexes; of long followed habits, customs and folkways; of subconscious trains of reasoning and unconscious nervous reflexes.”¹³² Substituting the historical constructedness of whiteness for “manifest destiny,” hence obfuscating the contingency of whiteness, whites remain imprisoned within a space of white ethical solipsism (only whites possess needs and desires that are truly worthy of respect¹³³). It would seem that many whites would rather remain imprisoned within the ontology of *sameness*, refusing to call into question the ideological structure of their identities as “superior.” The call of the other qua other remains unheard within the space of whiteness’s sameness. Locked within their self-enthralled structure of whiteness, whites occlude—both consciously and unconsciously—the possibility of developing new forms of ethical relationality to themselves and to nonwhites. Partly through the process of interrogating their hegemonic, monologic discourse (functioning as the “oracle voice”) whites might reach across the chasm of (nonhierarchical) difference and embrace the nonwhite other in his or her otherness. Du Bois did not romanticize the tremendous amount of work involved in working through the antiblack racism of whites. In short, given the rigidity of whiteness as an embodied, politically, institutionally, and economically rewarding site of identity and power, Du Bois realized that whiteness is not simply an issue of atomistic agency. More is required; “not sudden assault but long siege.”¹³⁴ The etymology of the word *siege* suggests actively waiting and deploying careful analyses and theorizing and diligent work with regard to the insidious nature of whiteness. “A true and worthy ideal,” as Du Bois wrote, “frees and uplifts a people.” He adds, “But say to a people: ‘The one virtue is to be white,’ and people rush to the inevitable conclusion, ‘Kill the ‘nigger!’” On this score, the presumed inextricable link between whiteness and virtue is structurally misanthropic vis-à-vis Blacks. Of course, the idea that “the one virtue is white” is a false ideal, for it “imprisons and lowers.”¹³⁵

Du Bois wrote of the arrogance of white power mongers: "These super-men and world-mastering demi-gods listened, however, to no low tongues of ours, even when we pointed silently to their feet of clay."¹³⁶ Whiteness takes itself as that universality that is beyond the realm of *particularity*. Black people embody particularity, have "feet of clay." Whiteness, however, embodies *all* that is good, moral, beautiful, and supreme. Du Bois noted:

This theory of human culture and its aims has worked itself through warp and woof of our daily thought with a thoroughness that few realize. Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is "white"; everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonorable is "yellow"; a bad taste is "brown"; and the devil is "black." The changes of this theme are continually rung in picture and story, in newspaper heading and movie-picture, in sermon and school book, until, of course, the King can do no wrong—a White Man is always right and a Black Man has no rights which a white man is bound to respect.¹³⁷

The last line in this quotation is an explicit reference to the famous *Dred Scott* decision in which (white) Chief Justice Roger B. Taney declared that Dred Scott and his wife, Harriet, who had petitioned for freedom, would remain enslaved. How could it have been otherwise when whiteness proves "its own incontestable superiority by appointing both judge and jury and summoning only its own witnesses."¹³⁸

Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n)¹³⁹

Whiteness is a "particular social and historical [formation] that [is] reproduced through specific discursive and material processes and circuits of desire and power."¹⁴⁰ Reproduced through circuits of desire and power, and through embodied, habituated forms of racism, whiteness, as Du Bois's writings suggest above, strives for totalization; it desires to claim the entire world for itself and has the misanthropic effrontery to territorialize the very meaning of the human.

Within the specific context of colonial desire, power, and knowledge production regarding the colonized Black body, Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) was a tragic figure as the colonial gaze constructed her body against the backdrop of a racist discursive regime of "truth." The white colonialist gaze was invested in a racist regime of classificatory "truth." Theorizing the specular/ocular dimensions of colonialist power and knowledge is a significant point of entry into the racist colonialist *Weltanschauung*. Indeed, "the hegemony of vision in Western modernity, its ocularcentric discourse, has been subjected to much scrutiny, and Afro-diasporic thinkers, in particular, have stressed the centrality of the scopic in constructions of race and racism."¹⁴¹

The so-called Hottentot Venus was the product of the colonial white gaze that had woven Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) "out of a thousand details, anecdotes, [and] stories," which thereby imprisoned her.¹⁴² To theorize the so-called

Hottentot Venus is to theorize the French *male* imaginary as expressed through monopolizing *desire* and power. Indeed, Hottentot Venus was a mirror through which nineteenth-century French male desire and power are reflected. Speaking more generally regarding how Black women are marked, Hortense Spillers argues:

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.¹⁴³

Functioning as a site of rhetorical wealth, the Black female body inhabits a social and discursive universe within which she is constantly *named*, always already interpellated. As a "sexual abnormality," Ba(a)rtman(n)'s Black body is a site of discursive formation that is structured through a larger historical a priori that constitutes a white epistemic orientation to the Black (female) body. In short, the Black female body as marked other is "trapped" within an "essence" that functions as an important ontological register that constitutes the Anglo-American/European as same/one. She is the exotic phantasm of the white imaginary. Like the French colonial postcards depicting Algerian women, a phenomenon that was created between 1900 and 1930, Ba(a)rtman(n)'s Black body became the fantasized object of the Frenchman's desire and power. In *The Colonial Harem*, Malik Alloula argues that it is through the aperture of the French photographer's camera, which is actually an extension of his voyeurism, that the Algerian, Oriental female became a sexualized object, an effect of a "vast operation of systematic distortion."¹⁴⁴ The postcard became a cheap opening (a form of penetrating) into the unveiling (stripteasing) of the Orient. It became "the poor man's phantasm: for a few pennies, display racks full of dreams. The postcard is everywhere, covering all the colonial space, immediately available to the tourist, the soldier, the colonist."¹⁴⁵ The construction of Ba(a)rtman(n)'s body was quintessentially the effect of a vast operation of distortion and discursive and nondiscursive disciplinary power. Her body became the phantasm of French scopophilia. The perverse gaze directed at Ba(a)rtman(n) was a violent act of reduction and mutilation.

Not only is the Black female body deemed exotic, it is a site of contradictory investments, at once desirable and undesirable, known and unknown. It was important that Ba(a)rtman(n) was both an object of sexual interest and degraded. In short, to reconfigure her into "an object of derision, 'a spectacle, a clown,' is to strip away her sexual appeal, albeit perverse and objectified, to the French male spectator, to reinforce and reinscribe Ba(a)rtman(n)'s position in the Manichaean social world as a primitive savage."¹⁴⁶ Hence, one consistent theme in the European imaginary has been that the Black female body is not

“normal” (read: white, civilized). Indeed, it “represents the abnormal in Eurocentric discourse.”¹⁴⁷

Given the connections between anthropology and European expansionism, it is no wonder that the Black female body, and the Black body more generally, would come to signify the “abnormal,” the “bizarre.” V. Y. Mudimbe has described how the development of European anthropology was “a visible power-knowledge political system” that led to the “reification of the ‘primitive.’”¹⁴⁸ As Jan Pieterse argues, “Anthropology, as the study of ‘otherness,’ never disengaged itself from Eurocentric narcissism.”¹⁴⁹

Capturing the gendered, racial and sexual dimensions at stake in the production of the “truth” of Hottentot Venus, Tracy Sharpley-Whiting notes that Black women embodied “racial/sexual alterity, historically invoking *primal fears* and desire in European (French) men, represent ultimate difference (the *sexualized savage*) and inspire repulsion, attraction, and anxiety, which gave rise to the nineteenth-century collective French male imagination of Black Venus (*primitive narratives*).”¹⁵⁰ The production of the “truth” of Hottentot Venus is fundamentally linked to the white French gaze, which possesses the power “to unveil, ‘to dissect,’ ‘to lay bare’ the unknown, in this case the black female. The gaze ‘fixes’ the black female in her place, steadies her, in order to decode and comfortably recode her into its own system of representations.”¹⁵¹ Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) as Hottentot Venus is always already constrained within the anthropological text of a chain of signifiers. The chain of signifiers point back to their source: the white racist and racialized episteme. Ba(a)rtman(n) is caught within the dialectical structure of the same-other. “Anthropology, as well as missionary studies of primitive philosophies, are then concerned with the study of the distance from the Same to the Other.”¹⁵² One can only imagine the pain felt as Ba(a)rtman(n) measured her body by the constructions projected upon her from the unconscious/conscious European imaginary.

Within the context of early nineteenth-century French society, where Ba(a)rtman(n) was put on display for five years (which includes time in London¹⁵³) for the French public to gaze upon, to gaze upon her big butt, French spectatorship was an active, constructive process that transmogrified Ba(a)rtman(n)’s body. One might argue, “But they were only looking.” However, as I will continue to argue throughout this book, “the white racist gaze” is itself a performance, an intervention, a violent form of marking, labeling as different, freakish, animal-like. While in London (where her name was changed from Sara[h] Baartman, which was given to her under Dutch colonial rule in South Africa, to Sarah Bartmann), Ba(a)rtman(n), who was of African Khoisan cultural identity, and who stood four feet six inches high, became the “grotesque” prized object to be “seen” by parties of five and upward at 225 Piccadilly.¹⁵⁴ Ba(a)rtman(n) later found herself in Paris. Having parted with her previous “guardians” (Alexander Dunlop and Hendrik Cezar) in London, her new “guardian” was “a showman of wild animals named Réaux.” Like a monkey, Ba(a)rtman(n) was fed small treats in order to entice her to dance and sing, probably moving in such a way as to clearly exhibit her “large cauldron pot.”¹⁵⁵ For three

francs one could either “see” the Hottentot Venus or “at rue de Castiglione and for the same admission price, Réaux was also exhibiting a five-year old male rhinoceros.”¹⁵⁶ One had a choice between two wild and exotic animals. Both were oddities, placed on specular display, waiting to be visually dissected by the curious French onlookers.¹⁵⁷ Clearly, Ba(a)rtman(n) was being violated despite her right to inviolability. Then, again, “animals” would not have had such rights to inviolability.

Hottentot Venus became the other through which French gazers could measure their own humanity and superiority. Echoing Spillers, the French needed Ba(a)rtman(n). Similar to the empire or colonial French films of the 1930s, Ba(a)rtman(n) was an outlet for the greatness of French national identity. Sharpley-Whiting writes, “Like travelogues and documentary films, elaborate feature films, depicting ‘happy savages’ and exotic and lush landscapes ripe for the taking, helped to garner support for continued colonial expansion among the French spectators at home.”¹⁵⁸ Indeed, countries such as “Holland and Germany actually had government bureaus controlling and directing the output and distribution of colonial propaganda films.”¹⁵⁹ Thus the creation of Ba(a)rtman(n) and the colonial other is inherent in empire building and imperialist domination. The sense of national failure (given “France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and a not-so-stellar performance during World War I”¹⁶⁰), weakness, and overall fear regarding its status, the “savage other” writ large (on the screen) became the medium in terms of which France could eject all of its historico-psychodynamic crises. The very act of gazing (even if sitting in the dark watching a film¹⁶¹) is itself a form of visual penetration by the phallogentric hegemony of the colonizing gaze. “The gaze is always bound up with power, domination, and eroticisation; it is eroticizing, sexualized, and sexualizing.”¹⁶²

Sharpley-Whiting demonstrates how “seeing” Ba(a)rtman(n) is inextricably linked to discourses of power, dominance, and hierarchies. She is aware of the dialectical relationship between whiteness (as pure, good, innocent) compared to Blackness (as impure, bad, freakish, guilty). French Africanism was tied to the perception of the French as racially superior. This dialectic is clear where Sharpley-Whiting argues that “geographically, linguistically, culturally, and aesthetically, France, the French language, French culture, and Frenchwomen are privileged sites against which Ba(a)rtman(n), and hence Africa, are measured as primitive, savage, and grotesque.”¹⁶³ Within the context of the French imaginary (a site where race, gender, and class intersect), “truth” about Black women, and Ba(a)rtman(n) in particular, was manufactured to foreclose any possibility of knowing Black women other than as prostitutes, sexually dangerous, diseased, and primitive. Historically, and I think this speaks to the pervasiveness of white male hegemony, late nineteenth-century science constructed *all women* as pathological (where this is linked to their sexuality), and that they could easily be “seen” as possessing the bestial characteristics of the Black female Hottentot. Within this context, it is also indicative that Sigmund Freud referred to adult white female sexuality as the “dark continent” of psychology.¹⁶⁴ Never-

theless, white women (read: civilized) were still superior to nonwhite women (read: savage).

Although she was not writing about the colonial context, it is difficult to resist referring to Toni Morrison's examination of a passage from Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and To Have Not*. The point that she raises speaks to the way in which white women, though historically oppressed by white men, receive an "existential wage," as it were, in virtue of being white when compared to Black/nonwhite women. The ideological significance of this example in relationship to Ba(a)rtman(n) is powerful. In a particular scene in the novel, the character Harry is making love to his wife, Marie, who asks:

"Listen, did you ever do it with a nigger wench?"

"Sure."

"What's it like?"

"Like nurse shark."

Morrison notes:

The strong notion here is that of a black female as the furthest thing from human, so far away as to be not even mammal but fish. The figure evokes a predatory, devouring eroticism and signals the antithesis to femininity, to nurturing, to nursing, to replenishment. In short, Harry's words mark something so brutal, contrary, and alien in its figuration that it does not belong to its own species and cannot be spoken of in language, in metaphor or metonymy, evocative of anything resembling the woman to whom Harry is speaking—his wife Marie. The kindness he has done Marie is palpable. His projection of black female sexuality has provided her with solace, for which she is properly grateful. She responds to the kindness and giggles, "You're funny."¹⁶⁵

"Hottentot maidens and Indian squaws are beautiful because of their comparability to Frenchwomen, the embodiment of beauty itself."¹⁶⁶ Prima facie, it would appear that to refer to Ba(a)rtman(n) as "Venus" might function as a term of praise. As Sharpley-Whiting points out, however, the use of the term "Venus" to describe the Black female body simply reinscribed the power of the *sameness* of European superiority.

The Roman deity of beauty, Venus, was also revered as the protectress of Roman prostitutes, who in her honor erected Venus temples of worship. Within these temples, instruction in the arts of love was given to aspiring courtesans. It is the latter image of prostitution, sexuality, and danger that reproduced itself in narrative and was projected onto black female bodies. The projection of the Venus image, of prostitute proclivities, onto black female bodies, allows the French writer to maintain a position of moral, sexual, and racial superiority.¹⁶⁷

To reiterate, the European has created a Manichaean world to buttress his/her own sense of who he/she is. The construction and deployment of essentialist discourse justified what the French "knew" to be true about Ba(a)rtman(n), and,

hence, true about themselves. She was reduced to a wild animal. Just as the Black man was constructed as a walking penis, “most nineteenth-century French spectators did not view her as a person or even a human, but rather as a titillating curiosity, a collage of buttocks and genitalia.”¹⁶⁸ During a three-day examination of Ba(a)rtman(n), with “a team of zoologists, anatomists, and physiologists,” prominent naturalist Georges Cuvier also wanted to do a painting of Ba(a)rtman(n), just as a naturalist would want to get a better picture of the physiology and physiognomy of any other wild and exotic animal.¹⁶⁹ The idea here was to create a kind of physiological cartography of Ba(a)rtman(n), to map her primitive differences against the backdrop of the European subject.

“To see” her “big butt” (what was called *steatopygia*) and her other alleged hypertrophies (enlarged and “primitive” labia minoria) was *not* to “see” her at all. Concerning the labia minoria or the so-called Hottentot apron, “investigators of racial differences would spend the eighteenth century debating its anatomical specifications, producing in the absence of actual evidence a variety of phantasmatic representations.”¹⁷⁰ Having the opportunity to examine Ba(a)rtman(n)’s body after she died, Cuvier’s “objective scientific gaze” revealed the “truth” about her Black body. “As he reads and simultaneously writes a text on Ba(a)rtman(n), the mystery of the dark continent unfolds.”¹⁷¹ In short, Ba(a)rtman(n)’s body “came into being” through the existence of categories that were ideologically fashioned. As John Bird and Simon Clarke note, “White people’s phantasies about black sexuality, about bodies and biology in general, are fears that center around otherness, otherness that they themselves have created and brought into being.”¹⁷² Commenting specifically on the “objective” sketches made of Ba(a)rtman(n), Sharpley-Whiting argues that these “sketches allow the viewer to observe, document, and compare her various physiognomic and physiological differences, differences that vastly differentiate the Other from the European self.”¹⁷³

Ba(a)rtman(n)’s body *became* the distorted sexual *thing* that “it was” in terms of the paradigm/the epistemic regime through which she was “seen.” Hence the European power/knowledge position of spectatorship—mediated by certain atavistic assumptions, fears, theories regarding polygenetic evolutionary development—gave rise to a historical accretion, making for the epistemic conditions under which Ba(a)rtman(n) “appeared.” If we think of Ba(a)rtman(n) as the “referent” of the colonial gaze and colonial discourse, she might be said to have become Hottentot Venus qua phantasm, located within the discursive field of white representational power. Concerning the power of discursivity, Robert Young notes, “[Edward] Said’s most significant argument about the discursive conditions of knowledge is that the texts of Orientalism ‘can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.’”¹⁷⁴ The white colonist helped maintain and perpetuate the epistemic conditions according to which Hottentot Venus *became* an ideological emergent phenomenon, while maintaining distance as a mere observer. It is this distance that also implies a temporal rupture. As Fatimah Tobing Rony notes, “Johannes Fabian explains that anthropology is premised on the notions of time which deny the con-

temporaneity—what he calls coevalness—of the anthropologists and the people that he or she studies.”¹⁷⁵

In reference to Hottentot Venus, French male knowledge production and the perception of “reality” was negotiated within a context that ensured immunity to its own vested interests and desires. For this elaborate colonial form of vision to take place, cognitive agents operated under unacknowledged presuppositions that guaranteed the “veridicality” of their perception of the projected object of speculation. One might say that the use of the term “truth” when describing Hottentot Venus was not an epistemic indicator of correspondence, but a way of ideologically fixing belief within the entire colonial form of orientation with respect to the dark other. If the truth of one’s beliefs were determined simply by stimulation from the external world,¹⁷⁶ then by simply opening one’s eyes one could immediately “see” Hottentot Venus. However, to “see” Hottentot Venus requires nothing short of having lived within a particular language-game, a form of life that always already runs ahead, as it were, creating conditions of intelligibility that have already reconfigured the meaning of some *x*, for example, as that “dark continent.” In this way, because Hottentot Venus was not simply given, the construction of the phantasmatic object must involve a constant process of maintenance, not only at the level of projecting new information onto Ba(a)rtman(n), providing ad hoc explanations to sustain conceptual coherence, but also to maintain ignorance regarding the role that one plays in the construction. As David Bloor reminds us, “Nature has power over us, but only [we] have authority”¹⁷⁷ Such authority signifies “the ways in which seemingly impartial, objective academic disciplines had in fact colluded with, and indeed been instrumental in, the production of actual forms of colonial subjugation and administration.”¹⁷⁸

To the extent that Ba(a)rtman(n) did not approximate the norm of European identity, which was also always already “seen” and “always constituted within, not outside, representation,” she became ersatz, the *femme fatale*.¹⁷⁹ Drawing from the antagonistic, binary logic of Prospero/Caliban, A. R. JanMohamed notes:

If . . . African natives can be collapsed into African animals and mystified still further as some magical essence of the continent, then clearly there can be no meeting ground, no identity, between the social, historical creatures of Europe and the metaphysical alterity of the Calibans and Ariels of Africa. If the differences between the Europeans and the natives are so vast, then clearly . . . the process of civilizing the natives can continue indefinitely. The ideological function of this mechanism, in addition to prolonging colonialism, is to dehistoricize and desocialize the conquered world, to present it as a metaphysical “fact of life,” before which those who have fashioned the colonial world are themselves reduced to the role of passive spectators in a mystery not of their making.¹⁸⁰

lander Gilman asks, “How do we organize our perceptions of the world?”¹⁸¹ This question is particularly important when it comes to my efforts to articulate

the structure of the white gaze. Gilman, too, is concerned with the issue of how the world is "seen" from the perspective of the white gaze. Gilman ties perception, historical convention, and iconography together in relationship to the science of medicine, that science that helped "uncover" the "reality" of Ba(a)rtman(n)'s "inferiority"/"primitiveness" in the first place. Gilman writes:

Medicine offers an especially interesting source of conventions since we do tend to give medical conventions special "scientific" status as opposed to the "subjective" status of the aesthetic conventions. But medical icons are no more "real" than "aesthetic" one's. Like aesthetic icons, medical icons may (or may not) be rooted in some observed reality. Like them, they are iconographic in that they represent these realities in a manner determined by the historical position of the observers, their relationship to their own time, and to the history of the conventions which they deploy.¹⁸²

The (iconic) ideologically "seen" difference in the buttocks and genitalia of the Hottentot was very important "evidence" to justify drawing the distinction between lines of evolutionary development. Autopsies were performed, differences were "seen," "facts" and "realities" suddenly "appeared." Gilman argues that the various vivisections performed on these women were ideologically linked to arguments for polygenesis. "If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan."¹⁸³

Within a larger context, Africa was deemed that mysterious exotic dark continent, which "the light of white maleness illumines." This same light (read: reason) illuminated Ba(a)rtman(n)'s dark body, creating a historico-racial schematized body through which her alleged simian origins were "recognized." Sharpley-Whiting:

Cuvier's description abounds with associations of black femaleness with bestiality and primitivism. Further, by way of contemplating Ba(a)rtman(n) as a learned, domesticated beast—comparing her to an orangutan—he reduces her facility with languages, her good memory, and musical inclinations to a sort of simian-like mimicry of the European race. By the nineteenth century, the ape, the monkey, and orangutan had become the interchangeable counterparts, the next of kin, to blacks in pseudoscientific and literary texts.¹⁸⁴

The comparison of Ba(a)rtman(n) to an ape was central to the French imaginary concerning the bestial nature of Black women. The sexual appetites of Black people, more generally, were believed to have no end. Some French theorists even claimed that Black women copulated with apes.¹⁸⁵ Robyn Wiegman examines Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* (1774), which proposed a sexual compatibility between Hottentot women and apes. Long noted, "Ludicrous as the opinion may seem, I do not think that an oran-outang husband would be any dishonour to an Hottentot female."¹⁸⁶ After all, or so the myth goes, the Black

female body is insatiable. The point here is that Ba(a)rtman(n) became the site for an entire range of sexual “perversions.” Ba(a)rtman(n)’s “anomalous” labia were linked to the overdevelopment of the clitoris, which was linked to lesbian love. Hence, “the concupiscence of the black is thus associated also with the sexuality of the lesbian.”¹⁸⁷

The “truth” of the Black body is not outside the domain of white colonial power. White colonial power is exercised through its representational practices that actually *constrain* the Black body, passing over its embodied integrity and creating a chimera from its own imaginary. *Mythopoetic* constructions of Ba(a)rtman(n) were designed to “discover” the hidden “truths” about Blacks in general and Black women in particular. It was this “knowledge” that enabled Europeans/Anglo-Americans to repress many of their fears. “Sexual and racial differences,” as Sharpley-Whiting argues with psychoanalytic insight, “inspires acute fears in the French male psyche. Fear is sublimated or screened through the desire to master or know this difference, resulting in the production of eroticized/exoticized narratives of truth.”¹⁸⁸ Ba(a)rtman(n) was *codified* as the very epitome of unrestrained sexuality. Through various *rituals* (medically mapping her body while dead or alive, voyeuristically peeping and peering), Ba(a)rtman(n) was further “seen” as strange, a throwback to some earlier moment in evolutionary history. Ba(a)rtman(n) “became” what her gazers, operating in bad faith, wanted to “see.” She was the victim of “a totalizing system of representation that allows the seen body to become the known body.”¹⁸⁹ Through the process of “looking,” which I have argued is a powerful act of construction, Ba(a)rtman(n) was *ontologized* into the Hottentot Venus. In “becoming” Hottentot Venus, Ba(a)rtman(n) underwent a process of dehumanization.

One can only imagine how Ba(a)rtman(n) felt as she learned to re-inhabit her body, to re-relate to it, as her consciousness of her body was shaped through the lens of a historico-racial schema. After all, everywhere she looked she found herself reconfigured by (heteronomous) gazes that returned her to herself, distorted and animal-like, imprisoned in a primitive essence. Within the semiotic social field of whiteness, she became an ontological cipher, waiting to be assigned meaning and identity from without, perhaps forever estranged from her African Khoisan identity. One can only imagine her traumatic experience of double consciousness, how she underwent the psychological duress of seeing herself through white symbols that ontologized her into the epitome of grotesqueness. Even at times when she found herself alone, the white gaze was no doubt operative. As she measured her soul by the tape of a white French world that gazed at/looked on her in amused contempt, desire, and pity, one wonders whether she had the dogged strength to keep herself from being torn asunder.¹⁹⁰ When her remains returned to her home of South Africa, a place where she would find rest, she ceased to be a prisoner of that dehumanizing gaze.¹⁹¹ In a beautifully written homecoming poem, “A Poem for Sarah Baartman,” Diana Ferrus is clear that she engages in a poetics of combat and freedom:

I have come to wrench you away—away from the poking eyes of the man-made monster who lives in the dark with his racist clutches of imperialism, who dissects your body bit by bit, who likens your soul to that of satan and declared himself the ultimate God!¹⁹²

Notes

1. Crispin Sartwell, *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography and White Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 6.
2. Charles Johnson, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32, no. 4 (1993), 595–614, quotation on 600.
3. James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood From the Dark Side*, ed. Colin MacCabe and Cornel West (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.
4. Lewis Gordon, "Africana Thought and African Diasporic Studies," *The Black Scholar* 30, nos. 3–4 (2000–2001): 25–30, quotation on 25.
5. Sartwell, *Act Like You Know*, 11.
6. Manning Marable, "A Conversation with Ossie Davis," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 2, no. 3 (2000): 6–16, quotation on 9.
7. Marable, "Ossie Davis," 9.
8. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 42.
9. William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 36.
10. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 111.
11. Paget Henry, "African and Afro-Caribbean Existential Philosophies," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 33.
12. Marable, "Ossie Davis," 9.
13. I delineate some of these discursive levels in chapter 5.
14. I would like to thank Bettina Bergo for our conversation regarding this point.
15. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114.
16. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114–15.
17. Bettina G. Bergo, "'Circulez! Il n'y a rien à voir,' Or, 'Seeing White': From Phenomenology to Psychoanalysis and Back," in *White on White/Black on Black*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 131.
18. Johnson, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," 603.
19. Johnson, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," 607.
20. Sartwell, *Act Like You Know*, 45.
21. Lewis R. Gordon, *Existencia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 76.
22. Johnson, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," 606. Within the context of the history of African-American philosophy, Johnson's article exploring a phenomenology of the Black body is an early and formative piece in the tradition of what is now termed Africana philosophy of existence. The article was written as early as 1975, and was subsequently published in the winter 1976 issue of *Ju-Ju: Research Papers in Afro-American Studies*. Johnson's article actually appeared prior to Thomas F. Slaughter Jr.'s