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BLACK EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY: TRUTH IN VIRTUE OF SELF-
DISCOVERY

A Dissertation

Submitted to McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

James B. Haile, III

May 2014

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James B. Haile, III

2014

BLACK EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY: TRUTH IN VIRTUE OF SELF-DISCOVERY

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ABSTRACT

BLACK EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY: TRUTH IN VIRTUE OF SELF-DISCOVERY

By

James B. Haile, III

May 2014

Dissertation supervised by Dr. James Swindal

In the past 20 years, within the discipline of philosophy there has been a burgeoning interest in the fields of Race theory, Africana, and African American philosophy, especially in the scholarship and questions concerning the experience and meaning of black existence; that is, within black existential philosophy. Despite this interest, though, there has yet to be a sustained study of the categories of black existential philosophy nor its concepts—there seems to have been the acceptance of traditional European existential categories and concepts merely applied to the questions of black existence. This work, though, offers a sustained examination of the existential categories—subjectivity (and objectivity), time, and history—as well as the partner concepts—freedom/autonomy, anxiety, despair, dread, and the absurd—to see if they can be applied to black existence, and to exam if the concepts themselves change when applied to black existence. What is more, in examining black existence, this work seeks to examine whether or not different categories of and concepts for existence emerge.

DEDICATION

To all those who have helped me to measure distances and record depths.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people, without whom this project as a whole, probably, would not have come to fruition, and almost certainly not as it currently exists. I thank Dr. Jim Swindal for his support and for allowing me to explore my voice in this project and through this process. To Jerry W. Ward, Jr., I wish to thank you for those late night conversations and for your constant reminders to push myself and do well in the crafting of my profession: I thought once, and am now sure that you are, in fact, the “Little of Man at Chehaw Station”! To friends and colleagues, Tommy J. Curry, Brandon Hogan, Rufus Burnette, I wish to thank you all for the support and fellowship over all these years. And, finally, to my parents, James and Desiree, I express what I’ve imbibed *all* these years old and have found their expression here.

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-INTRODUCTION-

Black Existentialism *as* Philosophy

This work, *Black Existentialism: Truth in Virtue of Self-Discovery*, serves as a primer or a meta-philosophical discussion on the experience(s) of being black and the meaning of black existence through an engagement with the philosophical methodologies of existentialism and phenomenology. This work situates itself, principally, within historical and contemporary debates concerning the meaning of blackness and black existence; and, rather than utilizing concepts furnished by ‘traditional’ existential philosophy and phenomenology¹ to understand the experience(s) of black existence, this work attempts to mine the foundation(s) of such concepts and ask whether these concepts, or *any* concepts, themselves can capture the experience of human existence. This work argues that any investigation into existence and analysis of experience require certain baseline assumptions and a framework through which any concept of living *can* arise.

Currently, we find ourselves at the beginning of an investigation and an analysis, attending to the issue of how to begin, deciding on how to frame the key issues: what are the baseline assumptions and framework for thinking existence and the meaning of experience within the spectrum of blackness and black people; that is, what are the baseline assumptions for an interpretation of “the being *of* blackness” and by what process

¹ ‘Traditional’ here means ‘canonical’. Black existential philosophy and phenomenology (as it currently stands) simply takes European intellectual concepts—such as angst, forlornness, abandonment—and, rather than investigating their foundational upsurge *as* concepts to capture the experience of existence, these concepts are simply borrowed and attached to the experience(s) of black people. In our work, here, we interested in establishing a new foundation for black existentialism through an examination of the foundation for existence, and, by proxy, for these ‘traditional’ concepts.

are these frameworks to be revealed?

Our challenge here is to establish *our* framework and assumptions while also illuminating the framework and assumptions of ‘traditional’ existential philosophy and phenomenology in order to understand the nuanced historical relation of blackness, black existence and ‘race’; that is, part of our concern is to demonstrate that the connection between the meaning of blackness, black existence, and that of the history of ‘race,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘racialization’ has become so interwoven that we have difficulty thinking blackness without this history: ‘race,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘racialization’ have become *the* baseline assumption and *the* framework through which black existence and black experience is to be understood. Our key issue herein: to establish *our* existential and phenomenological framework in order to disentangle blackness and the meaning of black existence from the history ‘race,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘racialization.’²

Yet, as a prolegomena, we are tasked with the questioned, “how do we, within this history of ‘race,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘racialization,’ come to an understanding of black experience and the meaning of black existence, which is related to this history, but not reducible to it?” Our question has a specific contour in the form of a subsequent questions: “what is black experience and the meaning of black existence,” becomes, “how does one determine the actions or expressions of persons *as* black?” and, “What does it mean to *be* black: that is,

² Kwame Anthony Appiah raises a similar concern in his work, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* where he argues the ‘idea’ of Africa has come to shadow the actual living realities of African peoples. For Appiah, our difficulty in thinking Africa is due to our racialized thought. Appiah argues that ‘ethnicity or culture,’ rather than ‘race’ better capture the meaning of African existence and the experiences of being African. Though I agree with Appiah’s criticism of our thinking of Africa in strictly ‘racialized’ ways, and even with his attempt to locate the meaning of existence and experience within the cultural, I think he did not go far enough in his positive articulation: for our work here, we want to argue that Appiah’s notion of culture is not sufficiently ‘spiritual’ or ‘spirit-filled,’ but technical.

what does it mean to act or produce blackness or black products?" The question of the meaning of blackness reveals itself further within a concrete concern of activity of production; yet, we must not lose sight of the theoretical concern of framework and the baseline assumptions that influence our findings and understanding to deem an activity or an artifact, 'black.' Our questions are ones of 'situating' knowledge, and also recognizing within 'tradition' some general claims, and contextualizing those claims. Before we engage specifically with activities and what is produced in that activity, we first need to establish the process in which and by which that activity occurs. We judge the progress of our meta-philosophical discussion in our ability to place our understanding, not within a specific tradition, but in terms of general principles reflective of our framework, fulfilled by our methodology.

We approach the questions of the meaning of black existence and the experience of being black from within our analysis of our own implicit framework and baseline assumptions (as well as those of the 'tradition') *in* the articulation of the process, those productive activities, and in artifacts deemed, by our methodology, as 'black.' That is, our methodology is to investigate black existence and analyze the experience of being black through an interpretation of what is produced and the process of production: black people are deemed 'black' in the processes of their interpretive production; and, we, as a prolegomena, measure that process and what is produced.

* * * *

We find ourselves on the plane of a fundamentally ontological project; existentialism, if to be successful at all as a methodological practice, has to concern itself not solely with the individual or even the group assumed primary, but with the ‘field’³ of that individual or group. To begin with what is situationally or factually specific and concrete would be to skip a step, and to leave open the relationship between the individual or group with what constitutes them *as* an individual, *as* a group. Existentialism as a methodological practice must take account of the process through which individuals or groups become ‘individualized’ or ‘grouped’ by taking account of the background from which, against which, and through which they exist *ecstatically*—existere: *to stand out*; that is, existentialism must take into account the background that allows the individual or group to ‘stand out,’ to be foregrounded: “It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground.”⁴ Our investigation and analysis into human existence and experience highlights the process of the activity of production and its product as our baseline assumptions and framework. Human beings exist—that is, ‘stand out’ as what they are—in their productive activities. Put another way, the question of human existence is answered, gestured towards in the experience of existence itself.

³ ‘Field’ is understood here as the structuring element in human experience. ‘Field’ is a concept similar to the concept of a ‘phenomenological field,’ as that which surrounds us and that which is primary. We are not concerned here with the ‘perceptual field’ surrounding an organism, but with the space and living place that individuals and groups make from the physical, surrounding world. For us, we are concerned with the ontological structure, that is, the interaction between an individual or group with the material world and the process through which the world as our own emerges as such.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*, 28.

The initial question concerning the meaning of existence, then, reveals a series of imbedded metaphysical and ontological questions; as it turns out, our meta-philosophical discussion is a metaphysical discussion: that is, the ontological question of existence is a metaphysical question of the status of the question itself. The question, "how do we best go about asking the question of existence,"—even in another iteration, "how do we best approximate what we understand to be the answer?"—suggests other metaphysical assumptions in the form of further questions: "what is a question," and, "how do we understand a question to *be* a question for us?" Existentialism, as a methodological approach, is a self-surpassing; that is, the nature of questioning leads to further questions about that which is questioned: "what is the meaning of existence" quickly reveals a more basic series of questions. The process of questioning seems, on the face of it, perpetually regressive, but within each of the meta-philosophical questions and further metaphysical explications is a seed of an answer in an approach to questioning and to our specific question. The commonality in all questioning is the questioner: the question of the nature of the relation of question to the questioner reveals ourselves as our own self-surpassing foundation: we are those that question, and stand in relation to our question and to what is questioned. Heidegger tells us, that "We come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself,"⁵ meaning neither existence itself, nor any of questions of existence have built in answers, nor answers that are to come from a source of absolute truth. Rather, we come to terms with our questions, with our relation to questioning through the process of existence, and the self-surpassing experience of

⁵ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, par. 12-13. We will explain this quotation further in the next chapter.

existence.⁶

For Heidegger, as with us, we come to know, that is, approach the proper way of asking a question generally, and asking *the* question of existence by way of examining the questioner. This process of examination reveals us, as questioner, in our very being-in-the-world as our dwelling in. That is, in our investigation into the meaning of existence and in our analysis of experience itself, we reveal our living reality in the concrete activity of production. What we produce and the process of its production reveals the meaning of existence as our being-in, or dwelling in-the-world. Dwelling, thus, is a process of production to signify living, *our* living, in its essential form. It is through dwelling that questions become questions *for us*, and that we, in turn, are questioned by the question, or experience, itself. Our dwelling becomes the background against which we come to exist to pose and answer questions. As such, our analysis of dwelling, and the meaning of our dwelling guide our approach to the question of existence.

The journey itself, from the metaphysical by way of the meta-philosophical, via the ontological—that is, the question of existence (metaphysical), which leads to the question of the question (meta-philosophical) directs us back to ourselves in our being-in as questioner (ontological)—offers some key insights into our specific approach to the meaning of black existence and the experience of being black in that it announces 1) ‘experience’ cannot not explain itself, but requires a background or framework against

⁶ Heidegger’s claim that only “existence” can answer the problem of “existence” reflects our earlier note that concepts themselves cannot capture human existence, but must be mined to discover what, internally, animates such concepts at all: in other words, Heidegger’s expression finds resonance in our thought that beneath concepts must be a living presence: or, as Heidegger notes, “the essential definition of this being cannot be accomplished by ascribing to it a ‘what’ that specifies its material content...” par. 12.

which the individual or group stands-out; and, 2) our understanding of black existence and black experience must be analyzed through activity and production: as it turns out, the meaning of black existence is not determined by those histories that have grouped peoples as 'black', but in those activities and products of those people deemed as 'black'. The metaphysical discussion of existence is answered by the ontological examination of being-in, or dwelling. Black existentialism, thus, is a meta-philosophical discussion of the meaning of black existence and an ontological project of being-in—that is, what is produced in [the] dwelling of 'black' people.

Our existential perspective is significant in that, in disentangling black existence and black experience from the history of 'race,' 'racism,' and 'racialization,' we also disentangle black existence and black experience from the de facto background or baseline assumption of oppression for understanding black people, broadening the horizons for the possibility of what it means to *be* black.

* * *

Black existential philosophy, the recently emergent sub-field in the discipline of philosophy, spans some seventeen years,⁷ and has created numerous interpretations of 'black' historical, intellectual, and aesthetic production. What these various interpretations have in common is that they have traditionally begun with a concern over meaning: what does it *mean* to be black. Yet, what belies this concern is not so much the existential

⁷ Black existentialism, as a formal study of black existence, began with the publication of Lewis R. Gordon's edited 1996 collection, *Existence in Black*.

concern of human *being*, or the meaning *of* existence, but the specificity of a situation, interpreted through a specific historicized lens. Rather than those general existential claims concerning human expression and the relation of the individual or group to their physical environment, or their various thinkings about their existence generally, the question of the meaning of black existence is interpreted through the baseline assumption, against the background and within the framework *of* the history of ‘race,’ ‘racialization,’ and ‘racism’. Through this assumption, background, and framework, the question of the meaning of black existence becomes, “critiques of domination” and affirmations of “the empowerment of Black people in the world.”⁸ In this accounting, the meaning of blackness, as the historicity of this oppression, can find its expression only in the public sphere as a political confrontation, begging the question: “is *all* black activity and production inherently in conversation with ‘race,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘racialization,’ and, thus, inherently a public act, and a political commitment [to liberation]”?

The title of this work, *Black Existentialism: Truth in Virtue of Self-Discovery*, suggests that the meaning of black existence and black experience stretches beyond the historicity of ‘race,’ ‘racism,’ and ‘racialization’ towards the living activity of being-in the world, and self-discovery in the hermeneutic unfolding of the world through one’s activity *in* it. “Discovery”, understood phenomenologically, will be rewritten, for clarity, as ‘dis-discovery’. Dis-discovery is not meant as an accidental finding, or even being led to some end, as in the case of following a map to some hidden treasure; nor is meant in terms of the psychological uncovering or a journey within oneself to reveal something unknown about oneself. Rather, dis-discovery refers to revelation—‘what’ is revealed in our living is our living: what is

⁸ Magnus O. Bassey. “What is Africana Critical Theory, or Black Existential Philosophy?”, 914.

revealed in our investigation into the meaning of existence is the manner in which and through which we exist: our modes of dwelling.

Existentialism as philosophy concerns the manner in which and the manner through which the 'world' becomes *our* world, and the manner in and through which what we call a 'self' engages in and with this 'world.'⁹ The world, thus, is not purely objective presence perceived by the senses in its already constituted form, as in the objective "fact" or "discovery" of physics or mathematics. Rather, the world emerges from the interrelation between consciousness and materiality. The world is the dis-covery, that is, revelation by consciousness; and, consciousness is the dis-covery of the world. That is, consciousness is dis-covered, that is, revealed, within its interaction, its dwelling in the world; the meaning of existence is dis-covered in our activity, in our *production*; the world is a mirror in that it reflects our own living activity back to us: it reflects our existence as our production in the world and bears witness to our existence. Truth, thus, is the co-dis-covery and co-constitution of consciousness and the world, consciousness *in the world*, and the world *in consciousness*.

This subtle shift from an objective stance towards the 'world' to an existential phenomenological hermeneutics of world has tremendous affects on and for black existentialism. This shift means that the concerns of black existential philosophy are not the particular focus of objective material reality in the history of 'race,' 'racism,' and 'racialization,' but the ontological principles of our understanding of black existence and

⁹ An important distinction is made here between the 'world' as such and the world. 'World' refers to the brute materiality which surrounds us, while world (without the quotes) refers to that which we make—that is, produce—from the brute materiality around us. World is both the process through which we make brute materiality ours, *and* it is the product of this process. For more, see Michael Inwood's *A Heidegger Dictionary*, 245-250.

the experience of being black. That is, what is of concern existentially is not the historicity of factual life, but the interpretation and self-representation of the 'world' as such and its transformation into *our* world.

The secondary subtle shift from objective stance to hermeneutics is linguistic. What is called 'black existential philosophy' is also known in another iteration, 'black philosophy of existence,'¹⁰ without clear reason behind the distinction. On the face of it, black existential philosophy differs from black philosophy of existence in that structurally "existential philosophy" differs from "philosophy of existence" (or *Existenzphilosophie*) in the arrangement of subject and preposition: for the former, existence is itself a methodological approach, that is a philosophical position; while for the latter, existence is an object of philosophical speculation, about which one *philosophizes*. The distinction between black existential philosophy and black philosophy of existence, though, may be more pronounced than simple word placement. The former consists of a manner or way

¹⁰ For example, in his text, *Existence in Black*, Lewis Gordon writes,

There is, however, a distinction that should here be born in mind. We can regard *existentialism*—the popularly named ideology—as a fundamentally European phenomenon. It is, in effect, the history of European literature that bears that name. On the other hand, we can regard *philosophy of existence* (the specialized term that will also sometimes be referred to in this volume as *existential philosophy*) as philosophical questions premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation. Unlike fashionable standpoint epistemologies of the present, philosophy of existence is marked by a centering of what is often known as the 'situation' of questioning or inquiry itself. Another term for situation is the lived—or meaning-context of concern." (3)

Here, Gordon, understands the distinction between existentialism and philosophy of existence to be largely historical. But, Gordon's willingness to move fluidly between the two does not suggest any real substantive difference between the two as we have posited here. Rather, for Gordon, the major concern of both is the centrality of the 'situation' for any understanding of human existence (4); we, though, posit human existence itself—that is, the question of the meaning of existence—as the possibility for and foundation of what Gordon refers to as the 'situation.'

that a world is constituted and reflected upon, while the latter consists of the manner in which the self comes *to be constituted* in an already existing world. That is, while existential philosophy is concerned with the co-discovery and the co-constitution of consciousness and world [with both the activity of production and what is produced as a signification of human dwelling], philosophy of existence is concerned with our conscious attention to the world as always already constituted entity. The distinction between existential philosophy and philosophy of existence for our understanding of the meaning of black existence and for black experience turns on whether we think of black people as co-constituting themselves and their world, or if we think of black people as being constituted by the already constituted external world: in short, are black people *historical* or products of history?

* *

Grounded in the original question of the meaning of existence, we are simultaneously working through and questioning our fundamental concepts of living, those concerning the constitution of 'experience' and what makes an experience *ours*. Concepts such as interpretation, inwardization, experience, subjectivity, meaning, and facticity are challenged for how they are understood, and affect our understanding of our own existence, our experience, and our world. Preliminarily, we are asking the question of how what are called 'facts' become *factual*—that is, how an aspect of brute existence comes to carry weight and meaning, and significance for *our* existence.

How do we set something like a fact or data 'free' of its ontic designation (material

context or situation) to mine its ontological structure so that it may be encountered as something other than what has been presented as factual, as telling, as indicating, as meaningful, as significant for some human life? The task of this work is to demonstrate the process by which something like a 'fact' becomes meaningful and significant, and what this process means for our understanding of black existence. The problem of *given* 'facts' is that they operate as if they were a priori judgments, rather than norms.¹¹ Part of our task, then, is to disentangle the normative aspect of 'facts' to reveal their construction within the co-constitution of consciousness and materiality; without this conceptual disentanglement, 'facts' are presented and consumed as if they are objective realities that themselves explain themselves, *and* condition the meaning of human existence. This tendency to allow 'facts' to explain the internal reckonings (the meaning of their existence) of individuals or groups without explicating the process of how a 'fact' may become telling, indicative, or revealing is especially troubling for black people who continually face an over abundance of 'facts' to explain the meaning of their existence and their experience. From *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) to *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Moynihan Report, 1965) and to many lesser known studies, articles, essays and books, black people have found a plethora of work dedicated to describing to them their moral, psychological, and emotional realities: works largely predicated upon the

¹¹ A standard argument in black sociology, which is also being made here, concerns what constitutes a 'fact' of an existence, and, how these 'facts' are used to construct an image of an individual or a group. 'Facts,' which are but interpretations of reality, are used as if they are objective' and non-subjective, and as such, can be used to 'know' the essence of a individual, a people, or a culture prior to, and even without engaging, directly, with the individual, group or culture. 'Facts,' thus, are taken as a priori transcendentals rather than subjective, normative ideals. For a good text of the usage of 'facts' to explain human existence see, Joyce Ladner's edited collection, *The Death of White Sociology: Essays on Race and Culture*.

collection of data and spurious correlations amongst that data.

The major task of existential philosophy is to address how something within the human world becomes what it is: how we locate and understand meaning; how the world itself is produced; and, how, within an already existing axiological framework that attempts to locate and mark us as what we *are*—in the specific case of black people, *as* blackness as other, as Othered, as object—we, nevertheless, insert an alternate framework. Altering the existential concern from an already constituted world to a produced existence offers a different axiological framework and the opportunity to pose different sets of questions.

Outline of the text

The text is divided in two parts. The first half, “Black Existential Philosophy,” is comprised of three chapters. The first chapter is a preliminary discussion of existentialism as philosophy, its component parts, emergent concepts, and the structure and methodology to be illumined throughout the text as a whole. Additionally, this chapter sketches out the elements of black existential philosophy in an attempt to begin to approach the question of the meaning of black existence and black experience *philosophically*. The second chapter is concerned with ‘race’ and the problem of the representation of black existence and experience in aesthetic form. This chapter engages writer Ralph Ellison and his views of writing generally, but aesthetics more broadly, as *techne* and the relation of *techne* to axiology. Ellison struggled with being both a writer and a black person; that is, between his duties to form and craft, and his obligation to ‘politics.’ This chapter attempts to bridge this divide in Ellison’s own writing by locating its answer within craftsmanship as both a *techne* and as a source of morality. The third chapter engages the work of Toni Morrison, and her

efforts through her novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, to differentiate the existential individual of 'traditional' existentialism from the communal subject in order to discuss love and freedom as the meaning of human existence.

The second half of the book, "Black Existential Phenomenology," explores the phenomenological aspects of existentialism through an analysis of space and place in the co-constitution of consciousness and the world. This half is comprised of two chapters. Chapter four engages existential phenomenology and black existence through an analysis of Thomas F. Slaughter's 1977 essay, "Epidermalizing the World: A Basic Mode of Being-Black". This chapter seeks to ground a phenomenological method for black people based in the meaning constructions and living productions of black people. Chapter five situates self-consciousness in the accomplishment of place and in the achievement of history. This chapter works to distinguish place from the bare materiality of space and to articulate a concept of history that is produced within the accomplishment of place. Further, this chapter highlights the significance of place and history for our understanding of human existence generally, but specifically for our discussion of the meaning of black existence and the experience of being black.

In the concluding remarks the future of philosophy, in general, but also the future of existentialism as philosophy, with specific concern for human freedom are discussed. Through the incorporation of the previous chapters on the construction of the world and consciousness through activity *of* production, and of the phenomenological experience of being in the world, this chapter will argue that human existence should be understood aesthetically, that is, in terms of what we do and what we produce. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that human existence is defined as 'aesthetic freedom.'

PART ONE: Black Existential Philosophy

Consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute, the only condition to attain consciousness of self. A consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, has to be ignorant, of the essences and determinations of being.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

-CHAPTER ONE-

Towards an *Existentiality* of Black Existentialism

We come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself. We shall call *this* kind of understanding of itself *existentiell* understanding. The question of existence is an ontic "affair" ...For this the theoretical perspicuity of the ontological structure of existence is not necessary. The question of structure aims at the analysis of what constitutes existence. We shall call the coherence of these structures *existentiality*. Its analysis does not have the character of an *existentiell* understanding but rather an *existential* one. The task of an existential analysis...is prescribed with regard to its possibility and necessity in the ontic constitution...

—Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

Introduction: By Way of Methodology

It is proper to begin a project concerned with the investigation into the meaning of existence and the analysis of experience by way of questioning, by way of the question itself, for it is the question and the act of questioning which produces our guiding way towards our possible 'answer.' The question, here, under investigation is, "what is the meaning of existence?" This is the baseline, original starting point for our project as a whole. Answering this question, though, is not straightforward for it is elusive; this original question, when approached, reveals a series of further, imbedded questions: "what is meant by 'existence'?"¹² And, perhaps, most fundamental: "why ask such a question at all; why do we query to existence, its meaning and its nature?" Our inquiry into the original question not only throws up at us secondary questions, but it also returns to us a question about ourselves to be addressed: "what does our original question tell us about ourselves as the questioner?" The original question, "what is the meaning of existence?" has become, "what is the meaning of our asking about the meaning of existence?" Not only is the question of the meaning of existence posed, but, along with the question of 'existence' itself, throws us back on ourselves in return of our initial gesture: "for *whom* is this a question that is in need of answering?" Why is it that the simplicity of the existential, "what is the meaning of existence," becomes complicated under the reflexive, "what does it mean to *be* questioned?" When a question is raised it implies two things: whatever is questioned is

¹² Also implied here is the question, "what is meaning?" or, the strange formulation, "what is the meaning of 'meaning'?" Here, this question will be treated not so much epistemically as ontologically. That is, we will understand the phenomenon 'meaning' in terms of the unfolding of the larger question, "what is the meaning of existence?" or, through the process of existence itself.

possibly known in some way; and, that whatever is questioned is worth knowing. It is this latter inference that throws us back on ourselves, for we must ask, “Why is it worth knowing [worth asking], and to whom, *for* whom, and for what purpose?” A question always reveals something about its questioner.

Phenomenologically, the questioning question not only reveals us as the questioner, but it also reveals, in our approach to the question, something about us in our posing *of* the question itself. “What is the meaning of existence?” reveals not only ourselves as the questioner of existence, but it reveals something about our concern for existence, and something concerning our implicit assumption(s) concerning the possibility of our knowledge: can we know the meaning of existence? Is this even a question worth asking? How we approach the question reveals our relationship to the question more than it discloses an ‘answer’.¹³ As such, our concern throughout is not with the specificity of an ‘answer,’ but with the approach to the question itself. We need to reveal our framework and the baseline assumptions of our frameworks through which we pose our questions (and through which a question *becomes* a question; that is, the baseline assumptions and the framework that allows a phenomenon to be ‘knowable’ and ‘worth knowing’.)

Questioning reveals the questioner as the one who situates the world in such a manner that inquiry itself is [thought to be] possible. The epistemic assumption of the nature of the question has to do with the possibility of knowledge. Yet, the kind of knowledge and what constitutes knowledge is to be debated: what epistemic referent is required to question, and what is required of us who question the questioning question? Is

¹³ The sorts of answers we get reveals the manner in which we ask our questions: answers are not themselves objective, making an endeavor of humanity necessarily phenomenological in that our answers equally reveal our assumptions in forming and asking our questions.

all knowledge equal? Are all questions equal, or are some more worthy of being asked given the object of inquiry is more worthy object? Aristotle tells us that the merit of an inquiry can be judged on the object under investigation: “We suppose that knowing is fine and honorable, and that one type of knowing is finer and more honorable than another either because it is more exact or because it is concerned with better and more wonderful things.”¹⁴

The question of the meaning of existence is thought to be a worthy question because its object is of the highest sort: that is, ‘existence’ itself is thought to be the most venerable of inquiries (in all of its varied forms: soul, Being, God, Truth, Form). Nevertheless, this sort of question, of the highest object, reveals something about us in our consideration of such a question itself valuable, and such an answer “finer and more honorable.” Though the question of the meaning of existence seems impersonal, and its answer(s) universal and abstract, we must still ask ourselves, “is this question more valuable than the question of its origin?” What has made philosophical inquiry difficult through the years—especially those post-Cartesian years—is that its questions have been presented as ubiquitous, the question of their foundation secondary or irrelevant and difficult to fully articulate. In a sense, we have forgotten the foundation of the question itself; and, in forgetting, have covered over the origin of our universal assertions. Existentially, though, we are always thrown back on ourselves, and what is of concern here is what questioning means for us, but also what it *does to* us in our activity [of questioning]. To question is to represent a world, to reveal a world.

¹⁴ *De Anima*, 402a1-4.

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The original question, “what is meaning of existence?” is existential in nature; while, the secondary question, “what is the experience of being-in the world?” is phenomenological in kind. The former reveals a further a question of the task of asking questions generally; the latter is the revelation of the original question. Both questions are reflexive and pose challenges to us. Although these questions are, here, treated by way of an ordering—i.e., “what is the meaning of existence?” is treated as our original or fundamental question; while, “what is the experience of being-in” is treated as though it were derivative of our original or foundational—in this investigation the ordering is only formal, given that our methodological approach and concern is not of either temporal or logical sequence; our engagement, rather, is with(in) the original question *as* the revelation of the experience of being-in. The question of the meaning of existence reveals the subsequent question of what it means to pose such a question and reveals the questioner as the foundation of the question. As such, what is treated as ‘primary’ is not what is temporally most immediate [i.e., first]; rather, it is what is reflected upon. Being-in, is prior in experience to the original question; but, the question of meaning reveals being-in as [its] phenomena, that by which we are to approach the question in ‘truth’, as [its] ‘answer’. The original question *reveals* experience, an experience that, in turn, guides our investigation into the meaning of existence [itself]. The hermeneutic of experience and the question of its meaning is embedded within the original question, as the internal relation between the two. Heidegger suggests as much when he writes,

Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought...As a seeking, questioning needs prior guidance from what it seeks. The meaning of being must therefore already be available to us in a certain way. We intimated that we are always already involved in an understanding of being. From

this grows the explicit question of the meaning of being and the tendency towards its concept. We do not *know* what 'being' means. But already when we ask, 'what is being?' we stand in an understanding of the 'is' without being able to determine conceptually what the 'is' means.¹⁵

The *inner-relation* between seeking and what is sought, between questioning and that which is questioned, between the questioner and the question itself, and, on a more basic level, between the original question of existence and the phenomenological question of experience reveals a seeming circularity: experience is necessary for questioning, and yet, questioning is said to reveal experience. In short, the 'circularity' of this *inner-relation* reveals that there is no experience without prior framing and there is no framing without a preceding experience. Experience without proper questioning is blind; and, questioning without experience is empty. Heidegger solves this seeming circularity by revealing that within the inherent but creative tension between existentialism and phenomenology lies *thinking* the internal discourse between the two. Thinking that attends to the co-disclosive, hermeneutic between consciousness and materiality, attends to the basic activity of human being, revealed within the question of existence itself: the production of world.

*"We learn to think by giving heed to what there is to think about."*¹⁶

Our task, throughout, will be to trace such thinking to disclose what is of concern, the meaning of existence. What will be set forth in questioning, ourselves –*in* the world, is still in need of further clarification. By what process are we, as being-in the world, set forth? To address this question we will begin by investigating that field of inquiry specifically concerned with our preliminary question [of existence]: existentialism.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, par. 5-6.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger. *Basic Writings*, 370.

A Discussion of Terms

A. Existentialism as Philosophy versus Philosophy of Existence¹⁷

Jean-Paul Sartre is perhaps the best-known existentialist philosopher.¹⁸ What is more, he is perhaps the only historic figure that self-identified with the term and wrote specifically with this term in mind.¹⁹ His essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1946) is one of the most cited, best and earliest examples of existentialism as a technical philosophy.²⁰ This essay preceded all of the anthologies of existential writers and philosophers by two decades.²¹ One of the basic tenets of existentialism as understood by Sartre is, “*existence*

¹⁷ Throughout I will differentiate between existentialism, as it will be understood herein, from the tradition of existentialism, which we will understand as a philosophy of existence. We will note this difference by usage of quotation marks. When we note traditional ‘existential philosophy’ we are referencing what we will term philosophy of existence, and when we use the term, existentialism, without quotation marks we will be referring to our understanding of existentialism.

¹⁸ One can look to his influence in many disciplines outside of philosophy from literature to history to American studies during the years of his life, and especially after his death in 1980. For a good example of Sartre’s influence see Anne Fulton’s *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945-1963*; also, see Jonathan Judaken’s edited collection, *Race After Sartre: Antiracism, Africana Existentialism, Postcolonialism*.

¹⁹ Many of the writers and philosophers currently associated with the term, at the time of their writing, did not associate themselves with the term, either because the term did not yet exist, as with a writer such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, or because they did not see much use of the term itself, as was the case with Albert Camus.

²⁰ This essay, more than his larger work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943) directly addresses the philosophical concerns and philosophical method of existentialism. What is more, Sartre wrote the essay as a clarifying statement of his longer works to defend existentialism not only as a philosophy, but one that was humanistic, positive, and life-affirming.

²¹ One can look to, perhaps the two best-known anthologies of existential philosophy, Walter Kaufmann’s *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1956) and William Barrett’s *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (1962) for some proof of the years between the publication of Sartre’s essay and the anthologizing of it.

comes before *essence*.”²² For Sartre the original question of the meaning of existence is understood in terms of ‘the situation’: that is, the meaning of the question itself is constituted in human choice, freedom, and responsibility in a concrete experience. What, though, did Sartre mean in situating the question of existence within the concrete ‘situation’? And, what, if any, are the implications of understanding the question of existence in terms of the concrete situation?

Sartre begins his investigation into the meaning of existence by way of a baseline assumption about consciousness. Sartre writes the following about consciousness.

Our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual, and that for strictly philosophic reasons. It is not because we are bourgeois, but because we seek to base our teaching upon the truth, and not upon a collection of fine theories, full of hope but lacking real foundations. And at the point of departure there cannot be any other truth than this, *I think, therefore I am*, which is the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself. Every theory which begins with man, outside this moment of self-attainment, is a theory which thereby suppresses truth, for outside of the Cartesian *cogito*, all objects are no more than probable, and any doctrine of probabilities which is not attached to a truth will crumble into nothing.²³

Sartre, here, has presented us with the baseline assumption as well as the framework for his philosophical position. That Sartre understands “the subjectivity of the individual” in terms of Rene Descartes (in the form of the ‘Cartesian *cogito*’) is, indeed, significant and pivotal for grasping his existential philosophy as a whole. In fact, the “existence” in Sartre’s “existence precedes essence” refers to the *cogito*. And, given that Sartre’s argues that the meaning of existence is to be understood in terms of the situation, one may, then, ask of the relation of the concrete situation and the *cogito*. If we recall, for a moment, Descartes’ main

²² Jean-Paul Sartre. “*Existentialism is a Humanism*” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Walter Kaufmann, ed., 348.

²³ Jean-Paul Sartre. “*Existentialism is a Humanism*” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Walter Kaufmann, ed., 360-1.

concern in *Meditations on First Philosophy* was the constitution of a system of knowledge on the objective world (as well as himself) that was “sure and certain” as the mathematics. He achieves this system through a *first person* accounting of his own self, and, subsequently, the material world. One may wonder why Sartre, who believes the meaning of existence to emerge from the concrete situation would argue that the “truth of consciousness” would be the *cogito* whose constitution is not only *outside* of materiality, and, thus, “the situation,” but is also deemed primary to materiality, in both order of sequence and in terms of ontological necessity.

Sartre argues that, “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards.”²⁴ By “exists” he means, physically present; our brute physical presence allows us to first ‘be’ such that we may choose, and, by choosing become what are. Yet, like our own hermeneutic understanding, brute presence, for Sartre, is immediate, and choice is reflective. By what process, though, do we move from immediacy to reflection; from brute being to choice; or, in our words, what moves us towards production? Sartre has already gestured his response in understanding consciousness in terms of the *cogito*: it seems, for Sartre, this process needs no explanation, for there is no process; that is, there is no connection, no *inner-relation* between consciousness and materiality. In locating “the truth of consciousness” within the *cogito*, Sartre has, perhaps unknowingly, argued that reflection itself is an imposition *onto* the brute materiality of the “world.” While it may appear that Sartre locates the meaning of existence within concrete experience, or the situation, as it turns out, he locates it within

²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre. “*Existentialism is a Humanism*” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Walter Kaufmann, ed., 349.

[an imposing] consciousness, or the *cogito*.

In our hermeneutic formulation, though, existence and essence are not separable, nor are they discrete or sequential ‘moments’; the former constitutes our original question, and both illuminates and is illuminated by the latter, which for us is the phenomenological approach to the question itself—‘essence’ is understood, here, as experience. As such, ‘experience’ or essence is the accomplishment of existence through being-in the world. For Sartre, both existence and essence are concretely situated, and, thus, predicated upon choice, responsibility, and freedom. The essence of existence is the freedom and choice and the resulting consequence of responsibility. What we are concerned with here is prior to ‘the situation’ in which choosing happens; what we are concerned with is the underlying relationship between existence and being-in that allows for or grounds ‘the situation’ itself. We are interested in the metaphysical question of existence and not the episteme of existence. As such, we will not be analyzing the typical terms of existentialism: abandonment, forlornness, despair, nothingness. Rather, we will concern ourselves with the metaphysical implications of the original question.

As we move from Jean-Paul Sartre’s understanding of existentialism, we also move ourselves away from what Sartre terms ‘facticity,’ or ‘the situation,’ as our foundation. Existentialism, then, is not concerned with solving the problems of existence, but that of understanding what we mean by existence, and how this consideration shapes and guides what we understand to *be* problems at all. Facticity, then, is derivative of a framework through which a thing becomes factual—that is, experiential.

The priority *of* the question of the meaning of existence speaks *to* and *through* the question itself: ironically, the question is greater than the questioner; although it is the

questioner that poses it, the question beckons to be posed. What the question of existence reveals is a concern of the metaphysical nature of what-is, and what it means to exist at all. What it means to exist is a universal statement of existence, but one that is predicated on experience. The original question is, then, a metaphysical exploration guided by what is implied within it: our investigation “takes its direction” from existence itself, which primordially frames our constitution and construction of reality and the experience of being-in; and, reflected upon, gives form to the ‘terms’ that Sartre deems expressive of “a human universality of *condition*.”²⁵

The distinction here between Sartre’s understanding of existentialism and that of our own turns on how we each understand “experience.” So far we have used the term liberally without definition, but now we will offer it some shape. For Sartre, ‘experience’ is but the interpretative labor of the external material world by a subjective, independent consciousness—the locus of choice is derivative of this fundamental interpretative act.²⁶ For us, though, ‘experience’ is not constituted in the act of Cartesian ‘interpretation,’ but in what is prior, in a more primal notion of consciousness itself. We are concerned with the framework itself through which Sartre comes to hold values such that his terms arrive at their meaning. For us, the ‘subject’ cannot be separated from the external world, and is

²⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre. “*Existentialism is a Humanism*” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Walter Kaufmann, ed., 362.

²⁶ This is the implicit result of Sartre locating “the truth of consciousness” within the Cartesian *cogito*, for, in Descartes, as noted earlier, certainty of the subject as consciousness, as the *cogito*, is what grounds and removes doubt about veracity of the sensory external world. Sartre clarifies this position when he writes, “Every theory which begins with man, outside of this moment of self-attainment [of the *cogito*], is a theory which thereby suppresses the truth, for outside of the Cartesian *cogito*, all objects are no more than probable...” (361) On principle, we are in agreement with Sartre’s general claim, but differ on the definition of “self-attainment.” For Sartre it is the *cogito*; for us it is the *inner-relation* of consciousness and the material world.

connected through the question itself, which is witnessed in the specifics of our original question.

In framing our investigation in terms of the question itself and not ‘concrete existence,’ we move away from situational ethics or politics, and even history as an external force, and towards the unconcealment of our own foundation. That is, in moving towards the question, or, more properly, in our approach *to* the question, we are less concerned with ‘individuals’ and more concerned with what *animates* them/us: soul.

Aristotle defines the soul as, “The first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive.”²⁷ As both an exact science and form of knowledge, as well as a metaphor, the idea of ‘animation’ radiates for both the life in general—in living things—but also within the intellect—as in what stirs the mind to think; soul both stirs the body to life *and* the intellect to thinking.

“We learn to think by giving heed to what there is to think about.”

Existentialism is concerned with what animates us: the question animates us in that it is what draws us in [closer] towards itself, and in drawing in, guides us in our investigation: what is sought guides the seeker and builds a way towards its own unfolding. We are revealed by the question as the questioner, and by the specific question of the meaning of existence as those for whom the question is meaningful. The already existing framework surrounding the question animates the question as that which is worth asking, and the question, in turn, animates us [in that it has always already animated us] to do the asking. It is in this hermeneutic unfolding that the question is ensouled in its beckoning us to ask it, and we are ensouled in the asking of it. Here, what animates [the soul] reveals what is

²⁷ *De Anima*, 412a27.

animated, and we [as animated], become aware of ourselves: in our questioning we, too, are ensouled.

Existentialism, thus, in its nature of questioning is philosophy ensouled, and the ensouling of philosophy. Existentialism as philosophy is inherently a spiritual [ensouling] enterprise. Aristotle writes in *De Anima* the following:

We suppose that knowing is fine and honorable, and that one type of knowing is finer and more honorable than another either because it is more exact or because it is concerned with better and more wonderful things. On both grounds, we might reasonably place inquiry into the soul in the first rank. Moreover, knowledge of it seems to make an important contribution to [knowledge of] the truth as a whole, and especially to the [knowledge of] nature...We seek to study and know the nature and essence of the soul...²⁸

For Aristotle, the inquiry into existence is inherently an inquiry into essence.²⁹ Inquiry into and knowledge of the soul is finer and more honorable, not only because it is the foundation of living, but also because knowledge of it is necessary for knowledge of all other things; because an investigation into the soul is an investigation into the nature of what-is. This sort of knowing, for Aristotle, is what animates all other sort of knowing, for it is *the* original question.

Aristotle's investigation is of the most basic [it is first philosophy]. Our original question not only animates our investigation, but it does so by way of providing us with a framework. Without the original question as our guiding framework, our investigation into existence and our analysis of experience is empty—as noted earlier, without the guiding question, phenomenological investigation is empty of content, and only formally, that is, theoretically relevant. That is, relevant only within a stream of already constituted thought,

²⁸ *De Anima*, 402a5-8.

²⁹ *De Anima*, 402a12-15.

its truth claim is valid only within a coherency of reason itself, prior to any engagement with the material world at all. G.W.F. Hegel notes that without the original question,

Spirit has not only lost its essential life; it is also conscious of this loss, and of the finitude that is its own content. Turning away from the empty husks, and confessing that it lies in wickedness, it reviles itself for doing so, and now demands from philosophy, not so much *knowledge* of what it is, as the recovery through its agency of that lost sense of solid and substantial being. Philosophy is to meet this need, not by opening up the fast-locked nature of substance, and raising this to self-consciousness, not by bringing consciousness out of its chaos back to an order based on thought, nor the simplicity of the Notion, but rather by running together what thought has put asunder, by suppressing the differentiations of the Notion and restoring the *feeling* of essential being...³⁰

If soul is what animates our question and existentialism *as* philosophy, then, spirit is the self-conscious reflection of soul. That is, once the question has been posed, and reflected upon, it reveals us in our living [being-in] as the way towards it. We have now moved from an investigation *into* the question to an analysis *of* being-in, or an analysis of spirit.

If existential philosophy is to begin to approach our original question, and seek the meaning of existence, it will not accomplish this by way of reason or thought as “the subjectivity of the individual” in the extraction of what-is. Rather, existential philosophy will have to mine the original question for the *feeling* of our approach to it. Hegel here can be used to extend Heidegger’s earlier claim: the question itself guides us in our seeking, but does so in terms of disclosing ourselves in the question; what the reflexive interrogative of the question reveals, though, is what Hegel refers to as the “feeling of essential being,” the feeling that stirs in us the curiosity to question and to *think* what-is.

In our approaching of the question itself, we are not unlocking the essence of things in-themselves, and revealing this secret to ourselves as the meaning of the world. Our

³⁰ G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, par. 7.

Aristotelian understanding of the intellect is not in the knowing the essence of existence as such, but as locating ourselves within the metaphysical speculation *into* existence. The nature of the soul is that of animation; and, the nature of the human soul as intellect is the revelation of the process of this understanding: science is but metaphysical speculation of the nature of existence, revealing ourselves to ourselves within the questions that we pose.

At its highest point in the reflection of the question, existential philosophy is the expression of the metaphysics of the original question. To state it more strongly, it is the original question which animates philosophical questioning, and the original question that pushes us towards all metaphysical speculation. If such speculations are to be 'true', that is, if they are to be about and reveal being-in, and not the empty speculations of "a lifeless universal"³¹ of absolute truth, then they are to be grounded in that which ensouls: the question itself.

Albert Camus once wrote that

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games: one must first answer.³²

The question of suicide reveals the significance of life, rather than its insignificance; it is the only question that *requires* being asked. "Why go on?" thus, is a spiritual philosophical question of the meaning of existence. Camus' consideration is an iteration of the two other considerations: one, which we have already noted, "what is the meaning of existence?";

³¹ In *Phenomenology* Hegel refers to those metaphysical speculations of philosophy, and science in general that are not related to actuality and the actualization of the concept in the living force of life as lifeless universals, those that are thought about but do not themselves animate thinking. See paragraphs 2 and 51.

³² Albert Camus. *Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 3.

and, another, perhaps, addendum to our original question, “why is there something rather than nothing?” Why should we will *something*? Why ask the original question at all? Camus’ challenge is the concrete articulation of our original concern; and, though he does not himself so much answer as he does pose the question, for us, the answers lies in that ‘we’ don’t so much ask the question as the question implores *to be asked*. But, like Camus’ question, our question is necessary: until this question is answered, no other question can be asked. That is, until we properly approach this question, no other question can be formed. It is this essential being-towards this question that animates, or ensouls every other question.

* * *

It must be noted that what is under investigation here is existentialism as philosophy. It must also be noted that existentialism as philosophy is meant to be in contrast with “philosophy of existence.” The difference and distance (between the two) is vast and is initially located within the preposition ‘of’. There is a vast difference loaded into the preposition “of” (in philosophy *of* existence); one could even say that there is a world of difference between these two. The “of” constitutes a shift in direction in the foundation (of thinking) itself between existential philosophy and philosophy *of* existence: the former affirms a philosophical position emerging from within existence; while for the latter existence is simply an object *of*, belonging *to* philosophy—as in, *philosophizing about existence* (in the application of philosophical terms to help clarify the problems of existence).

Notably, ‘philosophizing’ itself is an existential practice—as in, to philosophize is to pose questions, and the fundamental question that animates all questioning is the question of what-is, or that of existence—making philosophy of existence derivative of existential philosophy. The distance, then, between the two is phenomenological; meaning, existential philosophy is concerned with the original question of existence, while philosophy of existence mines the findings of existential philosophy and thematizes them into what come to be its fundamental concepts—abandonment, forlornness, etc.—of a concrete human situation. Philosophy of existence, then, begins its analysis on the meaning of existence from these concepts, often covering over or forgetting its own roots.

Philosophy of existence and existential philosophy, in a sense, are inversely related: while philosophy of existence privileges concrete experience as the foundation for the question of the meaning of existence, existential philosophy situates concrete experience as emergent from the original question. This dispute has been central to a series of debates within philosophic tradition of the West: Soren Kierkegaard’s critique of G.W.F. Hegel as having misunderstood *Spirit*³³; Karl Marx’s critique of Hegel over the meaning of ‘concrete’³⁴; and, the debate between Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Sartre over the nature of ‘the political,’³⁵ to name a few. It may be said that while the concerns of existentialism are inherently metaphysical, the concerns of philosophy of existence may be said to be ontological in nature. That is to say, while the concerns of existentialism over the meaning

³³ Soren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*.

³⁴ Karl Marx. *1844 Manuscripts*.

³⁵ *The Debate Between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre*, Jon Stewart, ed.; one could also place the debate between Sartre and Camus over the nature of ‘history’ and ‘politics’ and, ‘political action.’ See Ronald Aronson’s *Camus and Sartre: The Story of Friendship and the Quarrel the Ended it*.

of existence can be said to be foundational and of the first philosophy variety, the concerns of philosophy of existence are not concerned with what-is foundationally, but what-is concretely; philosophy of existence, in contrast to existential philosophy understands what-is in terms the human situation and in terms of what things *mean* for them in their lives.

Heidegger's philosophy stands uniquely between the two as an attempt to synthesize ontology and metaphysics into a coherent system of meaning: to transform an investigation into the meaning of existence *into* an analysis of human existence. Most famously in *Being and Time* Heidegger's project is an ontological, but not in terms of Sartre's notion of ontology—or that of other philosophers of existence—but, in terms of fundamental ontology. His distinctive use of ontology as fundamental ontology marries the investigation of being with the analysis of being-in—the essence of life with everyday living—being through being-in (and vice versa), revealed phenomenologically in what William Richardson calls Heidegger's "finite transcendence." (More will be said of this in the next section).

* * *

Philosophy of existence sets forth a psychological profile of the individual to explain the individual's existence in the world, and to deal with the problems of existence. In this understanding, not only is consciousness juxtaposed with the external world epistemologically—that is, juxtaposed for the task of seeking knowledge of/about the world—but more fundamentally, consciousness is juxtaposed to the external world ontologically—in terms of fundamental kinds; mind is a fundamentally different thing than

concrete reality. The latter consideration is what allows for the former; that is, because mind is different in kind than the external material world *knowledge* of the material world is possible.³⁶

In addition to Jean-Paul Sartre's work, it is through the work of Karl Jaspers, perhaps one of the best-known philosophers of existence,³⁷ that we come to understand philosophy of existence as setting forth such a profile and framework of the individual. In a public lecture to the German Academy in 1937, what would later become a book entitled, *Philosophy of Existence*, Jaspers wrote that, "[w]hat is called philosophy of existence is really only a form of primordial philosophy."³⁸ This, for Jaspers meant that philosophy concerned with 'existence' differs from traditional academic philosophy in that it is not driven or defined by a set of doctrines, but instead is a "felt quality of all our experience and thought."³⁹ Jaspers' characterization of philosophy of existence philosophizing about reality through a 'felt quality' sounds close to our earlier characterization of existential philosophy "restoring the *feeling* of essential being." The distinction here, though, as noted earlier, is what animates such a feeling. Here, Jaspers refers to the 'felt quality of all our experience and thought' in terms the manner in which the philosopher finds himself, in "an authentic awareness of himself."⁴⁰ For Jaspers, the philosopher philosophizing and ultimately understanding his existence is not concerned with soul—that is, what animates *all* of life—

³⁶ This is strongly inferred in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and echoed in Sartre's essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism."

³⁷ We have also situated Jean-Paul Sartre within philosophy of existence, though he did not identify with the term himself. Though it seems ironic that Sartre is mentioned here, we are linking Sartre with Jaspers as philosophers of existence through their psychological profile of individual consciousness.

³⁸ Karl Jaspers. *Philosophy of Existence*, 3.

³⁹ Karl Jaspers. *Philosophy of Existence*, xii.

⁴⁰ Karl Jaspers. *Philosophy of Existence*, xii.

but that of his own conscious life. Jaspers understands ‘existence,’ even the manner in which we speak of it, in terms of being-for-consciousness: that is, Jaspers takes our account of the ensouling of philosophy, and our own ensouling through the speculation of the meaning of existence *for* consciousness. Jaspers notes,

It is no accident, however, that for the moment the word ‘existence’ became the distinguishing term. It emphasized the task of philosophy that for a time had been almost forgotten: *to catch sight of reality at its origin and to grasp it through the way which, I, in thought, deal with myself—in inner action.*⁴¹

Jaspers here is in agreement with Heidegger’s early claim that we have not only forgotten Being (existence), but, and more problematically, we have *forgotten* the question and how to pose and pursue the question. For Heidegger, as for us, the question is not how consciousness interprets reality, but how we pose the question of reality at all: how do we *think* existence?

How, though, do we find our way back to reality, that is, back to ‘existence’? For Jaspers, it is “*through the way in which I, in thought, deal with my self—in inner action.*” Heidegger, too, may offer a similar response, nevertheless, the terms would be radicalized: what Jaspers means by inner action—what Richard F. Grabau typifies as his, “existentialist idealism”⁴²—we would understand, not as thought grasping reality, but as soul feeling [essential] being—the distinction here between consciousness grasping and soul feeling.

Primordial philosophy, for Jaspers, meant addressing our original question, but only in form. While our concern is for the meaning of existence, Jaspers’ interest in the origin of reality, in its meaning, is subjective. Grasping “reality” alone, though, is not sufficient, at least “reality” as we will be understanding it, for we also must equally be concerned with

⁴¹ Karl Jaspers. *Philosophy of Existence*, 3.

⁴² Karl Jaspers. *Philosophy of Existence*, xxii.

the *process* of its emergence. This inner movement cannot be resigned within consciousness itself, but must equally be constituted within a material reality.

In moving away from philosophy of existence and towards our hermeneutic understanding, we have searched for our direction to guide us towards the meaning of existence and found but more questions. We have, though, settled ourselves on one answer: We cannot look within the concrete for an explanation *of* the concrete anymore than we can allow consciousness to determine the meaning of reality by imposing its meaning onto things as such.⁴³ What Heidegger searches for in existential philosophy are not explanations to specific events or situations, but the framework for their constitution. Our concern must be when our original question, “What is the meaning of existence” becomes, “why do we struggle?”

For us, for now, it suffices to say that facticity or ‘the situation’ as concrete are but manifestations of an already existing framework of meaning and interpretation, and that existentialism as philosophy is concerned with the revelation of this framework.

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⁴³ For philosophy of existence, the “inner action” of the mind on reality, that is, the *idea* of reality, regulates what we understand to be experience more so than actual (actualized/actuality of) experience itself. Mind, then, or more properly, the contents of the mind in relation to reality, provides the regulative ideal through which the world as such is experienced. This is what is meant by Richard F. Grabau’s characterization of Jaspers as an existentialist idealist; and, it is also what is meant when we claim Sartre as a philosopher of existence, and draw strong ties between him and Jaspers, for in each the idea or the concept regulates our experience of the world; and, thus, the concept of the world or the concrete, is notably abstract and obscure. As such, what we understand as traditional ‘existential philosophy’ is concerned, not so much with actual experience and actual existence, but the abstract concept of them. This discussion becomes of critical importance—as well as the discussion that will take place over the next few pages—for our discussion of black existentialism and what constitutes black existentialism as opposed to a black philosophy of existence.

Existential philosophy, as exemplified by Jean-Paul Sartre, is a post-war phenomenon. With concerns for human freedom in the face of fascism in the European continent, there was a very direct challenge to the possibility of choice in the face of what seemed to be ‘the wall’ of determinism. Out such a condition, the question of the meaning of philosophy became very concrete, perhaps *only* concrete. It is from this ‘situation’ that existential philosophy, and the question of the meaning of life, became linked to concrete materiality. In contradistinction to our [earlier] notion of the meaning of existence as in questioning and what is produced in such questioning, the meaning of life became concerned with material immediacy to the detriment of *how* people lived; that is, the concrete came to stand in for the productive activities, and external histories of materiality became *the* way to understand human life. In a sense, one could say that Karl Marx had finally defeated G.W.F. Hegel—material dialectics supplanted spiritual dialectics.

In this process we have lost something of our original question and its meaning for the substantial life of spirit and for ‘doing’ philosophy: the secular humanist turn towards the individual has taken over the reigns of mysticism and the new faith in the ‘immediacy of perception’ has overtaken our spiritual insight into the meaning of being-in-the-world. That is, the materiality of the world as the human situation has become the meaning of being-in; our understanding of what it means to be at all is predicated upon the problems of existence in a modern world: elaborated through the concepts of alienation, despair, forlornness, abandonment—all are symptoms of our modern problem, but cannot release us from them. What is left for us is to recover what has been lost, by recovering what it means to be-in: as we recover this, we will also recover the original question. To ‘do’

existential philosophy is to release us back to the original question and the original feeling of the question itself; it is bring us back to truth in the unconcealment of the way towards the question, and to reanimate thinking as unconcealing. We have to re-understand and re-think what it means to unconceal; on the relation(ship) between knowing, truth, consciousness, self-consciousness, subjectivity and reality and the concrete.

Hermeneutically, philosophy is always in danger of coming to end—for thinking is a constant activity that, if not occasioned by questioning, can be stilled/arrested into a series of abstract concepts and formulae. Philosophy, though, is also always being [possibly] reborn, [possibly] replenishing itself within the question. The feeling the question yields from us is inexhaustible as are the questions which emerge from the original question. But, in order to question, one must be in the space in which one *can* question and the question may exist and flourish in being asked. This space is the clearing or the making way for thinking. If philosophy is stuck within what is thought, what is given as truth, the questioning itself is not true questioning, but the lonely journey of the "wanderer and its shadow"—but wandering is not enough, for without a proper guide one is lost and left wandering. Philosophy of existence, beginning with concrete experience, makes of the immediacy of 'the situation' an abstract concept alive within the mind alone; one no longer questions 'the situation' for it already has its meaning *as* a problem, within a given history and historical understanding—and leaves us wondering if we, indeed, are at the end of philosophy.

Heidegger attempts to join philosophy of existence with his understanding of existential philosophy by way of the clearing and the question, underpinning the psychological approach of philosophy of existence the rigor of phenomenological

hermeneutics, that is, the poesis as (self) interrogation to ground his analysis of being-in the world. Heidegger joins these by dividing existential philosophy and philosophy of existence into two parts, and then joining those parts into one whole, neither fully one nor the other. This is perhaps, for us, his greatest insight: to keep the two sides in contact in spite of their great distance. He writes,

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being'? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*. But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression 'Being'? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question. Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of *Being* and to do so concretely.⁴⁴

How do we understand being concretely? This is the task of the coherency of philosophy of existence with existential philosophy. We are implored to seek the question and, we discover that what we seek are not the things of existence in-themselves, but what underlies them as our interpretive framework for unconcealing their meaning. It is by way of the question itself that we discover that things do not explain themselves—that is, individual objects and/or situations do not carry within themselves their meaning, inherently, as what they are —nor can we impose their meaning onto them, but their meaning emerges out of our interaction with them as in interpretation and inwardization.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, par. 1.

⁴⁵ To Heidegger's notion of interpretation, we will add inwardization as the process through which an interpretation is just not the imposition of thought onto matter, but the way that consciousness grasps the 'world' as more than just external, but understands itself in terms of the material world as its own product, transforming the 'world' into world.

B. Existentialism: existential and existentiell

Our original question must be remembered: we have begun with the question of the meaning of existence; and recall that the question itself implores us to seek it, and also guides us in our seeking towards its truth in our being-in. That is to say, the question itself reveals and is revealed within our being-in; the meaning of existence is internally related to experience. Existential philosophy shares a common ancestor with phenomenology. The *inner-relation* between experience and existence overcomes the tension between consciousness and the external world by uniting them. Heidegger helps clarify our overcoming of this tension, but, and perhaps most importantly, he shows us, in their *destruktion*⁴⁶ how to put them back together. In his introductory remarks in *Being and Time* he writes

We come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself. We shall call *this* kind of understand of itself *existentiell* understanding. The question of existence is an ontic "affair" ...For this the theoretical perspicuity of the ontological structure of existence is not necessary. The question of structure aims at the analysis of what constitutes existence. We shall call the coherence of these structures *existentiality*. Its analysis does not have the character of an existentiell understanding but rather an *existential* one. The task of an existential analysis...is prescribed with regard to its possibility and necessity in the ontic constitution...⁴⁷

Heidegger here is claiming that *existential* understanding of being is related to what we have termed existential philosophy, the concern over the meaning of existence, and our relation to the question itself, from within the experience of being-in the world. The

⁴⁶ Heidegger uses this word in a special sense, not to denote 'destroying', but a critical analysis of a concept or tradition to unconceal "the 'original experiences that gave rise to it. This will show the merits, failings and limitation of traditional concepts. It may reveal new possibilities that the tradition obscures.'" (*Heidegger Dictionary*, 95). Sartre, interestingly, borrows the term in a similar manner in *The Problem of Nothingness*.

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, par. 12-13.

existentiell analysis, then, corresponds to what we have termed philosophy of existence, that is, theories of the experience of being in the world through conceptual analysis—dread, despair, etc.—but also through the “concrete” or factual aspects of an existence—when and where one was born, what Heidegger later terms being ‘thrown’ in the world. The existential understandings are abstract concepts [an ontological investigation], while the existentiell analysis is experience as such [an ontic analysis]. By themselves, each is a one-sided affair, but taken together a holistic image appears.

Heidegger does considerable work to tease apart these distinctions for specific reasons. Taken individually, we have a one-sided affair either concerned with an individual’s relation to the external world as such or to one’s own mind as such.⁴⁸ The novelty of Heidegger’s approach to the original question is in his attempt to combine both approaches into one coherent theory of being. William J. Richardson notes in *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* that

It is worthwhile insisting on the fact that although existential and existentiell in There-being are distinct, they are not separate. They are different dimensions of a unique and profoundly unified phenomenon: finite transcendence. The function of the existential analysis as a re-collection of forgotten transcendence will be to discern the existential dimension which structures existentiell everydayness. It must respect the unity of the phenomenon that it analyses. The existential analysis must be rooted in the existentiell, sc. unless it discerns the existential within the existentiell, it remains groundless. One begins to see more clearly what the phenomenology of There-being as a process of transcendence will imply. It must be brought to achievement in some existentiell (ontic) comportment through which There-being re-collects the existential dimension of its self.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ In a sense Heidegger is replaying Kant’s problem from *Critique of Pure Reason*; and, while Kant attempted to solve the dispute between idealism and empiricism by a metaphysical side-step of the first philosophy of our cognitive structures—i.e. transcendental philosophy—Heidegger argues for an interactive relationality—not one of “construction” or even “assemblage,” but one of continuity between what we call the “self” and what we call the “world”.

⁴⁹ William J. Richardson. *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, 50.

Richardson brings out the *inner-relation* between the original question and the phenomenal experience of being-in. We can remember our initial claim of this chapter: we are concerned with the *investigation* into the meaning of being, and an *analysis* of the experience of being-in the world. For us, the process of unfolding or unconcealing existence is two-fold—in both the meaning of existence and experience of being-in. We may also recall that we noted that the meaning *of* existence was *in* being-in: that is, our original question returned to us with itself as *our* question: what does it mean for us to ask this question? What does this question *do* to us in our asking? We revealed that in our asking, we are faced with ourselves asking as questioners. We may also remember that there was a seeming circularity of this sort of hermeneutic approach—if we are to know who we are in the questioning, how, then, can we question? Existentialism as we understand it, as philosophy, becomes its own ground *and* its own transcendence; that is, it is both the grounding *and* what is grounded: it grounds itself in order to transcend itself. Our original question as metaphysical speculation reveals our own being-in as its ‘proof’.

As Richardson suggests, Heidegger’s existentialism is another form of the inward turn within the Western tradition. But instead of the isolation of Kierkegaard’s Abraham—who in being beyond the law of man in the Absolute of God cannot speak and cannot be understood⁵⁰—or the individuation of the cogito in Husserl—the subject who is stranded within its own perspective and finds the Other only through “imaginative transposition”⁵¹—for Heidegger, as for us, this inward turn is neither towards consciousness as its own object, nor of consciousness’ turn to itself as a subject; rather, our

⁵⁰ Soren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*.

⁵¹ Edmond Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*.

turn is towards the structure of their *inner-relation* in existence: this turn is possible only in the realization that what is questioned, existence, is possibly illuminated only in that which is questions: us.⁵² But, in what way? Given that we have moved ourselves away from traditional existentialism and the transcendental ego, ‘us’ or ‘ourselves’ cannot be understood in terms of consciousness, at least in the traditional sense, nor the self; the world as such cannot be understood as external and material. James M. Edie suggests, in *What is Phenomenology?*, that Heidegger can be understood as “abandoning phenomenology” altogether.⁵³ Edie suggests that Heidegger’s interests are ultimately not in human consciousness or concrete man, but in revealing “being, obscured by what is” or the everyday.⁵⁴ What Edie notes of Heidegger’s later work can be seen, in glimpses, underdeveloped, in his earlier work. Perhaps we can interpret Richardson’s remarks of finite transcendence in a similar way, as Heidegger’s abandoning of phenomenology, ultimately, for metaphysics. And, what is more, perhaps we may read the distinction between *existential* understanding and *existentiell* analysis, as well as their coherency, as Heidegger’s early bread crumb of what is, ultimately, to come: the coherency of the two is an eventually giving way of phenomenology to metaphysics.

⁵² Our notion of the ‘inward’ turn may seem a bit odd in that we have attempted, thus far, to differentiate ourselves from philosophy of existence on precisely this point. We justify the usage of the phrase in the sense of *destruktion* where we mine the phrase for its roots, its origin in meaning. By ‘inward turn’ we shift the meaning of ‘inward’ itself, from the self-turning-itself, to that which is turned—like the slave boy in Plato’s dialogue, *The Meno*, who discovers, through Socrates, that education is not filling the soul with knowledge, but turning the soul towards the light itself so that it may recognize itself as always already possessing its knowledge, our turn is from the subjective self towards that which animates us in the direction of subject-making; our turn in the imploring of the question itself to guide us towards ourselves to see that the answer to the question is always already existing within ourselves, not as thought or reason, but in living, in our being-in.

⁵³ Pierre Thevenaz. *What is Phenomenology?*, 60-1.

⁵⁴ Pierre Thevenaz. *What is Phenomenology?*, 59.

We, though, must be careful when noting overcoming. Its traditional usage—as shedding, as sloughing off—is not what we want to suggest here. For us, Heidegger’s overcoming is not leaving behind, but a digging deeper and going further *in*: what is suggested in Hegel’s notion of *Aufhebung*. Phenomenology used in the service of further clarification, as a way in, a pathmark or pathway for further guidance of the original question, perhaps, may be the way we might think of ‘overcoming’. Edie eventually suggests this as well. He writes, “In place of phenomenological unveiling that brought the intentional content of consciousness, Heidegger substitutes illumination or revelation pure and simple.”⁵⁵ Though Heidegger suggests the traditional positions (in his own terms, *existential* and *existentiell*), it is in their coherency that he digs deeper or “overcoming” both of them, and their traditional framework.

It might seem strange for Heidegger to have abandoned, or at least planted the seeds for the abandonment of phenomenology, so early in his text except in that, for Heidegger phenomenology is methodological, his project is not phenomenological, it is existential (in his sense of the word): phenomenology serves to reveal us to ourselves in order for us to reveal, in our being-in, the nature of existence (Being) itself. Our question guides us towards ourselves to ultimately to guide us closer to existence, or Being itself. Edie reminds us that Heidegger’s early work is a “preliminary analysis”, but by no means an end; and, that this, perhaps, is what places him at odds with traditional ‘existential philosophy’.⁵⁶ For us, his notion of *destruktion* re-appears instructive. Hegel’s notion of the overall task of phenomenology in *Phenomenology of Spirit* is relevant here. In the

⁵⁵ Pierre Thevenaz. *What is Phenomenology?*, 65.

⁵⁶ Pierre Thevenaz. *What is Phenomenology?*, 58-9.

Phenomenology Hegel states that

In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.⁵⁷

Our inward turn, here, can be understood in terms of *inwardization*; it is the revelation of the existential substantiation of the existentiell (and vice versa) in finite transcendence. It is here that being-in the world is to be re-written as being-in-the-world: the movement from soul to spirit,⁵⁸ noted earlier, is, here, paralleled in the movement from being-in the world to being-in-the-world: we always already *-in* the world, but not always self-consciously aware of existence as *-in* the world. Our self-conscious awareness of ourselves through the question as the producer of the world, and in turn, allows us to interpret ourselves *through* our production. This interpretative moment *is* the emergence of both spirit and being-in-the-world as the self-appropriation of what is already ours.

In the process, the world is ensouled and we are ensouled. We are not concerned with aspects of ourselves or the world, but the foundation of the world itself and our own selves; our original question returns again with the chorus and the Calvary of ensouling:⁵⁹

⁵⁷ G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology* par. 17

⁵⁸ Soul is what animates and spirit is the self-acknowledgment of what has animated it.

⁵⁹ Calvary signifies our approach to the divine—the place where abstraction/transcendence has descended and the material world/immanence ascended; the place where immanence and transcendence meet. Hegel notes,

Here, therefore, consciousness—or the mode in which essence is for consciousness itself, i.e. its shape—is, in fact, identical with its self-consciousness. This shape is itself a self-consciousness; it is thus at the same time an object in the mode of immediate being, and this being, likewise immediately, has the significance of pure Thought, of absolute Being. The absolute Being which exists as an actual self-consciousness seems to have come down from its eternal simplicity, but by thus *coming down* it has in fact attained for the first time to its own highest essence. (par. 706)

“The experience of what Spirit is...’I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’”.⁶⁰ Man becomes ensouled when he self-consciously inwardizes the world as his own, and the meaning of his existence, and his existence as the meaning of the world.⁶¹ Heidegger’s phenomenological hermeneutic approach, or his finite transcendence is a metaphysical ontology, an ensouling philosophy, hence his definition of human being as being-in-the-world.⁶²

⁶⁰ G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, par. 177. To the end of our discussion of ensouling the metaphor the chorus and the Calvary, Jennifer Bates notes in *Hegel and Shakespeare on Moral Imagination* that

Hegel’s reference to Calvary in the last lines of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* indicates that it is upon the negation of death and the raising of it into thought that all the shapes of *Geist* (spirit) depend. (83)

She quotes Hegel at length:

The *goal*, Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm. Their preservation, regarded from the side of their free existence appearing in the form of contingency, is History; but regarded from the side of their [philosophically] comprehended organization, it is the Science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance: the two together, comprehended History, form alike the inwardizing and the Calvary of absolute Spirit, the actuality, truth, and certainty of his throne, without which he would be lifeless and alone. Only ‘from the chalice of this realm of spirits/ Foams forth for Him his own infinitude.’ (par. 808)

⁶¹ It is to note that our existence is more than as a subject in relation to objects; that is, our existence is more than as “instincts, needs, and drives; he acts so as to satisfy them” (*Philosophy of Existence*, xvii-xviii); our being-in reveals this to ourselves so long as we are self-consciously aware of this. The re-presentational mode of creation, specifically that of ‘art and the art thing’, is our ‘proof’. Our approach here, is, perhaps, what ultimately separates existentialism understood here as philosophy and Jean-Paul Sartre, understood here as philosophy of existence. Transcendence for Sartre and others (Jaspers) does not mean what Richardson means when he (and myself) understands Heidegger (and I add Hegel) as “finite transcendence”.

⁶² Michael Inwood notes of the significance of Heidegger’s usage of hyphens:

Heidegger’s hyphens do not invariably have the force of analyzing a word into its constituents. Often they bring distinct words together to form a single thought. He speaks of *In-der-Welt-sein*, ‘being-in-the-world’. ‘Being-in’, *In-sein*, is a specific sort of being, distinct, say, from *Mitsein*, ‘being with’ (BT, 53ff.). The *in* has a specific sense: in this sense of *in* one can only be in the world, and only a human being can be in it. There cannot be a world unless someone is in it. So the constituents of *In-der-Welt-sein* are not strictly separable; they form a single, integrated thought. (5)

Our task here is preliminary, but also revelatory of the nature of existence expressed in being-in. As previously stated, the original question—and the question in general—is equally an inquiry into an object, as it is an inquiry into the questioner: the question itself is reflexive; it is used to interrogate, but also interrogates. The reversibility of the question gives way to the analysis itself. The questioning question reveals that the original question of the meaning of existence is located within the experience of being-in. And, being-in is revealed in that we ask such a question at all. We noted earlier that the seeming circularity of this approach falls away when we are no longer concerned with logic as the foundation of our searching, and become more concerned with the interrogative question as our foundation. The question, metaphysical in nature, is but an interpretation of our experience in-the-world. And, what is left is its revelation. Edie rhapsodizes:

[T]he day will come when, while really thinking Being, revealed at last in its (hitherto hidden) meaning of dwelling, we will understand in truth what 'to dwell' means.⁶³

C. The Existentiality of Existentialism as Philosophy

Our original question, now unfolded, has revealed in our approach to the question its truth as our being-in-the-world. The coherency of existentialism joins together what was thought 'torn asunder'—*existential* understanding and *existentiell* analysis—into a whole, in the *existentiality* of existentialism. The significance of this coherency (existentiality) is that it shifts the meaning of philosophy from the search for the 'unknown'—as the concern for Truth—to the search for what-is, what animates us towards questioning. Our approach has revealed *spirit*—rather than reason—and philosophy as the activity of spirit. That is, we

⁶³ Pierre Thevenaz. *What is Phenomenology?*, 64.

have revealed the approach [to the question and the nature of philosophy] to be the goal *and* the goal to be not something of our creation—what we compel to be as an object (of or for thought or perception)—but what *compels us*, what draws us towards it. This truth—that which we pursue has already compelled us to pursue it—is hermeneutic and unfolds the question as that which we seek *and* that which compels us to seek: we do this seeking by way of the coherency we have spoken of—we seek by means of being-in.

Eddie noted earlier that when we come to understand the meaning of dwelling we will, then, understand the meaning of being, and he was correct in that when we pursue the question by means of our existence, we reveal the nature of our existence, and the nature of existence as such (Being). Heidegger's aim (explicit in his earlier writings, and implicit in his later writings) was to reveal the metaphysical principle of life, which we, as human beings, reveal in our analysis and understanding of ourselves. Yet, this was not enough for Heidegger, for his aim was not solely the ontical—a specific accounts of beings—but ontological—the general structure of Being. As for ourselves here, our concern is for the ontological, and how the ontological emerges from the ontic. This means that our investigation leads to a further analysis, which reveals the meaning of being-in, a meaning that we share with existence as such (Being). For Heidegger, this truth was revealed through a series of analysis of human being-in-the-world—mood, concern, and the like. For us, though, we wish to descend further than these concepts allow, to more general and generative structures: what we will call the dimensionality of existence. These dimensions are: *consciousness, self-consciousness, subjectivity, place, and history*. They reveal the constitution of, movement within, and experience of/in world. These dimensions will be the focus of this work as a whole; each chapter the progressive unfolding of what we will

note here: analysis of consciousness, self-consciousness, and subjectivity; the movement from consciousness to self-consciousness to subjectivity; the accomplishment and experience of place; and the achievement of history.

* * *

We have thus far noted that the original question of the meaning of existence is to be understood alongside and from within the phenomenal revelation of the meaning of experience as being-in; though we have yet to qualify what we mean by 'experience'.

What we mean by 'experience' is to be understood within our understanding of interpretation and inwardization. The distinction between our consideration of existential philosophy and that of traditional 'existential philosophy' hinges on our understanding of these concepts and how they help constitute the *inner-relation* between consciousness and materiality.

We may also recall that we noted the distinction between our understanding of consciousness and that of traditional 'existential philosophy'. We can recall that this distinction turned on the difference in the understanding of 'inward turn', or what we have termed, 'inwardization'. For traditional 'existential philosophy' consciousness turns inward towards itself—in thought, in positing *something* 'about' reality; consciousness is always *conscious of something*—creating a distinction between itself and the material world—and what is more, traditional 'existential philosophy' predicates the definition of consciousness within this difference. For us, though, this distinction [between consciousness and materiality] is drawn together within the question itself: we are drawn closer to the material world and the material world is drawn closer to us. The two are not inversely

related, but mutually necessary—we are not ‘conscious of’ something, consciousness emerges within, not alongside, the material world (and the material world emerges, not outside of, or alongside of consciousness, but within consciousness).

Consciousness, for us, is the coherency of "subject" with "object", "I" [as ‘we’] with "it", the "inside" with the "outside". Coherency, we may recall, is the overcoming or *destruktion* of the seeming contradiction or opposition of the preceding concepts, such that each is understood through the other. It is through their fusion that there is no intentional consciousness, consciousness *of* something, or a journey to the things themselves. Rather, consciousness and materiality emerge as joined, together, though we may understand them separately.⁶⁴ The difficulty of such a discussion is that we are always already ‘in’ the world, within things, and our world always already is. But, in our discussion we must travel backwards, so to speak, towards the source of consciousness and materiality, a source that, as of yet, has no name given that we are not yet at the level of ‘consciousness’ or ‘materiality’ when speaking of the fusion of consciousness *with* materiality. Heidegger, to avoid confusion of terminology, simply speaks of Da-sein rather than the conventional terms—consciousness and materiality—to analyze the meaning of being-in. What we want to emphasize here, and what Heidegger notes, is that consciousness and the world itself co-emerge and leave in their emergence the trail of a framework that we may use to trace back to its source: existence. Our original question guides us in our ‘backwards traveling’

⁶⁴ We noted earlier that though our methodology calls for separate analysis of existential and existentiell, they are, in fact, mutually co-extensive. This seeming separation for analysis is what calls for the difficulty and the charge of circularity, but because we are concerned with hermeneutic unfolding, we were not concerned with the linearity against which our claims fall prey to the fallacy of tautology. As such, our concepts are loosely used: when we speak of pre-conscious stage we will use quotes to signify that it is not yet consciousness, but nevertheless something.

towards itself and our understanding of it, and reveals, in our traveling, the dimensionality of our existence as being-in. The significance of this backwards traveling is to note that there is always already a framework through which we understand the world, a framework that we emerge out of *as* conscious *of* some-thing.

Being-in, then, is the product of the fusion of 'consciousness' and 'materiality'. What traditional 'existential philosophy' understands as the 'self', the 'cogito' is this second order produced 'consciousness' and not the primeval relation that underlies it. The problem with traditional 'existential philosophy' is that by ignoring the roots of consciousness, they oppose it with the material world. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre hints towards our original question in his discussion of the crag when he writes,

A particular crag, which manifests a profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside. In itself—if one can even imagine what the crag can be in itself—it is neutral; that is, it waits to be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful.⁶⁵

We may take notice of the phrases, "it waits to be illuminated" and, "if one can even imagine what the crag can be in itself". In both phrases, consciousness is already posited as something distinct from the object, the crag: the crag is to *be* illuminated; yet, the crag, as an existing external object, may have its own independent being-in-itself. In neither case, though, does Sartre consider himself, as consciousness, within the crag, but assumes their

⁶⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*, 620. Also, see Gary Cox's *Sartre for the Perplexed* where he writes,

The nature, meaning and value of a crag depends upon the ends of the person who encounters it. If the projected end of the persons is to climb the crag the it will manifest itself in the situation of that person as climbable or unclimbable...[O]n the other hand, the person who has no intention of climbing the crag will, if he notices the crag at all, view it only as an aesthetic object that he finds pleasing or displeasing according to his taste. (73)

distinction without tarrying with the possibility of their coextension. If the crag is to *be* anything, it is inanimate, neutral. In other words, reason has taken over where what Hegel referred to as “the essential feeling of being” once resided: the feeling of being *smaller than* the object, and letting the object, in its basic relation of existence, speak through him, for him, and him for it. Rather, Sartre begins with the project of consciousness—to claim for itself the meaning of the crag in terms of his own desire *for* the crag. The phrase, “in order to” operates as an existential quantifier to situate logically the phrases that follow, “A profound resistance” or “valuable aid” in terms only of consciousness’ own projects *for* the external material object.

We do not understand consciousness in terms of our projects, desires or wishes, but as the “essential feeling”: our philosophy is one of unconcealment and tracing backwards the source through the question, rather than imposing purpose or meaning as the *first order* of investigation and analysis. Standing on top the crag and looking down, the feeling of falling, of ascending; or, standing in front of the crag and feeling small. These feelings are what are meant by the coherency of subject and object, of the outside and inside; and, what is meant, primitively, by ‘dwelling’.

The ‘experience’ of consciousness in the world, then, is a second order processing of what already exists—in the case of the crag, the experience of the crag is immediate in the feeling, but our acknowledgment of it this feeling as our own is predicated on our interpretation and internalization of it *as* an experience. Sartre’s usage of the crag as “adverse” or helpful” simply expresses a more basic feeling in relation *to* the crag: if one, for example, has the feeling of height and falling (what is later termed ‘vertigo’), then the crag, on second order thought, becomes, as part of our project, “adverse”. The crag in-itself is

neutral, not because its meaning has yet to be created by us, but because we have yet to cohere with it to produce a feeling, which later is interpreted and internalized as what we 'experience'. As such, for us, experience is but a second level ordering of a phenomenal encounter with the material world. Our consciousness *of* the crag, then, is also derivative of a more basic feeling.

Our task in overcoming oppositions reveals the path towards what it means to dwell. The essential feeling is the fusion of consciousness with materiality such that we and it appear as coexisting. Only after the appearance of things and ourselves as conscious of them can we begin the second order thinking *of* them in terms of our projects. Only then can we become self-conscious of existing reality. That is, consciousness is the beginning of philosophy, but is not yet *philosophical* in that it has yet to become aware of itself as its own source. Self-consciousness is the recognition of consciousness and the world, but not as separate, competing entities, but of each in light of their shared root in feeling. We come to recognize that the question itself compels us in that we resemble the ontological structure of the question itself: as the question grounds itself by compelling us to seek it, we compel ourselves to investigate the original question and, by proxy ourselves, for whom the question *is a question at all*. As noted earlier, though the question of existence and the experience of being-in may be thematically separated, and though the question itself seems to be prior to our investigation into experience itself, neither is prior or derivative, and our approach as such is simply formal, but necessary for hermeneutics. What is meant by phenomenology is not the study of the relation between subject and object, but the revelation of the *inner-relation* between the two and the process through which we become self-consciously aware of each.

Self-consciousness is, thus, a rebirth of consciousness itself; consciousness is reborn into the self-aware recognition of the meaning of its existence within its world as its own making, its own production. That is, self-consciousness becomes aware of the dwelling of consciousness in the world as its place in the world. In the rebirth of consciousness as self-conscious, consciousness is reborn *as spirit*: reborn in the self-aware recognition of the dimensions of its existence—aware of consciousness in materiality (and vice versa); aware of the meaning of being-in as dwelling—aware of the conscious appropriation of itself and the world as its *accomplishment* and *achievement*. It is through the self-consciousness that we are aware of place and history.

‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’
‘How can someone be born when they are old?...Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!’

Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.⁶⁶

Man becomes ensouled when he self-consciously inwardizes the world as his own, and the meaning of his existence, and his existence as the meaning of the world and recognizes philosophy as the self-actualizing activity of spirit. Spirit’s place is the self-conscious appropriation of the coherency of the system of existentiality of existentialism. That is, place emerges from the overcoming or destruction of the ‘oppositions’.

Heidegger notes in his essay “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces” (1934) of the relation between consciousness and materiality in place, illuminated by the ‘essential feeling’ of dwelling.

This is my work-world—seen with the eye of an observer: the guest or summer vacationer. Strictly speaking I myself never observe the landscape. I experience its hourly changes, day and night, in the great comings and goings of the seasons. The

⁶⁶ John 3:3

gravity of the mountains and the hardness of their primeval rock, the slow and deliberate growth of the fir-trees, the brilliant, simple splendor of the meadows in bloom, the rush of the mountain brook in the long autumn night, the stern simplicity of the flatlands covered with snow—all of this moves and flows through and penetrates daily existence up there, and not in forced moments of ‘aesthetic’ immersion or artificial empathy, but only when one’s own existence stands in its work. It is work alone that opens up space for the reality.⁶⁷

Heidegger further notes,

But in the evening during a work-break, when I sit with the peasants by the fire or at the table in the ‘Lord’s Corner,’ we mostly say nothing at all...The inner relationship of my own work to the Black Forest and its people comes from a centuries-long and irreplaceable rootedness in the Alemannian-Swabian soil.⁶⁸

For Heidegger, being German is not a geographical location, but a spiritual designation. Our self-conscious awareness of place is what allows us to be reborn in it, and to dwell there spiritually. To be self-conscious is to be aware of consciousness and its *inner-relation* to materiality through place.

Place as dwelling-in is where transcendence descends and the immanence of the material world ascends; place is the meeting of immanence and transcendence. Place is the most concrete in that it is the direct expression of the ‘external’ internalized, the internal (feeling) externalized. Place allows us to speak the concrete abstractly (that is, conceptually) and to speak the concept concretely. Hegel notes

Here, therefore, consciousness—or the mode in which essence is for consciousness itself, i.e. its shape—is, in fact, identical with its self-consciousness. This shape is itself a self-consciousness; it is thus at the same time an object in the mode of immediate being, and this being, likewise immediately, has the significance of pure Thought, of absolute Being. The absolute Being which exists as an actual self-consciousness seems to have come down from its eternal simplicity, but by thus *coming down* it has in fact attained for the first time to its own highest essence.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Martin Heidegger. “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?”, 27.

⁶⁸ Martin Heidegger. “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?”, 28.

⁶⁹ G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology*, par. 760.

Rather than simply opposing consciousness to materiality, and siding with one over the other, or worse, understanding one *through* the other, we are concerned with bringing consciousness ‘down’ from the heights of reason, and ‘raising up’ materiality from the depths of objective presence. It is within this coherency that we arrive at a self-conscious understanding of experience and place. But, what is more, we have now grasped self-consciousness as more than mere dwelling-in, but have grasped self-consciousness as Historical.⁷⁰

Self-consciousness in its self-apprehension as dwelling-in has come to know itself as historically grounded; that is, situated within a particular place with a particular meaning. History is the achievement of a consciousness that recognizes itself in the world. History is but the ordering and sequencing of the experiences of dwelling-in, as place understood in terms of ‘events’ that ‘take place’ within a constituted framework of meaning. When Heidegger references the ‘Lord’s Corner’ he is not only speaking of peasants in their outward relation towards one another, but also the *inner-relationship* between those peasants and the land. But, what is more, he is speaking of this *inner-relationship* in his own work along with the ‘peasant’s work’ in the emergence of the historicity of Black Forest:

On a deep winter’s night when a wild, pounding snowstorm rages around the cabin and veils and covers everything, that is the perfect time for philosophy. Then its questions must become simple and essential. Working through each thought can only be tough and rigorous...

And this philosophical work does not take its course like the aloof studies of some eccentric. It belongs right in the midst of the peasant’s work.⁷¹

⁷⁰ History, for us, is not the set of events and external forces acting upon a subject, but what is created, produced in the union of consciousness and materiality—we are not products of history, we produce history; we make ourselves historical. More will be said of this in chapter five.

⁷¹ Martin Heidegger. “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?”, 27.

Similarly Hegel notes that, “[T]he movement of carrying forward the form of its self-knowledge is the labour which it accomplishes as actual History.”⁷² Place is the accomplishment of self-consciousness; in our self-consciousness awareness of it we become Historical.

* *

What is meant by consciousness, by experience, by self-consciousness, by subjectivity, by history, by place is all one, but separated out analytically for analysis, but cannot be *grasped* without the whole. Existence has dimensionality. Existence is inter-dimensional, which is revealed in the coherency of existential analysis and existentiell understanding. We have to face the multi-dimensionality of being-in-the-world. The phenomenological approach as a whole is spiritual rather than intentional.

Towards an Existentiality of Black Existentialism

With the publication of his edited anthology, *Existence in Black* (1996), Lewis R. Gordon formally announced the emergence of a new sub-field in the discipline of professional philosophy, black existentialism. Gordon’s point of departure for existential philosophy generally, and specifically, for this new sub-field of black existential philosophy is Jean-Paul Sartre. Gordon goes as far to note in the introductory remarks of his anthology that

Sartre stands as an unusual catalyst in the history of black existential philosophy, for he serves as a link between Richard Wright and Frantz Fanon...on the one hand, and the historical forces that came into play for the ascendance of European Philosophy

⁷² G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology*, par. 803.

of Existence in the American academy on the other hand.⁷³

Gordon's admiration for Sartre is evident throughout his corpus of work (1995; 1997; 2000) and is especially apparent in his short essay, "Sartre and Black Existentialism"—later to be reprinted in Jonathan Judaken's edited collection, *Racism after Sartre: Anti-racism, Africana Existentialism, Postcolonialism* where he writes,

I would love to have had a cup of coffee with Jean-Paul Sartre. Had I the opportunity, I would first thank him for his courage. He not only fought the anti-human forces of anti-Semitism and anti-black racism in French and American society, but also those vices within him that always offered the seduction of an easy way out...He stood his ground, as best he could, which, for a human being, could not have been other than imperfect...His understanding of the struggle for freedom and what it means to be historical while engaged in socially transformative projects was coterminous. This made him a constant ally of black existential thought and black liberation struggles throughout most of the twentieth century, since his emphasis on what it means to be a human being was a shared interest of people whose humanity has been denigrated in the modern world.⁷⁴

Even with such admiration, Gordon carefully treads the line between inspiration and foundational source in relating Sartre to black existential philosophy. Gordon notes that though Sartre may be a catalyst, it would be "fallacious to assume that that influence functions as the 'cause' [of black existentialism] instead of consequence," for the existential perspective of Africana philosophers can be noted "by virtue of the historical fact of racial oppression..."⁷⁵ And, it is here, in this formulation, that Sartre's real influence over Gordon's overall existential project is most evident. Gordon's formulation of the concern of black existential philosophy emerges here from what Sartre calls *the situation*.

We may recall the original question animating this work as a whole; we may also

⁷³ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 2.

⁷⁴ Lewis R. Gordon, "Sartre and Black Existentialism". Reprinted in *Racism after Sartre: Anti-racism, Africana Existentialism, Postcolonialism*, chapter seven.

⁷⁵ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 3.

recall that we have said that this question is reflexive in that it returns the question to the questioner, revealing itself as both what is sought and what guides us towards the 'truth' of its gesture; we may also recall that the 'truth' of the question is in its revelation of the experience of being-in, understood in terms of dwelling.

We may also recall that in our discussion of Sartre we noted that he, like Jaspers, was in the tradition of philosophy of existence, what we have termed thus far, traditional 'existential philosophy.' This tradition, we noted, is typified with the distinction between subject and object, outside and inside. But, and more importantly, this tradition is typified with(in) the notion that the meaning of existence is to be found within the concrete, factual reality or *the situation*. In a sense, concrete materiality itself is the foundation for theorizing about and understanding the truth and the meaning of existence.

We may further recall that though traditional 'existential philosophy' locates the truth of existence within the concrete or facticity, it grounds the concrete itself within reason, mind, consciousness, the self, or the cogito in its many forms; reason or consciousness acts as the source of knowledge *about* the external world about which the truth of existence is to be found.

Gordon's usage of Sartre, thus, is significant for his investigation into and analysis of black existence. Gordon, in Sartrean fashion, alters our original question from, "what is the meaning of existence?" to, "what is to be understood by black suffering?"⁷⁶ This question, Gordon claims, is "for many black people...the question of their blackness."⁷⁷ For Gordon, it

⁷⁶ We can recall our earlier remark that we must become concerned "when our original question, "What is the meaning of existence" becomes, "why do we struggle?" Here, with Gordon, we clearly see the shift occurring.

⁷⁷ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 1.

is *this* question that ‘animates’ “a great deal of the theoretical dimension of black intellectual production.”⁷⁸ This question, for Gordon, is the soul of black existential philosophy, “one challenge from which all the others *follow*.”⁷⁹ Gordon’s question, like Sartre’s, is concerned with concrete materiality and not what underlies it, or what ties consciousness to materiality as their *inner-relation*.

In his edited collection *Not Only the Master’s Tools* (2005) Gordon understands black existentialism as building “upon problems of existence generated by the complex history of black people.”⁸⁰ Gordon further clarifies his approach in the preciseness of what he *means* by the term existence: “The word *existence* comes from the Latin expression *ex sistere*, which means to stand out...[T]he word today is associated with simply *being*, but its etymology suggests *to life* and *to be*. To exist in this sense is to become fully aware of being alive and what that signifies.”⁸¹ Gordon’s existential approach, like that of Sartre’s and our own, hinges on what he means by “become fully aware of being alive and what that signifies.” Does Gordon mean to reveal for us the meaning of black existence within an existent relation to anti-black racism? Or, does he mean to signify something else by the term “black existence?”

If we listen to Gordon here, as well as in his other writings, what becomes clear is that the meaning of existence in general is to be understood within the concrete of materiality, and for black people, that simply means within the historical situation of anti-black racism. We noted earlier Gordon’s claim that it is the question of suffering that

⁷⁸ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 1.

⁷⁹ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 1.

⁸⁰ Lewis R. Gordon, “Geography of Reason,” 23.

⁸¹ Lewis R. Gordon, “Geography of Reason,” 23.

animates black intellectual production; coupled with the claim “Africana philosophers already have a reason to raise existential questions of liberation and questions of identity...by virtue of the historical fact of racial oppression”⁸² one comes to develop a more cohesive narrative from Gordon as to the nature of consciousness and its relation to concrete materiality.

Gordon, though, does not tell us how consciousness coheres to reality such that experience is possible, he simply informs us that blackness is a problem in an anti-black society. The question is, “can consciousness cohere itself, that is, be self-consciously aware of itself in the world as a problem?” Or is there something else that coheres consciousness to the world such that it can understand things such as ‘problems’ and what it *means* to be a problem to begin with? If so, what coheres? “What is black consciousness self-consciously aware of in an anti-black society?” This is perhaps the most pressing question of black existential phenomenology. For, if the existential question of existence is addressed in terms of the phenomenological experience of situatedness, then, we do not have the subjective experience of being-in-the-world, but something else.⁸³

⁸² *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 3.

⁸³ Perhaps, being in the “world”. Like that of non-human animals, being in the “world” would signify brute existence rather than conscious interaction. Heidegger (in)famously noted that animals are “poor in world,” by which he meant animals were “deprived” of world by the incapacity to constitute a world of meaning and dimensionality in which they dwell. As such, there is no place in the animal kingdom, nor is there any history. For more on Heidegger’s notion of animals as poor in world, see *Animal Philosophy*. The irony here is that this same claim has been made about Africans—perhaps, most famously by Hegel in his lecture on world history, *The Philosophy of History*, where he writes that Africa exists outside of history (93-99). For Hegel, it is the incapacity of Africans to represent their internal movement of spirit externally as *product*. What is ironic here is that while Gordon argues against these sort of anti-black racist claims, in locating the meaning of blackness within the experience of oppression, he has, in a sense, made the same sort of teleological claim: how can black people represent the

For Lewis, the question of suffering is to be or animate the ‘question of blackness’; it is to lead us, and guide us towards itself, not in terms of our seeking, but in terms of our excavation. We no longer seek the question, and the question no longer implores us to seek it, nor does it demand anything from us. Rather, the question is simply there, an existant (a thing) to be analyzed for its meaning content. Our task is no longer trailing the pathmarks of the question itself to the source of our being-in as the meaning of existence; our task is to mine the question itself: what is meant by suffering? Our task is to take this question as given—without questioning it: *do* blacks really suffer? And, what is meant by suffering? What sorts of assumptions must be made (about materiality, about consciousness, about consciousness’ interpretation of materiality) such that we may raise such a question, and have it make sense—and to dig into it to locate its [possible] answers: double-consciousness, invisibility, objectification...or better yet, epidermalization. The question no longer leads us, it tells us; we no longer think the question, we merely search within it and its framework, and its baseline assumptions for the answers prefabricated within the epistemological field of the question itself. In short, we are to excavate concrete reality to discover its meaning *as* concrete reality.

Here we find ourselves within a similar debate as we noted earlier between Marx and Hegel, or Sartre and Merleau-Ponty; a debate over the original question, and the animation of philosophy itself: what is to animate our exploration into the meaning of existence? The debate between traditional ‘existential philosophy’ and what is here understood as existential philosophy is significant, for in our discussion of black existential

world to themselves and as the expression of their spirit if what constitutes their existence is wholly *outside of them*?

philosophy the question of consciousness and materiality is once again raised. Are we to say that the meaning of black existence can be located within the 'history' of exogenous forces? And, if so, who or what is constituting 'history' at all? Who is arranging materiality in such a way to offer significance and meaning to [brute] 'events'? Can it be the case that the meaning of black existence is *in* the materiality of brute existence or facticity? Can it be the case that the meaning *of* black existence is to be found *within* whiteness itself: within the framework European and Anglo-Americans have constituted as meaningful, as "historical"?

What we have at issue, then, in black existentialism, is not simply what constitutes black experience and the being of blackness (that is, what it *means* to be black in light of experience), but the process by which an experience is constituted, and what and who are constituted within this process. That is, what is at issue in black existentialism is the presence and dis-covery of the human within the manifold of blackness, and what this might mean. Rather than simply conferring facticity upon a set of persons, black existentialism must be from "within the skin", an accomplished and achieved perspective constituted from "the inside", to incorporate the outside *as* the inside (and vice versa). What is of issue in black existentialism is meaning and the constitution of this meaning, and the significance of this constitution.

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To reach a closer view of what is intended by our original question when attending to the meaning of black existence, let us take a closer look on a relation that Gordon himself highlights in his own discussion of black existentialism: between Sartre and Fanon.

In 1948/76 Jean-Paul Sartre published “Black Orpheus” as an introductory remark for Leopold Senghor’s collection of Negritude poems, *An Anthology of the New Negro and Malagasy Poetry*. In this essay we can see firsthand the implications of Sartre’s own philosophical position. Not only is Sartre concentrated on concrete materiality as the meaning of existence, it is also clear that

[t]here is something more important: The Negro, as we have said, creates an anti-racist racism for himself. In no sense does he wish to rule the world: He seeks the abolition of all ethnic privilege, wherever they come from; he asserts his solidarity with the oppressed of all colors. At once the subjective, existential, ethnic idea of *negritude* ‘passes,’ as Hegel puts it, into the objective, positive, exact idea of *proletariat*...But that does not prevent the idea of race from mingling with that of class: the first is concrete and particular, the second is universal and abstract; the one stems from what Jaspers calls understanding and the other from intellection; the first is the result of a psychobiological syncretism and the second is a methodological construction based on experience. In fact, negritude appears as the minor term of a dialectical progression: The theoretical and practical assertion of the supremacy of the white man is this thesis; the position of negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is insufficient by itself, and the Negro who employ it know this very well; they know that it is intended to prepare the synthesis or realization of the human in a society without races. Thus negritude is the root of its own destruction, it is a transition and not a conclusion, a means of not an ultimate end.⁸⁴

The difficulty of Sartre’s claim is his notion of the universal: what leads us towards universality as the goal of experience? What is there within experience itself as concrete that necessitates the meaning of existence is to be found beyond concrete experience, and the situation itself? Perhaps, there is a guiding framework that is assumed, yet unnamed in which and through which Sartre comes to understand universality as meaningful in his investigation into and analysis of human being. Perhaps his understanding of race-as-blackness-as-relation-to-whiteness-towards-the-universal is the guiding assumption; perhaps his Marxist universalism is the guiding assumption. Before we address Sartre’s

⁸⁴ “Black Orpheus,” xl; also reprinted at length in *Black Skin, White Masks*, 132-33.

claim in terms of its significant for thinking black existentialism, let us first turn to Fanon and his critique of Sartre's claims.

Fanon writes of Sartre's "Black Orpheus" the following.

Help had been sought from a friend of the colored peoples, and that friend had found no better response than to point out the relativity of what they were doing. For once, that born Hegelian had forgotten that consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute, the only condition to attain to consciousness of self. In opposition to rationalism, he summoned up the negative side, but forgot that this negativity draws its worth from an almost substantive absoluteness. A consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, has to be ignorant, of the essences and the determinations of its being.⁸⁵

In our pursuit of the original question, can we turn to the "night of the absolute" as the 'moment' where 'consciousness' coheres to materiality, and we are 'born again' in/as self-consciousness?

Fanon further notes

And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, *pre-existing*, waiting for me. It is not our my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn in history.

In terms of consciousness, the black consciousness is held out as an absolute density, as filled with itself, a stage preceding any invasion, any abolition of the ego by desire. Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, had destroyed black zeal. In opposition to *historical becoming*, there had always been the unforeseeable. I needed to lose myself completely in negritude. One day, perhaps, in the depths of that *unhappy romanticism*...

In any case, I *needed* not to know. This struggle, this new decline had to take on an aspect of completeness. Nothing is more unwelcome than the commonplace: 'You'll change, my boy; I was like that too when I was young...you'll see, it will pass.'

The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position. Still, in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not the potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out

⁸⁵ Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 134.

as a lack. It *is*. It is its own follower.⁸⁶

Fanon seems to suggest, and we are suggesting here, that it is only *after* the “night of the absolute” in which we are ‘reborn’ that we can begin addressing Sartre’s question of ‘class consciousness’ and Gordon’s question of ‘suffering’. Fanon moves beyond recognition as the foundation for existence, to self-awareness as the foundation for existence.

As with Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, recognition by the other in a staged battle to the death is but the first moment, and not a moment of true recognition. Ato Sekyi-Otu similarly notes in his work, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, that

Fanon critically appropriates Hegel’s allegory of master and slave in the *Phenomenology* in order to display the distinctive properties of the colonizer-colonized relation. But there is more to Fanon’s critical appropriation of Hegel than that specific reading of Hegel’s famous metapolitical story. That story is, after all, but a signal moment in the affairs of spirit, one paradigmatic form among the variegated ‘series of its own configurations’—the series of shapes through which self-consciousness must journey in order to attain ‘genuine knowledge’ and ‘a completed experience of itself.’ It is with this larger figural body that Fanon’s discourse coquettes.

Fanon follows Hegel in describing the procession of the order of things and configurations of consciousness as a ‘pathway’ ...I, too, will go along with Hegel and call Fanon’s account of this movement a *dialectic* of experience. Dialectic because it narrates the generation of relations infinitely more complex than the ‘mass relationship’ or ‘simplifying’ logic of the colonizer-colonized opposition. Dialectic because it testifies to the dissolution of ‘the two metaphysics’ of absolute difference to which colonizer and colonized alike subscribe. And dialectic because this movement of experience consists, according to Fanon, in a ‘progressive enlightening of consciousness’ occasioned by the appearance or resuscitation of realities hidden from the inaugural purview of the colonized subject. In this process, structures, figures, and relations initially presented as the defining characteristics of social

⁸⁶ Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 134-5. Here it is important to also take note of Fanon’s phrasing, “My Negro consciousness...is its own follower” in light of our discussion of the original question, which both guides and implores us to ask it; both directs us towards it and we are its follower. Here, Fanon can be heard as making a claim that consciousness, once it is reborn in the self-conscious night of the absolute in its own self-awareness of itself *as* consciousness, comes to know itself in the question as being-in as dwelling, and with this knowing does not look outside itself for recognition, for its being-in has been recognized with the dimensionality of existence: as dwelling in place, and becoming historical.

reality, hence as the ultimate terms of political and moral discourse, are shown—after the manner of Hegel—to be the misleading products of ‘immediate knowledge’: they are shown to be ‘abstract and too immediate’ in the identities, oppositions, and unities they are held to exhibit.⁸⁷

Fanon, too, seems to be suggesting this progression himself. The night of the absolute releases him from the empty self-assertion of his blackness against whiteness and racism and towards a “negro consciousness” that “does not hold itself as a lack. It *is*.” And this perhaps is Sartre’s discomfort and source of denial of negritude, for what in concrete experience points us towards the universal where “a white man can understand a negro” and not towards a metaphysics of the concrete, where, through the coherency of consciousness to materiality there emerges a metaphysical truth—as Heidegger notes, “The inner relationship of my own work to the Black Forest and its people comes from a centuries-long and irreplaceable rootedness in the Alemannian-Swabian soil.” That is, the creation of self-consciousness which does not rely on the recognition of others to be self-aware. Is this Fanon’s goal: a true self-awareness that is beyond ‘race’, and that guides us towards a blackness that is the actualization of “a framework of solidarity with Being through which one surpasses Being”?⁸⁸

What, though, is to emerge from this night? What does Fanon mean by ‘black consciousness’? Is it what Otu understands as “the disclosure of a ‘new reality’ or rather ‘multiple realities’ pregnant with ‘new meanings.’”⁸⁹ New configurations of human being such that the oppositions of colonized-colonizer, a relation through which ‘race’ comes into the world with meaning, has been, in Sartre’s term, transcended, but not for a universal

⁸⁷ Ato Sekyi-Otu. *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, 25-6.

⁸⁸ Shannon Sullivan. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 236.

⁸⁹ Ato Sekyi-Otu. *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, 27.

humanism without discrete meaning, but for a concrete metaphysics of identity—in our earlier case, as being German, and, in this case, blackness or a black consciousness? On Otu’s reading, Fanon’s new consciousness releases him “from the imprisoning and impoverishing representations of ‘natural consciousness.’”⁹⁰

We are not, though, to install a tricky metaphysics of racial essentialism, nor do we mean to note the closure of the dialectic, or of our entrance *into* reality; but, to note the metaphysics of difference in the way of metaphysics of the concrete, and to inquire into what Fanon is meant by ‘black consciousness’ in light of it. It is to ask, and by way of questioning to seek and be guided by these ‘essences and determinations of being’; it is to wonder with Fanon on the meaning of his claim that, “a consciousness committed to experience is ignorant,” and, “*has to be ignorant* of essences and determinations of being”. We are left wondering with Fanon, “what has Sartre forgotten?” And, “how does his forgottenness locate him within the frame of a ‘born Hegelian?’” “Why Hegelian, when many scholars have understood Sartre to be more heavily influenced by Heidegger?” Beyond the master/bondsman, what is operating in Fanon’s usage of Hegel to critique Sartre? Robert Bernasconi links Fanon’s critique of Sartre’s forgetting that “consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute” with his later claim, that “Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently than the White”.⁹¹ For Bernasconi, “[T]hat Sartre forgot the difference between black and white experience of the body suggests that if he knew it at all, it was only intellectually: he did not really know.”⁹² Bernasconi suggests here that perhaps Sartre, unlike Aime Cesaire, could not make the claim of the

⁹⁰ Ato Sekyi-Otu. *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, 27.

⁹¹ Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 138.

⁹² Shannon Sullivan. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 237.

transcendence of *race* in the dialectic of experience, for he did not really *know* blackness to begin with. Perhaps, also, Bernasconi suggests that Sartre's existential position is empty of actual experience, and is only 'intellectual' and, thus, has no bearing on the 'experience of being-in-the-world'.

Perhaps, this is no more evident in Sartre's more general existential claim of experience where he notes,

And, diverse though man's purposes may be, at least none of them is wholly foreign to me, since every human purpose presents itself as an attempt either to surpass these limitations, or to widen them, or else to deny or to accommodate oneself to them. Consequently every purpose, however individual it may be, is of universal value. Every purpose, even that of a Chinese, an Indian or a Negro, can be understood by a European...In every purpose there is universality, in this sense that every purpose is comprehensible to every man.⁹³

We could say that Sartre's existential position of universality seems to be dialectic, but in its disavowal of difference, or of the metaphysics of the concrete—as in the case of Heidegger—is merely 'immediate', lacking 'genuine knowledge' for it is not concerned with the specificity of existence or of the concrete, but of the universality of the concept [human] itself. Taken together with his claim that negritude was relative, we see a development of the problem of the practical application of Sartre's existential philosophy for political discourse. We are simply noting here, not of the incorrectness of Sartre, but that his approach is, perhaps, the secondary moment, and not foundational: and, that our understanding of identity needs to be deepened, below facticity.

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⁹³Jean-Paul Sartre. "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Walter Kaufmann, ed., 362.

Ralph Ellison in his review of Swedish sociologist's Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* (1944)—a text concerned with the investigation into US American race-relations, and an analysis of the modes of existence of being black in America—wrote the following:

But can a people...live and develop for over three hundred years simply by *reacting*? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs; why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma?

...Men, as Dostoevsky observed, cannot live in revolt. Nor can they live in a state of "reacting." It will take a deeper science than Myrdal's, deep as that might be, to analyze what is happening among the masses of Negroes. Much of it is inarticulate, and Negro scholars have for the most part ignored it through clinging, as does Myrdal, to the sterile concept of 'race.'⁹⁴

That is, to understand black people one must know something more than concrete facts or statistics: one must concern oneself with the actuality of living spirit in the world, that is, *how* consciousness coheres to materiality, and what constitutes black consciousness more than the 'sociology of existence'. Or, what can be called, the proper "study of Negroes" is the existential encounter with the divine: revelation of the self and world, self *in* world. What, though, is this deeper science? To answer this is to find another pathway for us to follow, and what implores us in our seeking of the meaning of existence as such, and specifically, black existence. And, with this in mind, it is to Ralph Ellison that we now turn.

⁹⁴ Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings of Ralph Ellison*, 340.

-CHAPTER TWO-

Ralph Ellison's *Techne*: The Aesthetics of Representation and the Axiology of Existence

[t]he word *techne* denotes a mode of knowing. To know means to have seen, in the widest sense of seeing, which means to apprehend what is present as such. For Greek thought, the essence of knowing consists in *aletheia*, that is, in the revealing of beings. It supports and guides all comportment toward beings. *Techne* as knowledge...is a bringing-forth of beings in that it brings forth what is present as such out of concealedness and specifically into the unconcealedness of their appearance; *techne* never signifies the action of making.

Martin Heidegger, ("Origin of the Work of Art")

The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists—by the fact that he is own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being. Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and achievement rests on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. One cannot possibly build a school, teach a child, or drive a car without taking some things for granted. The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted; he must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.

James Baldwin, ("The Creative Process")

Introduction

C.W.E. Bigsby once wrote that Ralph Ellison's critical project was that of shaping the inchoate contours of experience into "moral meaning no less than aesthetic form."⁹⁵ There is, though, an inherent tension between controlling experience within a specific form and creating, *through* the formality of that form, not so much an expression of it as a caricature⁹⁶ of that experience. This tension lies at the heart of the creative process as a productive tension that gives rise to the art itself as the expression of the ambiguity between consciousness and materiality: "the relation between raw experience and the shaping power of the imagination."⁹⁷ In a sense, for Ellison, aesthetics is *techne* in that it reveals the tension of this *inner-relation*; the specific work of art, in this case, writing, would, then, be the crafting of its [*techne*] specific, emergent form.

Aesthetic creation mirrors the complexity in existence itself: it offers us insight into the possibility and necessity "around sets of dualities that are fused together"; the question of form, of representation, of expression are ultimately questions of the meaning of existence: the measure of a work of art is its capacity to capture and contain such

⁹⁵ C.W.E. Bigsby. "Improvising America: Ralph Ellison and the Paradox of Form," in *Speaking for You*. Kimberly W. Benston, ed., 173.

⁹⁶ That is, a distortion in the meaning of an experience or of its essential qualities, as either an exaggeration or an oversimplification. The significance of this quandary, or this tension, has historically been a concern in representing black experience in form: the recurring question of not only capturing and conveying a "black experience" but also what constitutes an "authentic black experience" reveals political, aesthetic *and* ethical concerns. More will be said of this later in this chapter.

⁹⁷ C.W.E. Bigsby. "Improvising America: Ralph Ellison and the Paradox of Form," in *Speaking for You*. Kimberly W. Benston, ed., 173.

ambiguity within a form without annihilating the tension [that gives rise to its necessity].⁹⁸

The artist is set to the task of revealing the nature of existence as the *inner-relation* between consciousness and materiality, and doing so without surrendering any of the inherent ambivalence of living.

Ellison's concern with *techne* has less to do with what is made or created, but what is revealed—about existence, *our* existence, the world, and our living within the world. The art product helps us to clearly see who we are in ways that mere existence cannot. As a self-reflected representation, literature, the *techne* of the specific craft of writing, is *poesis* [discovery] in that it is an opening onto the plane of our being, manifested. This is what Baldwin meant when he wrote that the task of the artist is to “drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.”

Writing provided Ellison with a measured response to the concerns of the creative, aesthetic process and the difficulty of expression. There is technique to weaving together disparate, uncoordinated [unrelated] “facts” into a coherent whole. As *techne* literature provided Ellison a method for an aesthetic expression at once universally human *and* specific black. How, though, does one write a literature of such an experience? How would an aesthetic form of blackness appear?

⁹⁸ Similarly, answering the question cannot annihilate what animated the question to begin with. The trouble of philosophy of existence, or of traditional ‘existential philosophy’ is that it seeks to answer the question in finality; and having answered the question, to promote only thought on the question rather than thinking of what animated the question itself.

***Race and Writing: Writing Race or Race Writing?*⁹⁹**

Fiction became the agency of my efforts to answer the questions: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be? What should I make of the life around me?...What does American society mean when regarded out of my *own* eyes, when informed by my *own* sense of the past and viewed by my *own* complex sense of the present?

Ralph Ellison, (*Collected Writings*)

In the opening lines of his edited work, *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reading*, Gene Andrew Jarrett states,

African American Literature Beyond Race argues that anthologies [of African American literature] too often ignore the generalist premise of “The Value of Race Literature,” allowing race to *overdetermine* the idea of African American literature. Anthologies give the impression that African American literature must feature African American protagonist alongside certain *historical themes, cultural geographies, political discourses, or subjectivities defined by race*. And these texts are ‘authentic’ when their authors are identifiable as African American, regardless of whether these authors desire to be characterized in this way. These protocols contribute to the idea that the canon, or the ‘best,’ of African American literature only portrays the realities of black life, or practices what I call racial realism. But this is not entirely true.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ It will be noticed throughout this chapter I engage in Ellison’s existential perspective in terms of the aesthetics of representation as the *techne* of craft, and avoid the particulars of such expression—specifically, the idioms of black vernacular and musical sources of blues and jazz. I have avoided those aspects because what is of interest here, in this work as a whole, is a prolegomena methodological analysis for the conditions for having such specific discussions of particular aesthetic production. As such, I am grounding the aesthetics of representation before I engage in a discussion of specific forms of aesthetic expression. Rather, our concern here, dealing with form and *techne*, draws on a more central issue of axiology in the representation of dwelling as existence.

¹⁰⁰ *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reading*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 2.

Jarrett is asking a more basic question of the baseline assumptions and frameworks we use to organize material into an order(ing) that is or becomes meaningful.¹⁰¹ Jarrett's question of the anthologizing of African American literature is at its root existential: it involves the question of the meaning of black existence, and how such an existence is not only written about, but we go about, through anthologizing, portraying our answer to the existential question for ourselves and our potential audience. Jarrett further notes that his anthology

[s]eeks to explain how race, representation, authenticity, genre, canon and tradition factored—and still factor—into the way scholars read, anthologies organize, instructors teach, and students learn African American literature. From here we can best determine what it means for African American authors to write literature beyond race.¹⁰²

In his introductory remarks, what stands out is his attempt and desire to divorce blackness or African American identity from 'race' and, as such, divorcing the meaning of blackness or African American identity and existence from the exogenous historical forces of whiteness and white racism; rather, he locates the meaning of black existence and black identity, and history within the expression of black writers themselves, following Victoria Earle Matthews' claim in her address delivered at the First Congress of Colored Women of the United States, "The Value of Race Literature" (1895) that,

By Race literature, we mean all the writings emanating from a distinct class—not necessarily race matter; but a general collection of what has been written by the men and women of that Race: History, Biographies, Scientific Treatises, Sermons, Addresses, Novels, Poems, Books of Travel, miscellaneous essays and the contributions to magazines and newspapers.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ We can remember in the first chapter that we discussed history as the organization of brute facts into meaningful expression; we are again raising such concern.

¹⁰² *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reading*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 3.

¹⁰³ *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reading*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 1.

This becomes an important point of departure for Ralph Ellison, not only in defining art and literature generally, but what constitutes “black” art or literature, what the aim of black art and the obligation of the black artist should be. Is there a distinct content of black art and the black artist that allows it to be called black art, and on the negative side, is this definition, then, necessarily to exclude certain expressions as neither ‘black’ nor art?

Ralph Ellison, in *Invisible Man* issues the following challenge to these prevailing questions of art and identity. He notes that the concern of the artist is

‘[N]ot actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record...We create the race is by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a *culture*. Why waste time creating something that doesn’t exist? For you see, blood and skin do not think!’¹⁰⁴

Toni Morrison notes in “Unspeakable Things Spoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” that, “The question of what constitutes the art of a black writer, for whom that modifier is more *search* than *fact* has some urgency. In other words, other than melanin and subject matter, what, in fact, may make me a black writer?”¹⁰⁵ Morrison’s claim of the question which implores, but also guides, is important for Ellison’s understanding of race and Jarrett’s claim of the distinction of race and blackness, for it is the question of the existence of black people that motivates such a searching through the literary arts, or arts in general, which can be understood in the aesthetic product of the novel, and in Matthews’ terms, any production of black people as a whole.

¹⁰⁴ Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*, 354.

¹⁰⁵ Toni Morrison. “Unspeakable Things Spoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” Reprinted in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Angelyn Mitchell, ed., 385.

It is the question of existence that animates such [aesthetic] production, not the *fact* of any particular existence, or any historical truths about existence. Jarrett, too, asks of the animating question of the aesthetic production of black people: what is the source of this literature, and how does this source help to explain, define, and understand the being of black people, of their existence. He writes,

We should confront that truth [of race], embracing the political significance of canons or traditions of African American literature. However, we should also acknowledge and contribute to that large and ongoing conversation *stimulated* by the fundamental question, "What is African American literature?"¹⁰⁶

Remembering our earlier claim that the meaning of existence is in the experience of being-in, that is, in dwelling, we find that we are back to our original question, but now in terms of what Ellison suggests as 'culture' and what Jarrett suggests as the organizing principle of anthologizing. One may see in Ellison's words and in Jarrett's introduction, and in Victoria Earle Matthews' address, that what constitutes a product as belonging to a particular 'race' is not related to skin color, but what we earlier referenced as the 'spiritual essence' or spiritual production of a people: their spiritual image of the world.¹⁰⁷ As such, and as indicated in our preceding chapter, we have the challenge of coming to terms with what is meant by spiritual image and what this constitutes as its world and as its production of world in the image of the spirit itself. Is this where African American writing belongs?

¹⁰⁶ *African American Writing Beyond Race*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 7.

¹⁰⁷ Spiritual essence refers to that which is produced within and by a particular people as their understanding and expression of the world. More will be said of this in chapter four. We should also remember our discussion in chapter one concerning the movement from soul to spirit as the self-conscious appropriation of the world as the meaning of one's identity. See pages 35-37 and 52-55 of chapter one.

We find ourselves in an ontological discussion of cultural production, but one that has metaphysical implications on the *meaning* of culture itself in the production of the world as such.

Jarrett, though, warns us that writing ‘beyond’ race does not mean being beyond race, or that these writers seen as writing beyond race are some how post-racial—or that black people have ever been post-racial; it is to note that blackness, or African American identity, is not necessarily tied, that is, internally related, to ‘race’ and ‘racialization’. It is to note that the context of ‘race’ does not determine the expressions of black or African American people and their aesthetic production.

For Ellison, and gestured towards by Jarrett, it is not so much brute materiality or the ‘history’ of that materiality that determines aesthetic expression; rather, the history of black expression is to be found within what one *does* with materiality, how one *interprets* externality into what is their own, as belonging to them.¹⁰⁸ Jarrett and Ellison ontologically separate blackness from ‘race’ not as an attempt to transcend race or in a deconstructive effort to ignore or re-write the history of materiality, but to reveal spirit as self-conscious awareness of the true history, or the truth *of* history as its own achievement.

Jarrett, in his exploration of the canon, is not only investigating the metaphysical implications of blackness beyond ‘race’ for the meaning of blackness and being black, but also attempting to avoid the conclusions of Kenneth Warren’s essay, “Does African-

¹⁰⁸ A grand example of this is to be found in Henry O. Tanner (1859-1937) a black painter known for his painting, “The Banjo Player,” but also a member of the Hudson Valley School, a school of American painters that moved to Europe and painted landscapes. For Tanner, his painting of European landscapes, the content of which would not usually be understood as ‘black’ or ‘African American’ was deeply black in that it was a reflection of his own soul and the situation that drove him from the country to paint in Europe to begin with.

American Literature Exist?" and his book similarly themed, *What Was African American Literature?* In this he frames African American literature as a "Jim Crow phenomenon" and, thus, announces 'the end' of black or African American literature. Warren writes,

I'd like to make a claim that runs counter to much of literary scholarship. Historically speaking, the collective enterprise we call African-American or black literature is of recent vintage—in fact, it's just a little more than a century old. Further, it has already come to an end. And the latter is a fact we should neither regret nor lament.

African-American literature was the literature of a distinct historical period, namely, the era of constitutionally sanctioned segregation known as Jim Crow. Punctuated by state constitutional amendments that disfranchised black Americans throughout much of the South, legitimated by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 with the infamous "separate but equal" ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and stumbling into decline in the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s, Jim Crow and the fight against it gave rise to—and shaped—African-American literary practice as we have come to know it. Like it or not, African-American literature was a Jim Crow phenomenon, which is to say, speaking from the standpoint of a post-Jim Crow world, African-American literature is history. While one can (and students of American literature certainly should) write *about* African-American literature as an object of study, one can no longer *write* African-American literature, any more than one can currently write Elizabethan literature.¹⁰⁹

Warren understands and frames black literature as a reaction to white oppression, specifically to what he calls, "Jim Crow through violence, state statutes, and judicial decisions, Southern states foreclosed on many of the avenues of political and social participation."¹¹⁰ For Warren, the concerns of African American literature are not the aesthetic configurations expressive of being-in-the-world, but the politically expedient concerns of 'rights' or the denial of rights "to demonstrate that blacks could produce

¹⁰⁹ "Does African American Literature Exist?" <http://chronicle.com/article/Does-African-American/126483/> (February 24, 2011)

¹¹⁰ "Does African American Literature Exist?" <http://chronicle.com/article/Does-African-American/126483/> (February 24, 2011)

literature, not that they needed to produce a distinct literature.”¹¹¹ What Warren suggests as a framework for cataloguing and organizing African American literature is but *one* way, not *the* way.

In suggesting his framework as *the* way to view and catalogue African American literature, Warren merely reproduces what Jarrett terms the assumptions of the ‘canon’ of African American literature.¹¹² In the traditional sense of the canon, Warren may be correct when asserting the connection between ‘race’ and ‘racialization’ and blackness expressed in black writing, but, if Jarrett is correct in divesting blackness of race, then, what of Warren’s claim about the definition and purpose of African American writing? What would Warren make of what Jarrett notes as the marginalization of those works where ‘race’ and protest are not central features?¹¹³ Would they not be African American texts? And, what comes of Warren’s enframing of the aesthetic production of African American as political protest: how does this shape how he reads and catalogues, sees and does not see, African American literary production, but also other aesthetic productions and alternate African American political thinking and political movements?

Warren, though, is correct in one respect: aesthetic concerns cannot be divorced from our own political and valuing concerns; rather, the way in which we organize the

¹¹¹ “Does African American Literature Exist?” <http://chronicle.com/article/Does-African-American/126483/> (February 24, 2011)

¹¹² In the latter half of the essay, Warren moves through the history of African American literature, from Reconstruction to the Civil Right era and concludes that despite the differences approaches of literary critics they nevertheless are in agreement with him that the motivating concerns of African American literature was the race question.

¹¹³ *African American Writing Beyond Race*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 9-14. A specific example would be Camille Dungy’s edited collection, *Black Nature*. What would Warren do with Dungy’s work? Is this collection not black literature?

world and the values we see within the world are reflective of the ways in which we come organize and understand aesthetic production. Jarrett notes,

To say that the term ‘African American literature’ signifies literature by, about, and/or for African Americans is not simply to utter a definition. In American intellectual society and culture, it is a determination of the way authors think about and write the literature, the way publishers classify and distribute it, the way bookstores receive and sell it, the way libraries catalog and shelve it, the way readers locate and retrieve it, the way teachers, scholars, and anthologists use it, the way students learn from it—in short, the way we *know* it.¹¹⁴

In short, Jarrett’s concern is how to *think* blackness, exhibited in how we represent blackness *in the classification* of black literature: its meaning, context, content, edges, and the horizons of a *black world*. For Jarrett, how we *think* blackness in how we engage African American literature is not solely for its conceptual or historical affirmative in distinction of and separation *from* whiteness or European or other American literature; ironically, the conceptual frame used to determine the canon of what constitutes black literature is also used “to justify moving this tradition as a whole from the margins to the center”¹¹⁵ in diversity courses in colleges and universities throughout American, and for diversity anthologies. In both the exclusion and the inclusion of blackness within and without the mainstream of American life, we, for Jarrett find ourselves within the paradigm of a certain mode of being-in where the meaning of blackness is *given*—i.e. concealed—within a certain form of representation.¹¹⁶

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How should we understand the existential voice of black writing? That is, how should we

¹¹⁴ *African American Writing Beyond Race*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 4.

¹¹⁵ *African American Writing Beyond Race*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 5.

¹¹⁶ *African American Writing Beyond Race*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 5.

understand black existence represented in literary form? Is black literature synonymous with protest literature? Such questions carry within them an irony—noted in the introductory remarks as a tension between controlling the inchoate elements with an aesthetic form, but here presented in terms of issues of either authenticity or ambiguity.¹¹⁷

One of the core elements of existential thought concerns authenticity, that is, true or honest depictions of one's existence. One of the core elements that Jarrett and Ellison are concerned with is the question of authenticity within black literature: is the question of authentic experience one that should be raised in relation to aesthetic expression, as is often done in representations of blackness in aesthetic form? "What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what *could* it be here in this country?" asks [white] literary critic Irving Howe. He further asks,

How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without impulse to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private released or buried?...The 'sociology' of his existence forms a constant pressure of his literary work, and not merely in the way this might be true of any writer, but with a pain and ferocity that nothing could remove.¹¹⁸

Howe makes the case for 'authentic' black literature, for an 'authentic' aesthetic expression—this may, though, be a misnomer, for perhaps neither Howe nor Warren consider black literature 'art' and understand it only in terms of its public or political use—that is to be found within a certain agenda and constructed with a certain purpose. Howe would not mean Camus' protest as man's fate in an indifferent, meaningless universe.¹¹⁹

The fate Howe speaks of is a specific 'black' fate, not human fate in relation to a non-human

¹¹⁷ This distinction will be treated later in the chapter.

¹¹⁸ Irvin Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *DISSENT* (Autumn, 1963). Also reprinted in *Collected Writings*, 158-9. This is a sentiment we see reflected earlier in Warren's own thoughts about African American literature as a response to Jim Crow.

¹¹⁹ See Albert Camus. "An Absurd Reasoning" in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*.

universe, but of the human, powerless in relation to an equally human, yet inhuman and, seemingly *un-human* force of white racism. It is for this reason that Howe promotes Wright as a more 'authentic' black writer than either James Baldwin or Ellison himself. "Evidently," Ellison writes, "Howe feels that unrelieved suffering is the only 'real' Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious."¹²⁰ "One unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would," Ellison continues, "get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell..."¹²¹

Art, if it is to fulfill its role of revealing, is not concerned with the debate between authentic and inauthentic expression; as Ellison notes, though it is a "public gesture," it is not necessarily "a political one."¹²² The highest form of aesthetic expression and aesthetic experience deals with the question of existence; existence, though, does not create aesthetic expression or even an experience, *it does interpret, it is what is interpreted*. "What moves writer to eloquence," Ellison noted, "is less meaningful than what he makes of it...[b]ecause it is *his* life and no mere abstraction in someone's head."¹²³

In the opening of his biography, *The Quality of Hurt*, Chester Himes notes,

Albert Camus once said that racism is absurd. Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition, Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in the victims...So it was with me. The first time I read the manuscript of my novel *The End of a Primitive*, I knew I had written an absurd book. But it had not been my intention to write about absurdity. I had intended to write about the deadly venom of racial prejudice which kills both racists and their victims. I had not intended to write about absurdity because the book was about me and I had not known at the time that I was absurd.

¹²⁰ Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings*, 159.

¹²¹ Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings*, 160.

¹²² Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings*, 158.

¹²³ Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings*, 159-60.

I thought I had struck a great blow against racial prejudice. I felt like a hero, a warrior in the battle for Negro rights in America. I felt that by writing this I had won a battle.

I was arrogant in the belief that I had performed a heroic service which made me a hero. I thought I was brave, and that other people were being absurd.¹²⁴

Himes had thought himself writing in a 'black' manner, in a 'black' tone about a 'black' subject, and that, in his writing in *this* way about *this* subject, that he had done a service to black people in his writing [performance] black. But in hindsight, reflecting back onto his life and his work and the motivations of his work, Himes concludes that he was simply being absurd in what Jarrett terms a 'racial realist' project. Such a conclusion raises the question that originally animated us here: what is black literature? And, if Himes thought himself absurd when writing 'race literature' or literature about racism and racialization, what can be extracted from this claim for our general point about 'black literature' overall? Himes reminds us that before we begin to discuss and categorize black authors, we first need to ask the question of how our own representation of them and their blackness affects how we understand their identity and the process and purpose of their own writing: and, if they are black writers, what these designations 'black' and 'writing' mean, and in their designation, whether they determine, and if this is determinate or indeterminate of an aesthetic unfolding. Jarrett writes and warns of the

[c]ategories in literary scholarship, anthologies, and curricula have afforded a convenient and popular set of concepts, discourses, and associations that certainly tempts one into referring almost exclusively to movements wherever African American literary history is concerned. But such convenience and popularity should not distract us from acknowledging and addressing...the problematic anxieties, assumptions, agendas, stereotypes, and contradictions that underwrote intellectual or academic constructions of movements.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Chester Himes, *My Life of Absurdity*, 1.

¹²⁵ *African American Writing Beyond Race*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 8.

Existentialism, as it is understood here, is not tied into a certain framework, but is a meta-discussion of existence animated by *the* question [of existence] and the subsequent questions of experience [of being-in]: the construction of the world, our being-in-the-world, the accomplishment and experience of place, the achievement of history and the horizon of the truth of that history. As a meta-discussion of the categories themselves through which we ask the ontological question of existence, and of black existence, we come closer to an ever expanding historicity: an ever expanding manifold and framework through which to understand and to see ‘blackness,’ not that such considerations distort the process and product of anthologies or of research itself, but demonstrate only that African American identity and aesthetic production should be “defined in the broadest way possible,” for existential as well as methodological purposes.¹²⁶

Our existential consideration, thus, takes on a certain directive, which could be understood by the traditional term, ‘politics’: the question of existence unfolds along an historical frame that names and defines reality and our experiences. In the case of black identity, articulated through our examination of ‘black’ aesthetic production, we not only discuss the meaning of black existence, but also the role of the ‘concrete’ in its *inner-relation*¹²⁷ to our thinking of existence. Our notion of the political unfolds along the lines of the return of the reflexive question, which implores us in our questioning—art, itself is not politics, but its production is *political*.

¹²⁶ *African American Writing Beyond Race*. Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., 2.

¹²⁷ This is to say aesthetics concerns themselves are not derivative of political ideology or of political action. Rather, the role of aesthetic production and the aesthetic product is to reveal the *inner-relationship* between consciousness and the material world by representing this *inner-relation* as an outward material form. The material is imbued with a conscious image, and consciousness is imbued with the material form. For more on this, reference chapter one, pages 26-30.

Along with the existential concern and the emergence of a working framework of meaning, there is also the emergence of an axiological framework as well. What is the *value* of asking the question of black literature and black aesthetics for our understanding of black existence? How does one judge the value of the question itself? Is its answer axiomatic, and, thus, not worth asking? What values emerge in asking the question itself? The aesthetic consideration reveals a constructed interpretation not only of history, but also that of the *inner-relation* between ontology and history: that is, the meaning of a people in relation to history as such and, specifically, to their history. Howe suggests that the experience of being black is not only historically contingent, but also ontologically determinative, such that when he writes, "How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without impulse to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried?" he is really stating that the question of the meaning of black literature is already settled in that its meaning is disclosed within the experience of being black itself. For Howe, there is no separation from the experience of being black and its representation in aesthetic form.

Wassily Kandinsky once wrote of the relation of the artist to the work of art that, "it is clear that the choice of object that is one of the elements in the harmony of form must be decided only by a corresponding vibration in the human soul."¹²⁸ We can, here, extract the meaning of this claim for our purpose. For Kandinsky what motivates us in the question is that which motivates in our representation of it [question]. For Kandinsky, this motivation is neither a matter of reason, nor what can be surmised *of* existence; the *inner-relation* between consciousness and materiality, between that which we encounter and that which

¹²⁸ Blue Rider Exhibition, 1914.

we produce as a manner of experience of the world is spirit, that which is [simply] our *living* essence. Aesthetic production and the aesthetic product is the expression of the *inner-relation* through the unity of materiality and conscious activity. It is an external expression of the soul [active principle of life] revealed through technique. Ellison, found his expression specifically in the craft of writing.¹²⁹ Similar to Kandinsky, Ellison notes that writing as craft is the revelation of one's conscious state in relation to materiality attending to the ultimate question of existence and that of its representation in aesthetic form. What is more, for Ellison, this representation, in addition to expressing reality as our experience of it, also stated something about *how* reality should be lived, revealing the axiological framework inherent in the aesthetic "choice of object". Ellison writes,

It's one thing to have a feeling, an insight, to hear in your mind's ear a rhythm, or to conceive an image. It is the *craft*, the knowledge of what other people have done, of what has been achieved by those great creators of the novel which gives you some idea of the possibility of that image, that nuance, that rhythm, that dramatic situation. It's not dry technique or craft that I'm talking about: it's craft which makes it possible for to be more or less conscious of what you are doing and of the tools that you have to work with.¹³⁰

Robert O'Meally connects the technique of aesthetic form and the craft of writing in Ellison with that of morality, or the axiological framework of the artist in the following way.

Ellison elaborates on this insight, observing that not only must the moral writer always do the best work he can, but when 'you [writers] describe a more viable and ethical way of living and denounce the world or a great part of society for the way it conducts its affairs and then write in a sloppy way or present issues in a simplistic

¹²⁹ Ralph Ellison's interest in and privileging of *Techne* extended beyond the craft of writing. It must be remembered that before becoming a full-time writer Ellison developed interests in audio technology, sculpture, and photography. These interests continued into and can be witnessed throughout his corpus. What is significant here—the task of aesthetic creation and the ethic of art production—can be applied to more than Ellison as a writer, but to Ellison as an artist. For more on Ellison's relation to music see Ralph Ellison, "Living with Music" and Lawrence Jackson's *Emergence of Genius*.

¹³⁰ WGBH-TV interview.

or banal way, then you're being amoral as an artist' ("Through a Writer's Eyes," B3). Since writer provide 'disastrously explicit' images, one which influence readers in their search for the meanings of their lives, then false images, or images faultily projected by inadequate craft, can cause confusion, dismay, and even death.¹³¹

The artist presents a specific way of articulating the universality of human existence: the universal through the individual. The *inner-relation* of the individual to the collective necessitates the moral component of the expression of the artist's internal structure [of existence]: for Ellison, "craft to me is an aspect of morality"¹³² because it is through *craft* that society is represented and presented to itself. Similarly James Baldwin argues that

The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists—by the fact that he is own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being.¹³³

The meaning of our existence in the art product itself is simultaneously expressive of a greater framework of meaning and historical becoming, of an axiology of meaning, which guides and litters our aesthetic expressions; it is what animates [vibrates] the soul towards its activity, towards its movement, towards its life; these expressions are exposures of world and our being-in, that is, dwelling as we are in the world. What we create explores what we value in the world, *as the world*.

Blackness as an ever-expanding term reflects a commitment to the historical frame and the meaning of the world, where what is understood is not only the aesthetic choice of object, but a form of the *historical*: it becomes meaningful to itself and of itself,

¹³¹ Robert O'Meally. "The Rules of Magic: Hemingway as Ellison's 'Ancestor'" in *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, 163.

¹³² Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings of Ralph Ellison*, 398.

¹³³ James Baldwin. "The Creative Process."

representative of a world and of a living [dwelling] in this world. It is an expansion, and at times explosion, of other historical [and axiological] frames of race, racism, and racialization.

Expanding our understanding of blackness beyond 'race', thus, expands our axiological structure in the meaning of the aesthetic product itself. Along with Jarrett, we question and reframe the meaning of black literature specifically [and black art product generally] and the grounding of meaning itself: altering our baseline assumptions on being and our framework of being discloses a new technique, a new way of crafting our way of living and way of expressing the *inner-relation*.

* * *

What is at stake in the axiological expression in aesthetic form is the paradox of meaning and/to blackness: we are surrounded by two untenable poles of either authenticity, on one hand, and ambiguity on the other. If blackness is to be tied to 'race,' then we are faced with a specific designation and understanding of black existence in black art, one that is tied to the external forces of white racism. The problem with this approach, though, is that it places us within a debate over authenticity: if black existence is tied to white racism, and black art to this experience, then what do we do with those forms of expression by black people that do not fall within this purview? We, then, have the opening moments of a sentence like, "such and such work is not black, or is not black enough", or, "so and so is not *really* black". On the other hand, if we untie blackness from race, then, what it means to be black is not specific; rather it is broad. This leaves us with the ambiguity of identity, where to be black is not simply one reality.

For Ellison, the ‘answer’ to this paradox lies in craftsmanship: Ellison attempted to blend both approaches; black art reflects the social and political conditions, but as one interprets them—that is, it is a blending of consciousness with material conditions. “Negro life,” Ellison writes, “is, for the Negro who must live it, not only a burden (and not always that) but also a *discipline*¹³⁴—just as any human life which is endured so long is a discipline teaching its own insights into the human condition...[t]here is a fullness, even a richness here—and here *despite* the realities of politics, perhaps, but nevertheless here and real. Because it is *human* life.”¹³⁵ Literary critic Henry Louis Gates similarly remarks that, “‘Blackness’ is not a material object, an absolute, or an event, but a trope.”¹³⁶ For Gates, the trope of blackness deals with the manner in which black art, in this case, literature, is “measured by a complex structure of meaning”, that expresses a writer’s “consciousness of his or her language”; that is, a consciousness of the form in and through which reality is to be represented. Key in this understanding from both Ellison and Gates is the seminal role consciousness plays in the construction of ‘blackness’. Materiality alone does not constitute the meaning of existence, but its [materiality’s] relation to conscious appropriation.

We are stewards of a greater message than that of skin or color or blood; we are stewards of the conscious appropriation of the world and/in its representation as ours, a process Ellison notes as *culture*. As we quoted Ellison from the opening moments of this

¹³⁴ This discipline is fortitude in the face of the question of the meaning of existence, and the necessity of facing such a question within one’s actual living as their experience. “It takes fortitude to be a man,” Ellison writes, “and no less to be an artist. Perhaps it takes even more if the black man would be an artist...It seems to me, therefore, that the question of how the ‘sociology of existence’ presses upon a Negro writer’s work depends upon how much of his life the individual writer is able to transform into art.” (159)

¹³⁵ Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings of Ralph Ellison*, 159.

¹³⁶ Henry Louis Gates. *Figures in Black*, 40-1; reprinted in Kenneth Warren, *So Black, So Blue*, 19.

section:

We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a *culture*. Why waste time creating something that doesn't exist? For you see, blood and skin do not think!¹³⁷

It is absurd to believe that such things as skin and blood and color can determine one's interpretation or expression of their existence no matter the guiding influence it may have: there is nothing internally necessary for us to interpret 'race' in a specific manner or react to it in one specific way. The craftsmanship of art, for Ellison, means that we escape, in a sense the ties of 'race,' by way of *techne*: a black artist is still an artist and still tied to the craft of art, a responsibility 'race' cannot alleviate him of. The black artist cannot rely on his 'race' to be a great artist or to give him the answer to the question of his existence or to claim Kandinsky's "harmony of form"; that is something that the artist will have to come to terms with in terms of his/her craft itself—it is an existential question that can be answered only by the specificities of craft itself.

Ellison writes the following warning to the would-be black artist:

I am saying to them that there is something about their experience which other people might tend to overlook because they're outside it. I'm saying that I'm in a better position to see certain things about American literature or American culture precisely *because* I'm a black man, but I'm not restricted by those frames which have been imposed on us. I think that one has to keep this constantly in mind; otherwise, somebody else is going to be interpreting your experience for you, and you're going to be repeating it. And they might be in error.¹³⁸

Similarly, W.E.B. Du Bois warns the would-be black artist, who he refers to as the "would-be black savant", in the *Soul of Black Folk* where he writes,

The would-be black *savant* was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his

¹³⁷ Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*, 354.

¹³⁸ Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings of Ellison*, 386.

people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood. The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand people,—has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves.¹³⁹

Both Ellison and Du Bois are centering in on an existential debate on not only the nature of black art and the axiological frame of aesthetic expression, but also the need for the black artists to determine for themselves what their frame is, and that this can only be done within the purview of craft itself. But, the issue of craft alone is not sufficient, for as Du Bois warned, if artist's measure themselves by the tape of those that despise them, then their craft will do them no good in the aesthetic expression of their message, leaving them "wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation". Unreflected *Techne* can be a false salvation: Kandinsky's claim comes back for us: "the choice of object that is one of the elements in the harmony of form must be decided only by a corresponding vibration in the human soul." What is this for the black artist? What does this mean for the black existential question? Can it tell us something of the meaning and experience of being black?

We are concerned with the inner workings, the harmony of spirit with the object of choice, or what we noted in the last chapter as the *inner-relation* of consciousness to materiality. What is the inner life of black people?

Ellison is concerned with the inner life of the individual, and what it means to live within a reality, and what constitutes reality and the concrete. Ellison challenges us to

¹³⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois. *Souls of Black Folk*, 11-12.

rethink self-consciousness: what does it mean to have an inner life? What constitutes an inner life? And, what happens to our research, our thinking, our understanding if the inner life of the individual is not accounted for? What does this mean for the study and methodological analysis of black people?

Ralph Ellison, the Existentialist?

Ralph Ellison is a writer of technique, a writer who sought to transform reality from a [seemingly] infinite series of random events, into understandable and expressible form through craft itself. In his work there is little mention of traditional existential terms or themes, such as despair and alienation, present in writers such as Richard Wright's *The Outsider*. Nevertheless, Ellison can be read as an existential writer, and with good reason. Ellison's existential insight is within the original question of existence, its meaning, and, what is more, its expression: Ellison turns the original question, which animates and guides us, into an axiological aesthetics through *techne* of the art [writing].

Ralph Ellison is not a 'black' writer, nor does he write 'black' literature if what is meant by 'black' is concerned solely with race and racism as the meaning of black life and of black living. While it is true that Ellison utilizes traditionally understood 'black' forms—language, idiom, music, and custom—that themselves emerged from within the traditional understanding of blackness—race and racism—Ellison's concerns of form, expression, structure, composition are not 'black' concerns. To call Ellison a 'black' writer is certainly to miss the influence of technique and form over his own writing, his construction of narrative and his development of characters; moreover, it is to miss the critical influence over his craft. Nevertheless, Ellison has become one of the most cited 'black' authors in existential literature (Cotkin, 1995, 2005; Gordon, 1998; Mills, 1998; Taylor, 2013), almost exclusively for his novel, *Invisible Man*, and the trope of invisibility—a term set to capture the absurdism, anxiety, and alienation of black life in American. As W.E.B. Du Bois is almost exclusively known for his theory of double-consciousness to the exclusion of his other concerns—method, analysis—that have effected the discipline as a whole—Ellison has yet

to be placed within the context of 'philosophy' or existentialism, as such, as the sustained interrogation of and the subtle dance with and in existence.

In his essay, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," Lewis Gordon (1996) writes,

At least four Africana theorists, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Ralph Ellison, and Frantz Fanon, have theorized dimensions of antiblack racism in a way that is so clearly indicative of an existential phenomenological turn...[w]hat these figures have in common are a passion to understand human beings and passion to articulate a liberation project that does not lead to the estrangement of humanity from itself.

For Gordon, what typifies the black existential phenomenological turn in their work is their focus on the "situational dimension...of race"; the particularity of the situational dimension of race, for Gordon, is revealed within their resistance to the "forces of institutional invisibility and the seduction of constructing theoretical maps that lead nowhere."¹⁴⁰ This seduction reveals itself in the difficult tension within a "Manichean" system, theodicean as it is sadomasochistic in its racialization.¹⁴¹

For Gordon, 'invisibility' is a social phenomenon imposed on individuals in and through the institutionalization of racialization and is, physiologically and psychologically, a seductive act, simultaneously making appear and making disappear. That is, the system of racialization creates certain forms of life while erasing other forms: in the case of anti-black racism, the 'black' as constructed within the system is what made to appear, while the individual human being, of whom blackness is predicated ontologically and metaphysically, is what is made to disappear. Gordon writes,

In the context of modern attitudes toward and political treatment of black folks, a

¹⁴⁰ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 70.

¹⁴¹ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 70-2.

special kind of theodicean grammar has asserted itself. The appeal to blacks as problem-people is an assertion of their ultimate location *outside* the systems of order and rationality...The formation of such system and their theodicean rationalizations lead to the generations of new forms of life, namely, those in the system and those outside the system. The 'outside' is an invisible reality generated, in its invisibility, as non-existence.¹⁴²

For Gordon, such theodicean concern of modernity, in its attempt to construct the black as 'other' is an attempt to perfect itself from the internal problems of modern alienation. "A perfect system cannot have imperfections. Since blacks claim to be contradictions of a perfect system, the imperfection must either be an error in reasoning (mere 'appearance') or lie in black folk themselves. Blacks become rationalized as the extraneous *evil* of a *just system*."¹⁴³ This desire to avoid the contradictions within the system in the locating black people 'outside' as 'other' or 'evil' is, for Gordon, not merely bad faith, but sadomasochistic—"an attempt to deny the coextensivity" of 'seeing,' 'being seen,' and 'being conscious of being seen by others'¹⁴⁴—and inherently seductive—" [s]education is an effort to get what we want by permitting another to be responsible for it."¹⁴⁵ Being responsible to that which we are not directly the cause for/of, and, simultaneously, being responsible for that which, even in our acceptance, we are oppressed by, is existentially and phenomenologically absurd, and, for Gordon, physiological and psychological self-estrangement (alienation) in black people.

In a sense, the existential question of existence is reversed within the spectrum of blackness, for the subjective accounting of the emergence of the self in traditional terms, as a Cartesian cogito or transcendental subject, is transformed into a given facticity wherein

¹⁴² Lewis R. Gordon, "African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason," 6.

¹⁴³ Lewis R. Gordon, "African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason," 6.

¹⁴⁴ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 71.

¹⁴⁵ *Existence in Black*, Lewis R. Gordon, ed., 76.

interpretation does not concern the existential being of the black. In a word, the existential shift is from 'choice' and 'responsibility' in Sartre to 'power'—in Foucauldian terms. In the case of blackness, choice and responsibility are skipped over or transcended for infinite facticity—that is, for the infinite of the concrete 'moment'. Frantz Fanon describes the feeling of infinite transcendence when he writes of the 'black' existential condition,

Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep¹⁴⁶

Similarly, James Baldwin, in his essay, "Stranger in a Village," finds himself in the absurd situation of being in a mountain town in Switzerland, where the townspeople, by all accounts, had never met a 'black' person—"I was told I would be a 'sight' for the village; I took this to mean that people my complexion were rarely seen in Switzerland...[i]t did not occur to me...that there could be people anywhere who had never seen a Negro"—and, yet, he is still confronted with the sound of "Nigger." This time, though, as the shouts of excitement from the town's children, in whom "there was certainly no element of intentional unkindness", nevertheless,

[t]he children who shout *Neger!* have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in me. They are brimming with good humor and more daring swell of pride when I stop and speak with them. Just the same, there are days when I cannot pause and smile, when I have no heart to play with them; when, indeed, I mutter sourly to myself, exactly as I muttered on the streets of a city these children have never seen, when I was no bigger than these children are now: *Your mother was a nigger.*¹⁴⁷

Baldwin's claim, though different in tone from Fanon's own experience on a train, nevertheless echoes the absurdity of facing racialization within the mouth of a child.

¹⁴⁶ Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 140.

¹⁴⁷ James Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son*, 159-162.

“Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!”, Fanon writes, “Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.”¹⁴⁸ What is striking about both Baldwin and Fanon is not so much the similarity of their existential and phenomenological self-narrative of racialization, but their similarly ambiguous concluding remarks. For Fanon, this racialization was not the totality of the experience of his existence; rather, Fanon writes in response to those who have and are attempting to limit him to this racialized experience that “consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute, the only condition to attain to consciousness of self,” after which he declares, “in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes.”¹⁴⁹

One finds in Baldwin this at the end of Baldwin’s essay,

In this long battle, a battle by no means finished, the unforeseeable effects of which will be felt by many future generations, the white’s man’s motive was the protection of his identity; the black man was motivated by the need to establish an identity. And *despite* the terrorization...*despite* the cruel and totally inescapable ambivalence of his status...the battle for his identity has long ago *been won*.¹⁵⁰

How are we to understand what Fanon means here, that *despite* such alienation and estrangement from himself, there is the “night of the absolute” where he can locate “consciousness of self”? What emerges from the other side of such a night? And, what could Baldwin mean that, “*despite* the cruel and totally inescapable ambivalence of his status...the battle for his identity has long ago been won”?

One may visit Heraclitus’ fragment in relation to Fanon and Baldwin’s claims and find in it an existentially instructive note. He writes, “When it’s dark and sight is

¹⁴⁸ Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

¹⁴⁹ Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 133-35.

¹⁵⁰ James Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son*, 173.

extinguished, man kindles his own light [flame].”¹⁵¹ Within the externality of ‘race’ and ‘racialization,’ black identity was thought to have been extinguished, but, for Fanon as with Baldwin it [black consciousness] finds itself *as the source of its own light, its own becoming*.

There is a difference, though, between how one is seen and how sees and represents themselves and their world. “Being outside” the system does not specifically mean being-outside as an ontological condition of being-outside of one’s own self. What is central to Gordon about these black existential phenomenologists is their attention to blackness as a mode of ‘invisibility,’ or the ‘dynamics of black invisibility.’” Can Gordon understand invisibility when it is outside of the framework of sadomasochism? Can this theory deal with or capture its meaning when invisibility is neither conferred or forced, but *chosen*? Comedian/singer/actor Bert Williams once said of his own chosen black-face performance: “Nobody in America knows my real name, and if I can prevent it, nobody ever will.”¹⁵² What torments Abraham in Soren Kierkegaard’s existential narrative, *Fear and Trembling*, is Abraham’s desire to be known, to speak his condition of being both inside the Absolute of God and outside the universalism that is human law. What is Abraham’s existential condition, though, if his silence is chosen? Is he, then, in a state of anxiety if he becomes what Albert Murray refers to as the dexterous “Alabama Jack Rabbit” of Brer Rabbit and indirectly asks to be put in the “briar patch”? In short, how does Gordon represent the trickster element so formative in black aesthetic production, captured in Murray’s demand for the craft of literature to be nimble, resilient, resourceful: diverse and swift as our living

¹⁵¹ Heraclitus, fragment, DK22b26.

¹⁵² Ann Charters. *Nobody: The Story of Bert Williams*.

lives are?¹⁵³ The question Ellison leaves with Gordon is, “what is the craft of invisibility?”¹⁵⁴

How should we understand invisibility existentially as that which may be chosen? For Ellison the term is often multifarious and evasive: it is what is a constant challenge to challenge us in our remembrance of ourselves and what the issue should be: It is a constantly shifting and moving principle

Our task then is always to challenge the *apparent* forms of reality—that is the fixed manners and values of the few—and to struggle with it until it reveals its mad, vari-implicated chaos, its false faces, and on until it surrenders its insight, its truth...Through the forging of forms of the novel worthy of it, we achieve not only the promise of our lives, but we anticipate the resolution of those *world problems* of humanity which for a moment seem to those who are in awe of statistics completely insoluble.¹⁵⁵

As with the narrator’s grandfather’s riddle in the *Prologue* and *Epilogue* of *Invisible Man*, we are dealing with not only ‘what moves at the margins’, but with our own conceptions and our own frameworks and the paradox of reading and understanding someone else’s *history*. “I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction...I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins...”¹⁵⁶

Once I thought my grandfather incapable of thoughts about humanity, but I was wrong. *Why should an old slave use such a phrase as, ‘This or this or this has made me more human,’ as I did in my arena speech? Hell, he never had any doubts about his humanity—that was left to his ‘free’ offspring.* He accepted his humanity just as he accepted the principle. It was his, and the principle lives on in all its human and

¹⁵³ Ralph Ellison. *Collected Writings*, 154; Albert Murray. *From the Briarpatch Files*, 4-10.

¹⁵⁴ In his novel, *Invisible Man*, Ellison writes that Louis Armstrong had made poetry out of his invisibility, and asked, “[c]ould this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?” (8-14)

¹⁵⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Collected Writings*, 154; emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 16. Very rarely do black philosophers engage Ellison’s grandfather, the ‘vet’ from Golden Day, and the challenges that they pronounce in complicating their discussion of invisibility for Ellison’s narrator. Joseph Trimmer’s essay, “The Grandfather’s Riddle in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” is instructive here.

absurd diversity. So now having tried to put it down I have disarmed myself in the process.¹⁵⁷

Shifting the ground from aesthetic representation [and the aesthetics *of* representation] to that of 'social mobility' has confused the nameless narrator—as the shift from art to politics, for Ellison, has confused both the art and politics of black writers and black literature. Our nameless narrator is on a search for the meaning of himself without realizing that he already has that meaning within his own capacity to represent reality for and to himself, in order to *be* himself, “to be his own father”—or, as Fanon puts it, to be his own following—to institute and become his own living principle instead of chasing his own humanity in others and becoming “one of the greatest jokes in the world...the spectacle of blacks striving towards whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray.”¹⁵⁸ Have not we 'disarmed' ourselves of understanding blackness, when, in the process of putting down the meaning of blackness we find, not its representation through an axiological aesthetics, but race and racialization?

¹⁵⁷ Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*, 580. Leon Forrester makes an important contribution here in his essay, “Luminosity from the Lower Frequencies” in *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, Kimberly Benston, ed.

¹⁵⁸ Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*, 577.

-CHAPTER THREE-

“Living-life” and the Actualization of the “subject” in Toni Morrison

I was preoccupied with books by black people that approached the subject [the African American girl], but I always missed some *intimacy*, some *direction*, some *voice*. Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright—all of whose books I admire enormously—I didn’t feel were telling *me* something. I thought they were saying something about *it* or *us* that revealed something about *us* to *you*, to others, to white people, to men.

Toni Morrison, interview with Charles Ruas (1981)

Introduction

One of trenchant criticisms women writers and feminist philosophers make of the traditional 'existential philosophy' and its canonization is its understanding of the source of reality (that is, of the world) as *the* individual. This starting point, it has been argued, as the beginning of ontological and epistemological analysis does not reflect what is universally "human" but what is specifically male.¹⁵⁹ *The* individual of existentialism has been compared to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "natural man" or Ralph Waldo Emerson's man of "deliberate living".¹⁶⁰ If one were to begin the narrative from another perspective, one would find that the existential problems and its concepts are shifted.

When one adds to the concern over gender the issue of race, something interesting occurs. For the most part, the history of black literature in America, especially in the twentieth century period between 1930 and 1960—the "existential period"—has been concerned with representation (of self and world). Problematically, though, many of the

¹⁵⁹ In the post-colonial, this criticism has also been expanded from 'male' to 'European' and 'elite'. For a good assessment of this criticism, see Lewis Gordon's *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*.

¹⁶⁰ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse On the Origin and Basis for Inequality Among Men* where Rousseau offers a hypothetical 'garden of Eden' before inequality was introduced by society and the social order. In this understanding, man was 'free'—in the sense that he was unfettered by social obligation. The problem, though, with Rousseau's depiction of nature, natural man and "Eden" was that it did not account for the natural obligation of child-rearing, causing theorists like S.M. Okin ("Rousseau's Natural Woman") to proclaim his "Eden" as a men's haven, but not a woman's.

Henry David Thoreau in his text, *Walden*, wrote of his contemporary disillusionment with industrial society and theorized a practical—transcendental—way to escape the burdens of anonymity and alienation. Thoreau theorized leaving the city and going into the woods (on the outskirts of the city) to live in a deliberate, human manner. For Thoreau, industrial society had become so decadent that one has to be deliberate in their searching out natural life, to hear their own natural voice. Thoreau, like Rousseau argued that modern industrial society was the cause of their modern problems, and their solution was simply to escape this reality, either through a mythical genealogy or through poetic movement.

male writers of that time mirror similar ontological and epistemological concerns of traditional 'existential philosophy'. From Richard Wright's *Native Son* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* many of the black male writers concern themselves with the tension between the individual and society at large, and, specifically, within the black community. Similar concepts such as despair, alienation, forlornness, and anxiety can be found in these writers, but within a different context and with different content. Rather than being understood as straightforwardly existential, these writers are claimed under the newly emerging category of black existentialism. The question remains, though, "what of Black women's existential voice?" Within contemporary feminism we have the sketch of an answer to the question, "where is the women's existential voice?" with noted writers such as Simone de Beauvoir. But, within black existentialism, the answer has not been offered. Rather, much of what one sees is a selection of women who are situated within the existential problems of black male writers—historically, figures such as Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells are situated within debates by or around male writers; in contemporary writing, Toni Morrison, the author of note in this chapter, is largely understood in terms alienation, despair, and anxiety.¹⁶¹ But, what happens if we were to read Morrison as she had intended: "The novelty, I thought, would be in having this story of female violation revealed from the vantage point of the victims or could-be victims of rape—the persons no one inquired of: the girls themselves."¹⁶²

In this chapter, I will be analyzing two of Toni Morrison's novels, mining what I will call her black American woman's existential voice, one that is constitutive of *community* as

¹⁶¹ For an example of this type of treatment of Morrison's work see George Yancy's analysis of *Bluest Eye* in his text *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, chapter six.

¹⁶² Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, "Afterword".

the metaphysical actualization of the *subject*.¹⁶³ Rather than beginning with *the* individual as the formative ontological structure of human being (and being human), this chapter seeks to trace the movement from *the* individual (of traditional ‘existential philosophy’) through consciousness to self-consciousness and, finally, to subjectivity as the movement of inner life of spirit.¹⁶⁴ Utilizing Morrison’s *Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon* (as primary texts supplemented by her critical essays and interviews), I will argue that community, rather than *the* individual, is the ontological foundation of being human. Further, I will distinguish this community ontology from that of traditional black (male centered) existentialism (most notably Ralph Ellison, the subject of the preceding chapter). By forwarding a different ontological condition of the human being, Toni Morrison offers a different ontic designation for blackness; beyond oppression, blackness finds itself predicated upon and within community.

Toni Morrison, Community, and the Actualization of the Subject

I am not experimental, I am simply trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books—something that defines what makes a book “black”. And that has nothing to do with whether the people in the books are black or not. The open-ended quality that is sometimes a problematic in the novel form reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the black community. The stories are constantly being retold, constantly being imagined within a framework, And I hook into this like a *life-support system*, which for me is the thing out of which I come.

¹⁶³ Moreover, in this chapter, I will be building on and developing the distinction made in the first chapter between consciousness, self-consciousness, individuality, and subjectivity.

¹⁶⁴ We may recall from the first chapter that ‘spirit’ herein is understood as the self-conscious appropriation of soul. That is, spirit is the self-conscious appropriation of world into *my* world.

Toni Morrison, Interview

The discussion of black literature in critical terms is unfailingly sociology and almost never art criticism.

Toni Morrison, 1984 Interview

Morrison's entrance into existentialism and the current discussion of *the* individual and subjectivity is not through the traditional routes of 'philosophy' in the formal sense of the word—that is, through formal debate or critical conversation with the discipline or history of the discipline. Rather, her entrance is through literature, broadly, but, what is more, her engagement is through language: a language that bears witness. The significance of her emergence into existentialism and the discussion of subjectivity through literature/language is that she does not carry with (and within) her work and thought the "baggage" of the philosophy and the history of philosophical enterprise.¹⁶⁵ What she offers to existentialism and the discussion of subjectivity is a metaphysical analysis of the *inner-relation* and necessity of *the* individual and community. Her influences, thus, are as chosen as they are inherited—ranging from non-Western origins (African folklore and mythology) to Western, non-philosophical origins (African American literature, American literature and epic mythology)—and give her vision a different direction hereto understood as 'given'.

Morrison's work has not really taken hold within the black existential scholarship, with one notable exception, her earliest novel, *Bluest Eye*. While this novel has, and will

¹⁶⁵ For example, in the realm of existentialism and subjectivity, she does not find herself at odds with the Cartesian shadow. As such, she is freed from the onto-epistemic paradox [of outside versus inside] noted in the first chapter.

likely continue to be read as expressing a thematic in Morrison's writings overall—the issue of belonging and self-acceptance—these are not our concern here. Rather, what we wish to investigate, here, is what she troubles along the way as she comes to these thematic assertions. That is, Morrison not only offers new language possibilities in her choice to let “the girls themselves” tell their story, that is, to bear witness of themselves and their experiences; but, and, what is more, her narratives, generally, understand the nature of subjectivity and community in order to investigate the *inner-relation* between the two. In her investigation, we come to witness the expansion of this *inner-relation* to include not just relations between ‘subjects’ (in the traditional sense of persons), but also to include the ties between the past and present, between people and spirits, between human consciousness and nature, between thought and deed, between the names of things and things themselves. What we witness is that her “community” does not solely exist between human beings, but in *all* of these sets of relations; it is indeed a metaphysical community.

When we analyze these other, more obscure connections, we discover that what is of concern is that subjectivity is the *actualization* of representation in what is presented as less obvious, subtler, and, at times invisible to, yet recorded by our senses, and imprinted in our intuition. The question, which remains of Morrison, is, “what would it mean—that is, how would it appear—to think of human connection in the way we think of these other, subtler connections?” If we do discover this subtle connection, what has it to do with blackness and black people; and, what can it *add* to the existential analysis and our existentiell understanding?

What is of paramount interest in this chapter is neither the political nor sociological elements of Morrison's work, nor the purely aesthetic or metaphysical components, but

how and by *what process* they converge, speak to one another, tell, bear witness, and, most importantly, *why they are mutually coextensive* for Morrison's work as a whole. This question—in addition to the others—pushes the limits of existential philosophy generally, and black existentialism specifically, to account for the subtler [mystical] aspects of everyday life, and to account for them *with* and *within* everyday life—how can we tell the concrete narrative of everyday life with and in the subtle details of the inner connections; and, how can we speak of these details in the revelation of the everyday? This is the challenge Morrison takes up, but also the challenge that she offers her readers, to challenge the prevailing notions of art and politics, but also the meaning and being of blackness and black existence/living.

* * * *

What differentiates Toni Morrison from noted black existential writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison is her approach and understanding of subjectivity and its *inner-relation* to community. Morrison, like Ellison, is not only concerned with self-consciousness, but also the conditions and processes under which self-consciousness occurs. For each, this process is ontological—that is, dealing with the basic structures of *all* human experience—revealed phenomenologically. Yet, for Morrison, this process is not that of isolation and alienation of *the* individual coming to consciousness self-awareness. Rather, Morrison is concerned with what is beyond self-consciousness; Morrison's concern is the *actualization* of the subject.¹⁶⁶ What is significant about Morrison's work for black

¹⁶⁶ Self-consciousness is the highest form *the* individual can take—it is the self-conscious awareness of the self (in tandem with other selves) as the foundation of the world.

existential philosophy is that, given her different starting point of community rather than the isolated individual, Morrison is able to achieve an understanding *beyond* self-consciousness; she is able to reveal subjectivity.

Morrison imbues the ‘racial realism’ of black literature with the metaphysical, with what “defines what makes a book ‘black’” providing its “*life-support system*”; rather than a given ‘racial’ impulse to contradict whiteness or exhort white people, to explain *us* to *them*, “to white people”, Morrison situates her own work in the “stories [that] are constantly being retold, constantly being imagined within a framework” of community, understood as the *life* of the individual. For Morrison, story telling is bearing witness to one’s history, but also individualized self-understanding through the universal group collective—the individuated group. What makes her work ‘black’ is her understanding of community, which is cast in the *form* or *representation* of the individual. The individuated group at once captures the essential meaning of a ‘race’, but also the superstructure that provides “the enabling conditions,”¹⁶⁷ making Morrison’s work at once art (in story telling), but also political engagement.

Morrison’s engagement with and in superstructure including that of history, seeks to understand superstructure and, thus, ‘race’ and ‘race writing’ within her own ‘black’ writing. Morrison understands her writing and ‘race’ in terms of the metaphysical *as* mystical—that is, through subtle connections between superstructure or human social

Nevertheless, this self remains ontologically isolated from other selves, only brought together phenomenologically, to create the meaning of an external reality. Subjectivity, though, emerges from the collective action of *community*—not as the collection of isolated individuals—but the essential form out of which the individual emerges. While *the* individual can only be ontological, community is metaphysical. And, as metaphysics is deeper than ontology, in both the living practice as well as philosophically, the subject is a deepened individual.

¹⁶⁷ *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison*. Marc C. Conner, ed., xviii.

reality and the spiritual world, man, and nature. Morrison's voice should be understood in terms of this metaphysical shift. As such Morrison's work seems to avoid the debate around art/politics and 'race' in that she offers a different understanding of 'race' and blackness; she offers a political message—or the metaphysics of politics—in her understanding of the blackness of black people through her 'telling' of black history and culture in the aesthetic of her writing. The metaphysical *as* mystical relieves the anxiety of the two (art and politics) by placing the political *in* the aesthetic, not by the measure of technique (as with Ralph Ellison), but by revelation, that is, by *poesis*, by means of dis-covery. In her thinking through traditional problems of black unity and the black aesthetic, Morrison reaches for the political within the aesthetic of the metaphysics of the mystical. Her thinking, thus, is a double of itself; it signifies on itself, as the present signifies the past, the living on the dead, and what we get in this double is also a double bind, one that is received from within the coherency in the actualization of the subject from within the framework of community rather than simply the inwardization of the external into self-consciousness as in traditional 'existential philosophy'.

Morrison's approach to existentialism through a language that bears witness, what has and will continue to be referred to as *poesis* (or dis-covery), reveal not only the evocative power and necessity of language for and to being, but also the intrinsic meaning of what it means to *be*—it reveals both its principle and the inner movement of the principle from consciousness through self-consciousness to subjectivity.

* * * *

Our discussion of existentialism has, thus far, been centered the traditional Western notion of self-consciousness, but not yet on subjectivity. Self-consciousness is the achievement of

consciousness to found itself *on* its construction of the external material world, and the external material world *in* the signification of meaning of individual self-conscious construction. Subjectivity, though, is the *accomplishment* of self-consciousness in its realization of the foundation of the external world and itself *within* the metaphysical principle of community. The transition from self-consciousness to subjectivity is a metaphysical shift from soul to spirit, from constructionism to spirit: self-consciousness takes into itself the spiritual element of community as the foundation of itself. Traditional 'existential philosophy' has, in large, produced only self-consciousness, but not yet subjectivity; its failure to come to terms with the Other as the foundation itself, not conceptually, but *spiritually*. Morrison, in her movement towards the subtle, mystical foundations of community delivers subjectivity.

In the novels discussed here Morrison delivers two different ways of understanding community and subjectivity. In *Bluest Eye* community is understood in terms of "love". The novel centers Pecola Breedlove, a black little girl, who discovers that community can destroy as well as sustain. But, what is more, *Bluest Eye* reveals the necessity of community for subjectivity, through its depiction of Pecola's *destruktion*.¹⁶⁸ In *Song of Solomon* community is understood as the relation of the present to the past (and vice versa), the relationship between not only the human world and nature, but also the spirit world through the usage of African, Western, and African American mythology. And, while these novels offer different accounts, what they share in common joins Morrison's conception of community as metaphysical theory.

¹⁶⁸ Reference footnote 46.

Bluest Eye

In the first lines of the opening chapter, Morrison foreshadows the metaphysical structure of the book. She writes,

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did... For years I thought my sister was right; it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding... What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth.

There is nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.¹⁶⁹

In these lines, right up front, Morrison links the relationship between Pecola and her father to that of the *earth* and its yielding (of marigolds). Right up front Morrison establishes a metaphysical condition as the underlying condition of each relationship, *one* in the *other*.¹⁷⁰ What is more, Morrison is telling us, up front, that analyzing Pecola and her situation existentially—that is, analyzing her situation *in terms of concepts* such as, “hope, fear, lust, love or grief”; or, the more traditional existential cognates of anguish, abandonment, and despair—is not her primary concern; rather, what is of concern, what remains, is the

¹⁶⁹ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 7-8; emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁰ Morrison notes this in the *Afterward* where she suggestively writes:

What, then, is the Big Secret about to be shared? The thing we (reader and I) are ‘in’ on? A botanical aberration. Pollution, perhaps. A skip, perhaps, in the natural order of things: a September, an autumn, a fall without marigolds. When? In 1941, and since that is a momentous year (the beginning of World War II for the United States), the ‘fall’ of 1941, just before the declaration of war, has a ‘closet’ innuendo... something grim is about to be *divulged*. The next sentence will make it clear that the sayer, the one who *knows*, is a child speaking... (213)

Taken together with the emergence of existentialism as a post-War phenomena, Morrison is offering something more than what is here. She is offering a different response to the War that is not perfervid individualism, nor the psychological discussion of “why”, but a discussion of “how”.

metaphysical connection between “Pecola and the unyielding earth.” What we are left with is not the psychoanalytic explanation of *why* any of “this life” occurs—the psyche or ego individuated making sense of the world—but the voice of a child engaged with existence *connecting* the seemingly disparate elements *of* life—a little girl and the hard black dirt. “*We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola’s father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair.*”¹⁷¹ What is left when the traditional ‘existential philosophy’ has failed is the metaphysical question: not why, but how—how does *anything*, *anyone* come to be who or what they are?

Initially, what appears to be at issue in the novel is love, or the lack of love. Pecola’s relationship with her own family and with the community at large appears to be predicated upon the absence of love. Valerie Smith goes as far as to say that the puzzle *Bluest Eye* presents is centered around the discussion of what the lack of love from the community represents for both Pecola and the community itself.¹⁷² Pecola’s self-loathing, her wanting blue eyes, is but a symptom of the greater community problem of self-loathing, or what can be thought of as the lacking of self-love, radiated outward, expressed as indifference and cruelty. And, at the end of the novel, it is this outward aggression, indifference, and cruelty that cost Pecola her identity, her sense of self, her very sanity: “She...stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us...”¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 8; emphasis in original.

¹⁷² See Valerie Smith, “*Song of Solomon: Continuities of Community*”, in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, page 274. Some have gone as far as to note that even the name of the focus family of the novel, Breedlove, prefigures the significance of love by posing a question in the name itself: can one breed love, and if so, how?

¹⁷³ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 206.

Morrison, though, offers a complicated vision of love, one that works to deconstruct the concept, to differentiate traditional, common ideas. Morrison moves from the idea of affect and desire, to her idea of love as the foundation for *all* existence, human and non-human out of which our normative ideas emerge. What has occurred, then, in *Bluest Eye* is not 'love' in the traditional sense, but the metaphysical content of what we call 'love' actualized and revealed in the mystical relation between the community and Pecola, the ground and the marigolds. The relationship between Pecola and the community reveals the metaphysical postulate inherent in life itself: what can sustain can also destroy. Beyond the discussion of community and its affect on the individual is this more basic metaphysical truth about life itself.

Morrison informs of her vision of love by shattering our traditional ideas, of the "love of something" in an abstract, what she refers to as an "adjustment without improvement,"¹⁷⁴ a desire without real inwardization. Love, as an abstract entity, allows the individual to externalize the world as an object of its desire, an object that attains its worth and identity through the individual's desire for/of it. The individual has not yet realized that it finds its own self in the object it desires, reversing the object/subject distinction, making the object the foundation of self's own identity. The object *as* desire, *as* externalized, though, remains in the individual's control, and keeps the individual from inwardizing the object as what has *drawn* the self close, as what it has constituted self in the self's own desiring. And, what is more, as suggested in the opening pages of our work as a whole, recognition of the reversibility, or dialectic of subject and object into the fusion of the two as co-constituting, is also the recognition of vulnerability at the foundation of the

¹⁷⁴ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 23.

dialectic in the “object’s” capacity to refuse to be desired, to refuse the co-constitution, to refuse to give itself over *as* object, to refuse the gesture of the individual to be drawn *into* the individual; the refusal of the object to be incorporated places the individual without an object to found itself on the externalization of—and troubles the individual. This dialectic is dangerous for the individual and the reason for the refusal of reversibility and for the pure externalization. Morrison notes, again early on in *Bluest Eye*, that, “*It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding.*”

By deconstructing our myths about the nature of “love” or varied ways in which this sentiment is both determined and distributed, what Morrison offers is an ontological shift in our thinking. Reversibility, as the foundation of subjectivity, offers a different view of love. Morrison leaves open what would have become of Pecola had the community been equally charged with what she demanded *of* them, to *do* and to *become* in light of *her* existence. Concepts, though, become real only when they are actualized in living, not in the abstraction of thought and the cycle of its movement over objects *of* the intellect. For Morrison the concept of love can be actualized only within the living human community of persons.

“Love” in the traditional sense, then, is not only the pure externalization of the world, as Other, but also the pure externalization of the self *as* [the meaning of the] world. Through the sobriety of actuality, *in* events that cannot be explained, only witnessed, Morrison transforms this abstract concept into a living reality, even if only in the negative. In Pauline’s relationship to Cholly, we witness such negative externalization. Morrison writes,

Mrs. Breedlove considered herself an upright Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish. (Cholly was beyond redemption, of

course, *and redemption was hardly the point*—Mrs. Breedlove was not interested in Christ the Redeemer, but rather Christ the Judge...She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus.¹⁷⁵

And, of Cholly she wrote,

No less did Cholly need her. She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his *inarticulate* fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact.¹⁷⁶

What is revealed in the above passages, beyond a critique of religion or its failure, is the foundation of their relationship itself. It was religion, or more specifically Jesus, that allowed Pauline to locate her identity in the pure externalization of evil, of sin *in* Cholly. What was to *be* punished, more than any of one of his actions, was his "character". Beyond what Cholly did, what act(s) he committed, it was *who* he was and *whom* she was that called for such punishment. Earlier in the same chapter Morrison makes a similar claim *about* the "ugliness" of the Breedloves. She writes, "You looked at them and wondered *why* they were so ugly; you *looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized it came from conviction, their conviction.*"¹⁷⁷ "Love", ironically, in the case of Pauline and Cholly—even if it could be said that they did not "love" one another at this moment, they certainly "loved" one another when they first met¹⁷⁸—emerged, reciprocally, from need; what each *needed* from the other; that is, emerged from lack. What their relationship reveals, then, is not "love" in the romantic sense, but the condition of the constitution of the self, and the

¹⁷⁵ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 42.

¹⁷⁶ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 42.

¹⁷⁷ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 39.

¹⁷⁸ One can see even in reflection of their first encounter. Morrison writes, "Pauline and Cholly loved each other. He seemed to relish in her company and even enjoyed her country ways and lack of knowledge about city things...And he did touch her, firmly, but gently, just as she had dreamed...She was secure and grateful..." (115-6)

problems that occur in the pure externalization of the world as the foundation of the self. This, in existential terms, is the establishment of consciousness, not yet self-conscious: what constitutes the self is what the self is not. Morrison notes this in her conclusion where she writes of the community's relationship to Pecola,

All of us [in the community] felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous...Oh, and some of us 'loved' her...Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly...¹⁷⁹

This "we" is not the self-actualized "we" of community, but the "we" of consciousness attempting to locate itself outside of itself, in the externalization of the world. It is not yet the "we" of the actualized self *in* community.

One needs to read all of *Bluest Eye* to understand why she would write in the conclusion that people love as they are, as they live—one can, in the case of *Bluest Eye*, understand "love" only by understanding the history of its actualization in the living community of the novel itself. We witness in the novel how such a concept can develop from lesser forms, and the necessity of those forms for understanding its [the concept's] present actualization. Cholly's action, especially his "rape" of his daughter was, in a backward way, the actualization of his dread of his own masculinity and blackness, and his desire for his own wife, at the same young age. Cholly's action, thus, was not a single event, but the living actuality of his repeated failures throughout his life.¹⁸⁰ The history of Cholly is the history of his failure, but not in a deterministic way, but the progressive,

¹⁷⁹ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 205-6.

¹⁸⁰ Toni Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, 159-163 which we prefigured earlier, 115.

phenomenological unfolding of its internal structure, followed to its end.

* * * *

Morrison concretizes her conceptual critique of the pure externality in the development of the contrast between the outside and the inside. This discussion is critical for understanding her idea of community, for it establishes, concretely, the link between community and life, and being outside and death. This connection, though, is not simply metaphorical, but the concrete expression of an internal principle. The outside is developed as the *wilderness*, in the sense of *hinterland*—that which is *beyond* society and socialization. Locating death in the beyond of socialization, Morrison is offering her existential insight of the constitution of the self. While traditional ‘existential philosophy’ argues that not only can *the* individual live outside of society, it is in the outside that *the* individual develops his ideas of himself, the world, and those things that he will later value. By linking *life* to community, Morrison establishes an internal, logical need—the community *becomes the life* of the individual (and vice versa). In the opening epigraph of this section she notes that her own writing “hooks into” community—of course her expanded notion, including ancestors and spirits—which she claims as her “life support system.” Morrison not only offers a different existential starting point and a different understanding of the constitution of the self; she also offers a different idea of *life* itself, and what constitutes life. Traditionally, “life” is thought to be that “which animates a body.”¹⁸¹ Morrison, though, locates life in what is considered life-less in traditional ‘existential philosophy’—the non-rational connection

¹⁸¹ Aristotle’s notion of life still carries much weight.

between things, between people, within language. To be left outside of this is to be left outside of the connections that are life.

What is inside, then, is within “the fold” or the loop of existence: what contributes to and finds itself enmeshed in the connections. Morrison elaborates,

Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the *hem of life*, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into *the major folds* of the garment.¹⁸²

Here, Morrison’s language is evocative: life exists on the *hem*, within the *folds*. Life is what exists between *things*, not in each individual thing. It is a set of relations without which nothing individuated makes any sense. Without these connections existence is but an abstraction of thought.

This relation of the outside to the inside, of life to death is repeated in the relation of externalization to inwardization: the life of spirit is what is inwardized within the conscious appropriation of what is outside of self, such that there is no longer an “outside” and a “self”, but a inside that is outside and an outside that is inside. The life of the spirit or the self is constituted in this inside-outside dialectic, and is founded within the community. To be outside, then, is to be without this dialectic, to be stuck on either the side of “self” or the side of “outside”. We, thus, again run into the dual problem of *pure inwardization* and *pure externalization*. For Morrison, love can be misunderstood as both: as a *pure externalization*, where one locates one’s truth outside of one’s own self, within the other—within the desired object; the object *becomes* love itself, and not what is loved—or one can understand love as the *pure inwardization* of the self, where the world outside only comes to have meaning depending on one’s own desires—the desired object is only desirable

¹⁸² Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 17.

because one has deemed it worthy; what one really desires is not the object, but one's own self desiring; the desire and the self is constituted by negating any truth or dialectic with the outside. What Morrison is calling for is a dialectic between individual desire and what lies outside of this desire. Morrison's dialectic is a chiasm between inside and outside, folding and unfolding as the life of the individual within the community.

Bluest Eye demonstrates the necessity of community, and how far consciousness will extend to constitute community for itself. For, without community, one suffers the metaphysical condition of "being outside", where subjectivity cannot be actualized, and one is stuck in the death of either pure inwardization or pure externalization. Morrison writes,

There is a difference between being put *out*¹⁸³ and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition...the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter—like the difference between the *concept* of death and being, in fact, dead.¹⁸⁴

What Morrison works to uncover is not the essential quality in things or even people *in themselves*, but as they have *become*, as we, in giving our significance and internalizing them, have *made* them. Phenomenologically, the link of what is to what we have made, the inside with the outside, can be witnessed in her discussion of the Breedlove's home and the things in it. She writes, "There is nothing more to say about the furnishings. They were anything but describable...The furniture had aged without ever having become *familiar*. People had owned it, but never *known* it"¹⁸⁵; and in Claudia's obsessive dismembering of her white dolls, to "see of what it was made, to *discover* the dearness, to *find* the beauty, the

¹⁸³ One might note here being put *out* is akin to being cast out, while having no people is akin to being outdoors; there is nothing to moor to outdoors.

¹⁸⁴ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 18; emphasis added.

¹⁸⁵ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 35-6.

desirability that had escaped me...eluded me: the secret of the *magic* they weaved on others.”¹⁸⁶ It is us that constitutes the meaning of these things, of ourselves, of our own reality. Existentially, what this amounts to is not solely the isolated self as the constructor of reality, or the world as constituted by a group of individuals, but in the bonds that occur when collectively constituted individuals come to know themselves and their world through their collective efforts to name their reality. In this, Morrison is centering us, the “we” of the community—that constitutes and is constituted by the I of ourselves, individually—as the maker of meaning and the constitution of the world. Pecola has not discovered, as “we” the audience has, that she has been placed outside, thrown out of a community that cannot constitute itself without first constituting her as outside. All Pecola knows is that she has the wrong color eyes—this, for her, is the source of the community’s actions.¹⁸⁷ This is the failure of the community in *Bluest Eye*, they are not the actualization of subjectivity, but the pure externalization/inwardization of everything deemed *not* it. It has located in Pecola the abstraction of itself. But, to understand Morrison’s point to be a critique of the black community only is to miss the larger point of connecting Pecola and the community with the earth and the marigolds; of understanding *how* things could have gone so bad that a little girl would be raped by her own father, and left outside by the community.

¹⁸⁶ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 20-22.

¹⁸⁷ Morrison writes, “It occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We musn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.’” (46)

Song of Solomon

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* explores the relationship between the individual and the community and what happens to an individual who situates him or herself outside *of* and in contradistinction *to* community—this novel, according to David Z. Wehner, can be read as Morrison's critique of individualism¹⁸⁸; but, what is more, this novel can also be seen as a critique of traditional 'existential philosophy'. The novel's main characters, Milkman and Macon Dead, represent the perils of the Western myth of the self-made man for constructing and constituting self-identity. Morrison juxtaposes this representation of individualism with the character of Pilate, in whom the mystical roots of the community in the past-present-spirit world are represented. Both Milkman and Macon seek their identity by eschewing the past and its relation to the present, but along the way, in their failure, they reveal that one cannot overcome one's past in the making of the present. The metaphysical relationship between individual and community, then, goes beyond the individual and the community of persons to include *real* language, spirits, animals, and all of nature. What they reveal is what Morrison will term 'living-life'.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* gives clearer indication of community as what constitutes the subject, and community as phenomenological revelation in the mystical. For Morrison, community is the living element of the individual, the actualization of the living individual. Morrison refers to the spiritual foundation of existence in the relation between the individual and community, its living-life, to denote what sustains itself as it carries

¹⁸⁸ See David Z. Wehner's chapter, "To Live this Life Intensely and Well: The Re-birth of Milkman Dead in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" in *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*.

forward¹⁸⁹—life is a sustaining force, but, what is more, a force that carries itself forward through reproducing itself, by carrying carrying-itself-forward. As its living-element, life not only sustains community, but *creates* it. The individual is the living actualization of the community as the community is the living actualization of the principle of life, reproducing itself as the community’s culture. Morrison’s commitment to retelling stories, of pulling the past forward in her narratives, are all commitments to reproduction, to her cultural values through which she ultimately sustains herself.

An engagement with living-life involves a direct engagement with life generally; an engagement that throws off the pretense of sociality, and engages what exists below sociality—an ontological engagement with and in being—as its foundation, its *ur* reality, its *ur* life, as in *surreality* or *surrealism*.¹⁹⁰ This reality, for Morrison, not only offers the foundation for our social reality, but it is also the living element of it. As its living element, consciousness is obliged to understand it to understand itself. Nevertheless, beyond the dialectic of consciousness and what is outside of consciousness is *surreality*. *What Morrison means by living-life is what underlies reality itself*. Below the dialectic is the *surreal*. The dialectic is the foundation of self-consciousness; *surreality* is the foundation of community; and, community is the foundation of subjectivity. What is *surreal*—what is magical, in the folklore, in *real* language, in the *real* names of things, in the process of subjectivity—is what

¹⁸⁹ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 285.

¹⁹⁰ The surreal understood as “having disorienting, hallucinatory quality of a dream”. The *surreal* in this case is fantastical and can only be represented in dreams, in magic, what exists beyond common experience and common language. As such, here, the surreal is not only beyond the real, but, for Morrison, the foundation of the real. The *ur* signifies the prefix of what is proto or primitive, forming the *sur*real as the primitive or proto experience that grounds our common, everyday experiences.. I will be using the term *surreal* (in different iterations) to denote this idea of foundation.

sustains as it envelops, “contain[s] all things, and fill[s] them indeed by containing them.”¹⁹¹

Without *surreality*, life is without form, and empty.

* * * *

We are led to believe, early on, that there is something special about Milkman, something that we are to learn about him throughout the novel. Morrison writes early on that

When the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to women who did not hate his mother. The ones who did, who accepted her invitations to tea and envied the doctor’s big dark house of twelve rooms and the green sedan, called him ‘peculiar.’ The others, who knew that the house was more of prison than palace, and that the Dodge sedan was for Sunday drives only, felt sorry for Ruth Foster and her dry daughters, and called her son ‘deep.’ Even mysterious.

“Did he come with a caul?”

“You should have dried it and made him some tea from it to drink. If you don’t he’ll see ghosts.”

“You believe that?”

“I don’t, but that’s what the old people say.”

“Well, he’s a deep one anyway. Look at his eyes.”¹⁹²

From what we are introduced to here, Morrison seems to suggest that there is something deep *about*, inherent *in* Milkman; that he, and not his condition and the situation he is to undertake, is what is mysterious. Nevertheless, Morrison announces the central role of flight and the imagination that will be carried throughout the novel.

In this initial scene Morrison alludes to all of the characters, revealing, not so much foreshadowing, the folds of and the unfolding of the novel as a whole: the end is in the beginning; everything we need to know we already know (we just have not learned to

¹⁹¹ Augustine. *Confessions*, III, 4.

¹⁹² Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 10.

recognize its elements) because, in this novel, everything exists at once, albeit in a not-yet-developed form: Ruth holding and dropping velvet rose-petals, and her young daughters, then scrabbling to secure for her mistake, the “sudden burst into song” and the presence of *Sugarman*, a cat-eyed boy charged with ‘saving’ life, and the mysterious boy.¹⁹³

In the novel’s folding and unfolding, Morrison reveals something more about the inner structure of the novel. At the center of the novel is desire. But, for Morrison, this desire is more than the individual desire; it is a desire that extends beyond the self, it is a desire for life, a desire for being, for meaning. Yet, folded up within these multiple desires Morrison ties the problem of traditional ‘existential philosophy’: the problem of the relation of the inside and outside, the self and its necessary Other. Morrison locates in Macon Dead’s desire to own things; in Milkman’s desire for flight; in Ruth’s desire for affection and intimacy (from a warm body),¹⁹⁴ her critique of the failings of individualism. As noted earlier, in the pure externalization and inwardization of the world (as the foundation of the self), things and others become stationary settings to be interpreted, but not negotiated; and, when things or people refuse such incorporation, there is a crumble in consciousness. We the readers can hear in the novel the verse after which it takes its name. Song of Solomon, chapter 6, verse 3 reads: *I am my beloved’s and his desire is for me.*¹⁹⁵ Bible commentators Johann Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch interpret this verse as follows:

When a wife is the object of such passion, it is possible that, on the one side, she feels herself very fortunate therein; and, on the other side, if the love, in its high commendations, becomes excessive, oppressed, and when she perceives that in her love-relation she is the observed of many eyes, troubled.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 5-10.

¹⁹⁴ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 64, 79.

¹⁹⁵ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 63.

¹⁹⁶ Keil and Delitzsch Bible Commentary: <http://bible.cc/songs/7-10.htm>

In both a view from the inside and the outside, from within and without, Morrison instructs us, alongside the Biblical verse and interpretation:

You think that he *belongs* to you because you *want* to belong to him...It's a bad word, 'belong.' Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn't be like that. Did you ever see the way the clouds love the mountain? They circle all around it; sometimes you can't even see the mountain for the clouds. But you know what? You go up top and what do you see? His head. The clouds never cover the head. His head pokes through, because the clouds *let* him; they don't wrap him up. They let him keep his head up high, free, with nothing to hide him or bind him...Hear me?¹⁹⁷

From the one who both desires to own the other—because in owning they know *who* they are (I am the one *who* desires)—and the desire to *be* owned by the other—in such an owning they know *what* they are (I am that which is desired)—there is a sense of belonging to the world as constituted by what is outside the self. But, from without there is a sense of being trapped by the other. Ontologically, the totality of this desire to belong, to incorporate the inside into what you need it to be binds the other its definition. Hagar and Milkman represent these different perspectives, which Morrison investigates along with that of Macon and Ruth.

Morrison notes of Milkman and Guitar's conversation about being trapped by another's desire, love, and need of belonging.

Everybody wants something from me, you know what I mean? Something they think I got. I don't know what it is—I mean what it is they really want.”
Guitar stretched his legs. “They want you life, man”
“My life?”
“What else?”
“No. Hagar wants my life. My family...they want—“
“*I don't mean that way. I don't mean they want your dead life; they want your living life.*”
“You're loosing me,” said Milkman.
“Look. It's the condition our condition is in. *Everybody wants the life of a black man.*”

¹⁹⁷ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 306.

Everybody. White men want us dead or quiet—*which is the same thing as dead*. White women, same thing. They want us, you know, ‘universal,’ human, no ‘race consciousness.’ Tame, except in bed. They like a little racial loincloth in the bed. But outside the bed they want us to be individuals. You tell them, ‘But they lynched my papa,’ and they say, ‘Yeah, but you’re better than the lynchers are, so forget it.’ And black women, they want your whole self. *Love, they call it, and understanding*. ‘Why don’t you *understand* me? What they mean is, *Don’t love anything on earth except for me*. They say, ‘Be responsible,’ but what they mean is, Don’t go anywhere I ain’t...You blow your lungs out on the horn and they want what breath you got left to hear about how you love them. They want your full attention. Take a risk and they say you not for real. That you don’t love them. They won’t even let you let you risk your own life, man, your *own* life—*unless it’s over them*. You can’t die unless it’s about them. What good is a man’s life if he can’t even choose what to die for?”

“Nobody can choose what to die for.”

“Yes you can, and if you can’t, you can well try to.”

“You sound bitter. If that’s what you feel, why are you playing your numbers game? Keeping the racial ratio the same and all? Every time I ask you what you doing it for, you talk about love. Loving Negroes. Now you say—“

“it is about love. What else but love? *Can’t I love what I criticize?*”¹⁹⁸

Morrison, here, places together multiple senses “love” with contrasting notions of life. In her story telling she informs us that there is an inherent continuity between the senses of love and the senses of life. Living life is linked to the love that Guitar asserts of himself; the kind of love that is self-assertive of the essential nature of life itself and is constituted in its capacity to sustain and reproduce itself. Living life like this love is the living essence actualized in the individual. While dead life is linked to the “love” that is possessive, that says, “*Don’t love anything on earth except for me*”. Dead life like possessive love is the conceptualization or abstraction of life generally understood in thought alone and not in its living actuality [which can be understood, as noted earlier, in either pure externalization or pure inwardization].

In addition to the multiple understandings of life, Morrison operates *Song of Solomon* on multiple levels, interweaving levels of ‘reality’ with levels ‘existence’. In

¹⁹⁸ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 222-3.

addition to the bringing together of multiple notions of love and life, Morrison brings together folklore, ancestors, and language. Similar to the connection between love and life, folklore, ancestor and language are brought together around issues of externalization, inwardization, community and subjectivity. Significant to the novel, naming as an aspect of language, points beyond itself—past the mere collection of letters taken together to form words—to the essential feature of what is being named.

Song of Solomon can be understood to be a text centered on naming and power of naming. In Macon's son, Milkman, Morrison locates the idea of love, life, and naming. Tellingly, how Milkman's name came about signified Ruth's obsessive love of him, her wanting, that is, needing him such her desire itself became her object of attraction, Milkman simply being the way her desire for expressed. In Milkman's name Morrison foreshadows the significance of name and the *act* of naming—the connection between language, that which is named and who *names*, and the inner essence of a thing, person, or state or condition.

Morrison notes the power of naming early in Macon's own regret over the origin of his name.

Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was *real*. A name *given to him* at birth with love and *seriousness*. A name that was not a joke, nor a *disguise*, nor a *brand name*. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane stalked legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name. His own parents, in some mood of *perverseness* or *resignation*, had agreed to abide by a naming done *to them* by somebody who couldn't have cared less. Agreed to take and *pass on to all their issue with this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness...*¹⁹⁹

Morrison seems to be suggesting *within* the power of naming lies the fate of the thing,

¹⁹⁹ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 17-18; emphasis added.

person, or situation/condition. In Macon's own last name Morrison again references the distinction between living life and dead life. Macon's last name suggests more than simply himself, but of his son and his wife, Milkman (Macon, Jr.) and Ruth Dead; and to the things they owned: their house—A Dead house, “more of a prison than a palace”; their car a Dead Packard, “the Packard had no real *lived life* at all. So they called it Macon Dead's hearse.”²⁰⁰

Macon's dead life can be attributed to his relationship to things, to others, to states of being or conditions that were the pure externalization of them, as ‘that’ which is to be bought and, thus, controlled.

“Boy, you got *better* things to do with your time. Besides, it's time you started *learning* how to work...and learn what's *real*. Pilate can't teach you a thing you can *use* in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: *Own things*. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll *own yourself and other people too*. Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you *how*.”²⁰¹

Macon's advice to his son reveals this view, one that Guitar labeled as “white” further distinguishes Morrison's own voice from that of the traditional Western episteme generally, and Western existentialism specifically.

Ironically, Macon's proclamation of owning things and others, founded on the belief that he was accepted by Ruth's (educated and wealthy) father *because* he owned things, turned out to be false.

It was because of those keys that he could dare to walk over to that part of No Doctor Street...and approach the most important Negro in the city. To lift the lion's paw knocker, to entertain thoughts of marrying the doctor's daughter was possible because each key *represented* a house which he owned at the time. Without those keys he would have floated away at the doctor's first word...Instead he was able to say that he had been introduced to his daughter...and would appreciate having the doctor's permission to keep her company now and then. That his intentions were

²⁰⁰ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 33; emphasis added.

²⁰¹ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 55; emphasis added.

honorable and that he himself was *certainly worthy* of the doctor's consideration as a gentleman friend for Miss Foster since, at twenty-five, he was already a colored man of property...Macon Dead still believed the magic he had lain in the two keys.²⁰²

Macon never discovered that his keys, which signified, *for* him, 'ownership' of property, in fact, had no magic, no influence, no power in either opening doors or allowing him to walk through them. Macon would never know that Ruth's father was more *grateful* than selective in his daughter choice of suitor, for his daughter's affections and 'love' had become overwhelming and unsettling²⁰³; Macon, blinded by his 'power' of ownership would never know of Ruth's love for her father was greater than his idea of power, and that, for both of them, their externalization of love would keep them apart, at a distance, and slowly in the spiral of death, or dead life. Morrison keeps Macon in the dark, so to speak, about the real source of power of Ruth's father, his desire to escape dead life. But "we" readers are in on this revelation. Macon's failure to actualize his own self-worth and his own happiness came from his idea of individuality as the externalization of the world. In a telling scene, Macon stoops near the window of sister's house.

Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and he relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight...As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead *could not leave*. He liked looking at them freely in this way.²⁰⁴

In this scene, Macon acknowledges but refuses to accept that his approach to life as ownership was empty and formless; instead, he locates, for the moment, his memory, *in* the

²⁰² Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 22-23; emphasis added.

²⁰³ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 23.

²⁰⁴ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 30; emphasis added.

house, *in* the music and he cannot move (for then they would both disappear).²⁰⁵ One can almost hear Morrison speaking through Macon: *Spirit has not only lost its essential life; it is also conscious of this loss, and of the finitude that is its own content.*

Morrison links naming to time, the past to the present, but also to levels of reality and levels of existence. Through naming, Morrison suggests time and the travel from one reality and existence to another. Names suggest the essence of persons and things, but also temporality, of the past, present, and future. Names extend the past in the present, and suggest the possibility of a future to come. Morrison foreshadows the relation of temporality and time travel in Milkman: his discomfort with riding backwards in the car—“It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been”²⁰⁶—to his emerging habit—“concentration on things behind him”.²⁰⁷ Morrison reveals time-traveling along the naming-essence practice. Such time traveling, from the past to the present, and into the future and its arrival, or its hesitation to *come*, to emerge was linked to our uncovering and understanding our own name and the names of things.

If one knew the *real* names of things, one could travel back to their emergence, and could understand the present as the continuation of them. One could understand the realm of magic, of spirits, of ancestors, of folklore, as more than merely language: one could understand proto-language. Milkman, in his journey to find his roots, discovers this proto-language

²⁰⁵ It is telling that Macon does not refer to either the memory or the music as *his*, but just *as* memory, *as* music. But, they belonged to someone, as all things *had* to belong to someone—according to his own logic of existence. But, they were not *his*, they were outside of him; and, he simply witnessed them. And, “liked looking at them freely...”

²⁰⁶ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 32.

²⁰⁷ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 35.

His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had *learned to use*. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch—and some other sense that he knew he did not have: an ability to *separate out*, of all things there were to sense, the one that *life itself* might depend on...Little by little it fell into place. The dogs, the men—none was *just* hollering, *just* signaling location or pace. The men and the dogs were *talking to each other*. In distinctive voices they were saying distinctive, complicated things....It was all language. An extension of the click people in their cheeks back home...No, it was not language; it was *what was there before language*. *Before* things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did not talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse; when a tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each understood the other; when a man ran *with* wolves, not from or after them.²⁰⁸

In Milkman's realization of the inner nature of what connects our world to the natural world, our language to reality, he transcends mere presence in representation; he moves beyond the signification of language, of thought in things, to what draws near in the name, what is carried forward in the act of signification. What is more, he is drawn to the complexity and expansion of the notion of community, from what *is* to what *does*—he understands the meaning of existence in terms of what being-in *produces*. In the men and the dogs, their community is not in what they are, but what they do—in their “talking to each other.” Extrapolated beyond the men and the dogs, beyond the woods itself, the trees themselves, Milkman begins to recognize that what is behind existence, behind reality is what existence *is*, what reality *is*; and, he is prepared to begin to think about his own life, his own name; he is prepared to investigate the past, his own past and its relation to the present, and possibly the future.

Milkman's internal movement, his ‘transformation’, followed from what was but the mere edification of the notion—world, language, names, time, history, past, present—to the essential feeling that brings them together, one in the other. He has moved beyond his

²⁰⁸ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 278.

father's advice of "ownership" to realize that things, like people, allow themselves to be owned, and in allowing themselves to be owned, could *be owned*, for their capacity existed within them; yet, their existence and reality, like ours, existed in the relationship between themselves and others.

Under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the cocoon that was his 'personality'—gave way. He could barely see his own hand, and couldn't see his feet. He was only breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared.²⁰⁹

Linking naming to the disappearance of his ego, his 'self' was the actualization of Milkman's subjectivity, and his freedom. Milkman also learned that naming also links levels of reality and levels of existence, and ultimately to the core concern of existential philosophy and the core concern of Morrison, human freedom. Just how are the levels of reality and existence and naming related to human freedom?

Freedom and Flight in Song of Solomon and Bluest Eye

A concern undergirding much of traditional 'existential philosophy' is the issue of human freedom—what does it mean to be, and what constitutes this freedom? Human freedom though—its possibility and how it appears—is predicated upon an ontological understanding of what the human being *is*. Traditional Western existentialism begins with *the* individual; human freedom appears as the condition of choice or the will in negotiation *with* the world.

Morrison's engagement with freedom, though, entails, not the dissolution of

²⁰⁹ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 277.

boundaries *as* impediments, but a connection to “boundaries” as sources of freedom. Morrison upends the traditional existential notion of freedom and *the* individual by upending our thinking of boundaries. What is past, what is present, names, language are not for her social conventions—where one can switch out one name for another, and if we all agree, then the new name becomes as *meaningful* as the old—but are connections to reality and to our existence. We are free to the extent that we are moored to something, someone, some past.

Morrison’s conception of freedom is predicated on her understanding of the human being constituted within community. The relation between the individual and the collective is one of metaphysical representation: beyond the dialectic of the two, the *inner continuity* of representation necessitates her understanding of freedom, not in terms of the absence of external impediments, for the inside/outside diad is replaced within the contiguity of chiasm. This freedom, then, is constituted in the relation *between* the two, within the inner necessity constituting the movement between the individual as the representation of the community, and the community as the essential element of the individual. Morrison’s notion of freedom is in terms of mooring; the individual moored to its essential element, and the community moored to its representation. Through the individual the abstract essential element becomes concrete; and, through the community the concrete individual comes to possess itself, its essential quality. Concretely, this translates into an individual mooring: through both novels we see that one is free to the extent that one is moored to something, someone, or some condition. It is mooring that ultimately provides the reality of meaning, belonging, and real freedom. Those characters who seek to attain a [seeming] freedom that is without ties—to one’s past, to one’s community, to one’s name, to nature

itself—find themselves failing to capture and understand their identity, their own existence, and the meaning of their own living.

The narrative parallel between *Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* is also ontological, offering a glimpse into Morrison's understanding of freedom in the cases of Ruth and Milkman in *Song of Solomon* and Pecola in *Bluest Eye*. Morrison's redefining of freedom questions its relationship to materiality, to the physical world, juxtaposing her, specifically to the Western discourse of existentialism and *the* individual. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison writes of Ruth's mooring, and, paradoxically, her freedom.

As she [Ruth] unfolded the white linen and let it billow over the fine mahogany table, she would look once more at the large water mark. She never set the table or passed through the dining room without looking at it. Like a lighthouse keeper drawn to his window to gaze once again at the sea, or a prisoner automatically searching out the sun as he steps into the yard for his hour of exercise, Ruth looked for the water mark several times during the day. She knew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of the lighthouse, and the prisoner, she regarded it as a *mooring*, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream. That she was alive somewhere, inside, which she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, *outside herself*.²¹⁰

Once exposed, though, this water stain, her mooring in the world, operated as an independent object, one that at once threatened—with its independence from Ruth's desire, to tell Ruth no, to refuse to be revealed and called forth in the simplicity of Ruth's gaze—as it sustained, and from the same source. Morrison writes,

And once exposed, it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-gray flower that throbbed like fever, and sighed like the shift of sand dunes. But it could also be still. Patient, restful, and still.²¹¹

Ruth's water stain—what moored her to *this* world—represents a physical marker, a

²¹⁰ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 11.

²¹¹ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 12-13.

manifestation of an underlying condition which suggests that we, as subjective observer do not have immediate access to things in-themselves, and that, as they appear, are no more clear than we are to ourselves without them. Morrison, through Ruth, investigates this phenomenological insight: the danger of pure externality and/or inwardization is either the loss of ourselves *in* the world or the world *in* ourselves. The water stain, when exposed, *speaks*, in terms of both Ruth's desire, but also, and more problematically for Ruth, it speaks of its own desire—*it could be still*. "But," Morrison notes, "there was nothing you could do with a mooring except *acknowledge* it, use it for the verification of some idea you wanted to keep alive."²¹² Such mooring is essential to consciousness, and its acknowledgment for self-consciousness, but both are useless for constituting subjectivity. Yet, if mooring is essential to freedom, the question remains, at what level of mooring does the subject loose themselves to the object or further into themselves; and, at what level does the subject constitute this mooring within community? Ruth's mooring was in place of community, her isolation from others in her world—the other women, her own husband and children. The house, or more properly, her memory of her father *through* her house became the source of Ruth's community. Karen Carmean, though, suggests that Ruth's mooring to the house is related to her as a woman: "it might simply come from a natural knack women have, since their usual situation is to be tied to a room, a house, or some particular place."²¹³ Yet, we still need some explanation for the necessity of her being tied to the house, to *this* place more so than place in general. Morrison suggests that Ruth's mooring to her father's house has more to do with Ruth's condition than to her gender.

²¹² Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 13.

²¹³ *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction*. Karen Carmean, ed., 12.

Morrison seems to suggest that when people choose what they moor themselves to, rather than desiring an object or person out of need or lack, one can become free *in* what they moor. Pilate, it seems, was free because she chose to moor herself to her name, her past (past *through* her name), and the language that surrounded her. Similarly, one may think of Pecola as becoming free in her mooring herself, not to blue eyes qua *blue eyes* [desiring whiteness], but the condition *of* blue eyes, a condition and a mooring that ultimately led to her *choosing* the outside and constituting herself in it.

Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a dark brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other...There was a difference in the reaction of the children to these battles. Sammy cursed for a while, or left the house, or threw himself into the fray...Pecola, on the other hand, restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance...

"Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear." She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away...Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left.

Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were *everything*. Everything was there, *in* them. All of those pictures, all of those faces. She had long given up the idea of running away to see new pictures, new faces...As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them. Long hours she sat looking into the mirror, trying to *discover* the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ugly or despised...

It occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We musn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.'²¹⁴

Yet, as Ruth finds her mooring in the water stain—a symbol of her 'madness', to find meaning in imperfection, and in her failure to keep her father's table perfect—Pecola, desiring to be herself, only differently—a desire that will ultimately drive her into *her*

²¹⁴ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 39-45.

'madness'—along with Piate and Milkman found her freedom in moving beyond terrestriality, either through physically or spiritually displacing the earth, but each time in *flight*. Flight, though, is not transcendence—or the cognate of the traditional existential concern with nothingness. What Morrison offers traditional existentialism is the idea that no matter how we understand and constitute our reality, it is constituted in our moorings. This, though, is not an individual action, but a collective community action acted through the individual.

* * * *

In addition to mooring as an understanding of human freedom, Morrison also understands human freedom in terms of flight. Similar to mooring, her usage of flight reveals her understanding of the human being, and her conception of freedom. For Morrison flight represents both that of “escape” and the desire for “home”, for-other-than-where-one-is, but also in the more basic ontological sense, transfiguration: of the body, of the earth, of terrestriality. Each is redefined. In the latter sense of terrestriality, flight is not so much a metaphor as a metaphysical reality—the alteration of material space by one’s inner movement. Morrison’s discussion of flight is taken from the mythology of the “flying African”, more overtly stated in *Song of Solomon* than in *Bluest Eye*, but present in each. The myth is said to have derived from an event in

the spring of 1803, when a group of Igbo slaves arrived in Savannah, Georgia...The Igbo, who became known as the flying Africans, were purchased at the slave market in Savannah by agents working on behalf of John Couper and Thomas Spalding. Loaded aboard a small vessel, the Igbo were confined below deck for the trip down the coast to St. Simons. During the course of the journey, however, the Igbo rose up

in rebellion against the white agents, who jumped overboard and were drowned.²¹⁵

Or, as told in the oral tradition by one, Wallace Quarterman, later canonized by Virginia Hamilton in *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*,

Ain't you heard about them? Well, at that time Mr. Blue he was the overseer and . . . Mr. Blue he go down one morning with a long whip for to whip them good. . . . Anyway, he whipped them good and they got together and stuck that hoe in the field and then . . . rose up in the sky and turned themselves into buzzards and flew right back to Africa. . . . Everybody knows about them.²¹⁶

As with Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, there is an 'historical' record and an oral record: there is what is recorded by those who place happenings into Events, and those that simply record by bearing witness: the "the spring of 1803", in "Savannah, Georgia", purchased slaves, rebellion, and the ship becomes transformed, and emerges as "[they] rose up in the sky", the black buzzards and "flew right back to Africa. Morrison picks up on the tension between "history" and oral tradition, between a language that is written and read and a language that is spoken and heard. In Lorna McDaniel's essay, "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of Myth in the Americas," McDaniel argues that

...while the theme of human flight does not occur in any significant proportion in West African mythology...The belief in spirit flight, ubiquitous in the Black diaspora of the New World, parallels that in African thought, but in the New World it is enlarged to include humans as possessors of the capability of flight."²¹⁷

Additionally, McDaniel, like Morrison, links flight to language and to song revealing the *inner* connection between levels of reality and levels of existence. In *Song of Solomon*, the song of Solomon, and that of Sugarman is told to recount history, but to also recount a day and a people who could connect the terrestriality of walking with that of flight, and could

²¹⁵ The New Encyclopedia Georgia. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2895>

²¹⁶ <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2895>

²¹⁷ Lorna McDaniel. "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of Myth in the Americas," 28.

transcend reality and existence, not by overcoming it, but by deepening it with their own existence. Milkman recounts his grief of his own history of singing and his own desire for flight in the “imitation of a plane” and “rapid twirling”²¹⁸ as the children sang:

*Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home.*²¹⁹

Milkman remembered an earlier hearing of this same song, only a woman sang, not Solomon, but Sugarman:

*O Sugramn done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home*²²⁰

McDaniel notes, “In both stories, song or magical word precipitate or accompany freedom and in the several variants of the myth, where song is not employed, code words facilitate flight.”²²¹ As Morrison interprets the myth, and its relation to language, to word and song, flight is not *necessarily* or *just* a metaphor of escape in the freedom of the individual—bodily or spirit—but one also located within history, as a way of mooring one to the earth by transfixing it in flying over it.

In *Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* Morrison uses the flight to discuss the different sides of freedom. In *Song of Solomon* Milkman engages flight as freedom, as overcoming the earth, and more importantly, what was *on* the earth: his family, his scorned lover, his responsibilities, his indecision over the meaning of his life, *any* life; to be in the air, over it all, floating away. Milkman’s mooring was to his desire to not be moored to anything, to

²¹⁸ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 264.

²¹⁹ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 303.

²²⁰ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 6.

²²¹ Lorna McDaniel. “The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of Myth in the Americas”, 28.

anyone and to call this desire 'freedom'.

"He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam!" He whipped the water with his fists, then jumped straight up as though he too could take off, and landed on his back and sank down, his mouth and eyes full of water. Up again, Still pounding, leaping, diving. "The son of a bitch could fly! You hear me, Sweet? That motherfucker could fly! Could fly! Didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self...Oh, man! He didn't need no airplane. He just *took off, got fed up. All the way up!* No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit! He flew, baby, Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew home. Can you dig it? Jesus God, that must have been something to see...

"Who'd he leave behind?"

"Everybody! He left everybody *down on the ground* and he sailed off like a black eagle...²²²

Initially, Milkman could only see the escape of the world, and not the consequences of such escape. He could only understand one-side of reality and existence; could understand only the desire to be somewhere, someone else, entirely, and found his identity within this narrative, within this mythology. Escape is only possible, if somewhere, within me, there is the capacity for this escape as well. Milkman initially thought that he had only to inwardize his past in the localization of his identity to escape, to find his freedom, but found he was unable to answer Sweet's question, "who'd he [Solomon] leave behind?" The past, like the narrative itself, was externalized, existing only as an object to be thought, not one to be lived.

Milkman's idea of freedom was, initially, part of the 'male fantasy' of escape, which desires to externalize the world in such a way that one may interact with it, but bear no responsibility *to* or *for* it. His attraction to Solomon, more than ancestry and self-knowledge through the past, was in Solomon's capacity to externalize the world and escape it.

Milkman's desire finds its kin in the early works of Jean-Jacque Rousseau's notion of

²²² Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 328.

‘natural man’, one freed up from the social responsibility of the ‘other’—community of other men, women and children. Rousseau notes:

Man was initially a happy hermit. He lived by himself. He was independent and lived off the fruits of the land. He ate when he wanted, he drank when he wanted, and he slept whenever and wherever... Once in a while, man had chance sexual encounters with woman. Once both their sexual needs were satisfied, they both parted. Man had no memory and never remembered which fruits he ate, which streams he drank from, and which women he had had sexual experiences with. Therefore, he was a man with no preference, no tastes, and all of his experiences were satisfying and made him contented.²²³

Milkman finds the idea of flight, of overcoming history by removing the power of it from his body, and by proxy his spirit; of seeding the earth, a kind of freedom in both bodily motility, but also in terms of creating the world by reproducing an image of himself—in his children, in his name, in the direct representation of himself—that he is simultaneously not responsible to or for, which allows him to *fly off*. Milkman captures the traditional Western existential notion of *the* individual attempting to overcome community in a search for a freedom unencumbered, actualized *in* this lack of external impediments.

On the other side of Milkman and Solomon’s ‘freedom’ is Pecola, Pilate and, by proxy, the wife of Solomon, Ryna, and her experience of Solomon’s freedom *as* flight.

“He [Solomon] had a slew of children, all over the place...Must be over forty families spread in these hills calling themselves Solomon something or other. I guess he must have been hot stuff.” She laughed. “But anyway, hot stuff or not, *he disappeared and left everybody*. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children. And they say *they saw him go*. The wife saw him and the children saw him...Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air...It liked killed the woman, his wife. I guess you could say ‘wife’. Anyway, she supposed to have screamed out loud for days...They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely.²²⁴

In addition to leaving, Solomon’s children left behind witnessed his leaving and their

²²³ Jean-Jacque Rosseau. *Origins of Inequality*.

²²⁴ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 323; emphasis added.

existence bore witness to his absence. Those left behind were not of thought by Milkman, they were simply jettisoned in his desire for his 'freedom'. He did not even draw the connection between his flight down south and his leaving behind his own lover.²²⁵ Milkman simply thought of his relation to Solomon and flying, but not of that woman he left behind.

In *Bluest Eye*, we catch a glimpse into what happens when one is left behind in the character of Pecola. Pecola, though, is not abandoned in another's flight; she is put outside of the community. Flight, in *Bluest Eye*, is hers. Contrasting Pecola's attempts at flight with that of Milkman reveals a fundamental distinction: Milkman's desire is to shed community, while Pecola's desire is to find community. Morrison writes of Pecola's flight in the concluding chapter:

She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind.²²⁶

Many scholars have noted this scene as prefiguring Pecola's 'madness'; though, alongside Ruth's mooring, this scene prefigures the other side of Milkman's freedom, one that depends on the un-freedom of others, and their mooring to the world in order to stabilize the world, against which one may liberate oneself—traditional Newtonian physics tells us that when one pushes down, against the ground to take flight, one is, in that moment before the transfiguration of space, moored to that space, and only on the condition that the ground relinquishes itself, can a man take flight; his flight predicated on the mooring of the ground to itself *as* ground, to propel the body higher into flight. Milkman's freedom, like

²²⁵ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 323.

²²⁶ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 204.

Solomon, calls again the paradox of traditional 'existential philosophy', between *the* individual and the outside: the outside is necessary for the construction of the inside, or the perfervid individual—the individual constitutes itself in contradistinction to the outside, making the outside the foundation *for* the inside; the ground as the precondition *for* flight. Milkman's denial of the ground also is a denial that his freedom is dependent on community, on an outside, on the mooring of others, to the outside, to the ground.

Pecola's 'madness' prefigures the significance of community; being cast outside. There is a certain kind of madness, of broken flight, that captures her and offers her the only clarity she has left: she finally *makes* herself community with God, with her own thoughts.²²⁷

Pecola's relation to God, in her search for community, is traced throughout the text, from her seeking out of Soaphead's magic²²⁸ and, finally, either her oneness with God, or her own consciousness, having inwardized the external world (that casts her out), and externalized itself from itself to create another voice, the voice of God. We witness in Pecola, even after having been abused and "loved," still finds a way to constitute her own

²²⁷ As an interesting existential point of comparison, while Kierkegaard bemoans the anxiety of Abraham in the face of the Absurd—his order from the Absolute, God, to defy the Universal, human law, in the sacrifice of his son, Isaac, Pecola finds herself in the same predicament with blue eyes and the deal she struck with Soaphead; though no one can and has acknowledged her blue eyes, she alone, with God, can establish her blue eyes. Nevertheless, in being one with God with a certain truth no man can understand, rather than be rendered speechless with the unspeakable and unthinkable, as is Abraham (on Kierkegaard's reading), Pecola instead *makes community* with God, and speaks and thinks *with* God. Pecola, in short, has overcome the Absurd with 'madness'.

²²⁸ "A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment...It seemed so sad, do frivolous, that mere mortality, not judgment, kept him from it." *Bluest Eye*, 173-5.

community and subjectivity *for* herself. Morrison seems to suggest the strength as well as weakness of subjectivity and the metaphysical (rather than psychological) necessity of community for and its ironic achievement—Pecola’s ironic achievement—in, *life*.

Morrison, through Pecola’s madness, reveals that community as an *accomplishment* of subjectivity; and, what is more, that when community is denied in the traditional sense of other persons, one will create for themselves their community.

You are a real friend. I’m sorry about picking on you before. I mean, saying you were jealous and all.

That’s all right.

No. Really. You are my very best friend. Why didn’t I know you before?

You didn’t need me before.

Didn’t need you?

I mean,,you were so unhappy before. I guess you didn’t notice me before.

I guess you’re right. And I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes.

*No, honey. Right after your eyes.*²²⁹

Was this God Pecola was talking to? Will we ever know, and much more, does it really matter? Anymore than the “sounds of Pauline’s soul”, the “dark sweetness...that Pauline yearned for...of the Stranger who *knew*,” in song:

Precious Lord take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storms, through the night
Lead me on to the Light
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.²³⁰

Milkman’s revelation, at the end of *Song of Solomon*, came with his realization of his scorned lover’s death; in his facing what Solomon never had to—the consequences of his ‘freedom’.

²²⁹ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 196; emphasis in original.

²³⁰ Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye*, 113-4.

When he came to, he was lying on his side in the cellar. He opened one eye and considered the option of not coming to for a little while more. For a long time now he knew that anything could appear to be something else, and probably was. Nothing could be taken for granted. Women who loved you tried to cut your throat, while women who didn't even know your name scrubbed your back...

So he lay on the damp floor of the cellar and tried to figure out what he was doing there. What did Pilate knock him out for?...What could it be, what else had he done that would turn her against him? Then he knew. Something had happened to Hagar. Where was she? Had she run off? Was she sick or...Hagar was dead...

What difference did it make? He had hurt her, *left* her, and now she was dead.—he was certain of it. *He had left her*. While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying. Sweet's silvery voice came back to him: "Who'd he leave behind?" He left Ryna behind and twenty children. Twenty-one since he dropped the one he tried to take with him. And Ryna had thrown herself all over the ground, lost her mind, and was still crying in a ditch. *Who looked after those children?* Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children!...Shalimar [Solomon] left his, but it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive.²³¹

Nevertheless, Milkman finds his condition, or the "condition our condition is in," as the pure externalization *in* another—in his own mother's sublimation of him *as his father*; in Hagar's desire for self-fulfillment in the object of his affection, to have, to own as one's own.²³² It could be said that in contrast to *Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* explores the existential narrative of black male subjectivity. And, that existentially, as narratives of *how* rather than *why* there are no victims or victimizers, heroes and villains, just stories and story tellers, But, what would that mean: to tell stories that bear witness to tradition, to tell us about ourselves? And, what are we to do with Pecola; but, more, what are we to do about the relationship between Hagar and Milkman and mooring practices of perfervid individualism and that of metaphysical, mystical community? Can a folklore that tells, that bears tell us what to do with Solomon who wants his freedom and moors himself to the sky and his wife, who moors herself to the ground? In traditional 'existential philosophy',

²³¹ Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 323; emphasis mine.

²³² Toni Morrison. *Song Solomon*, 222.

freedom is not without responsibility, but responsibility itself is not without its paradox: to whom is one responsible; and, for what? Morrison's *Bluest Eye* seems to suggest that we are responsible to and for what we become; *Song of Solomon* seems to suggest that we are responsible to what has *become of us*, in our history, of our past, of nature and the call back to move forward.

In the end of *Song of Solomon* Milkman discovers that freedom, like subjectivity, comes when one dis-covers what they will moor themselves to/with. That is, freedom, like subjectivity, is a dis-covery that comes only when one understands *what* constitutes them, and decides what one will attach meaning of one's life, dis-covering that the secret of life are its subtleties, not its unlimited expansion of the will towards power. Morrison uncovers how this freedom is actualized and the limits surrounding it, and the necessity of mooring within freedom, but not a mooring that is limiting and in contradistinction to the (individual) will, but is its foundation. Even as flight, freedom finds within itself moored to who is left, and what this leaving means for the world and the constitution of "individual" identity.

If traditional 'existential philosophy's' major concern was to show the inner life of *the* individual, Morrison's concern was to show the inner-life of community/spirit. If traditional 'existential philosophy' is concerned with self-consciousness as the inwardization of the outside inside, then Morrison's concern was of subjectivity in terms of self-consciousness within community. The understanding of the human being and human freedom for each reveals Morrison's concern as the actualization of subjectivity, and that of traditional existentialism as the inner discord between the individual and community.

Conclusion

In these texts, written so closely together—*Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Song of Solomon* (1977)—Morrison begins to ask the questions of human being, of human existence, and subjectivity anew. In asking the question differently, Morrison opens up new possibilities for answers. Her existential insight into the traditional questions un-grounds the meaning of existence, but what is more begins shifting the meaning of blackness and what it means to be black; a shift from the sociohistorical, to the sociobiographical. And, what is more, within this sociobiographical Morrison interjects the mystical. Blackness, for Morrison, in addition to one's lineage is located within story telling, within the act of bearing witness, within the connections *between* levels of realities and levels of existence—blackness becomes *something* both distinguishable and indistinguishable; at once specific and ubiquitous. Morrison leaves us asking, what is the meaning of blackness beyond the sociohistorical, beyond oppression, in this phenomenological unfolding of the sociohistorical—between reality and existence, man and nature, in language and being? What is the blackness of black people if the blackness of things black is predicated on conceptions of love, living life, chiasmic beyond dialectic, vulnerability in the telling of how rather than the explanation of why, and, ultimately, on community?

In these works Morrison transitions us from *the* individual to the metaphysics of community, and in doing so, also transitions us from existential philosophy to existential phenomenology. In Morrison we find our power in our capacity of collective representation, not only of the world but ourselves as well. We must, though, take what is given and *make* it into something that posits the internal difficulty of hermeneutics: we must be better as individuals, accomplished through collective effort. Nevertheless, our

collectivity is related to our own subjective actualities. Where does one begin? Or, more properly, *how* does one begin? Morrison leaves us with this question lingering: somewhere in liminal space between past and present, material and non-material, civilized and wild is there something else that we need? Perhaps, *magic*.

PART TWO:

Black Existential Phenomenology

And I know just to go *to* it could never amount to going *through* it...

Wayne, "Let the Beat Build"

-CHAPTER FOUR-

Black Existential Phenomenology: Reflections on Thomas F. Slaughter's "Epidermalizing the World," 30 Years Later

When it's dark and sight is extinguished, man kindles his own light [flame].

Heraclitus, *Fragment 233*²³³

When the Negro dives—in other words, goes under—something remarkable occurs.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

²³³ Another translation of this fragment is the following: "A man in the night kindles a light for himself when his vision is extinguished" (G.S. Kirk, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 205)

Introduction

Phenomenology, philosophically understood²³⁴, emerged out of the “crisis of [the] European sciences.”²³⁵ This crisis amounted to a crisis between the objective science world and the human life world in and through the development of modern science and

²³⁴ Phenomenological analysis takes many forms in different disciplines from existential and phenomenological psychology to existential and phenomenological sociology. And while the lines are blurred and the figures overlap, in this essay we engage the “philosophical” interpretation of it.

²³⁵ In *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man* [“The Vienna Lecture”] (1935) Edmund Husserl writes,

To live as a person is to live in a social framework, wherein I and we live together in community and have the community as a horizon. Now, communities are structured in various simple or complex forms, such as family, nation, or international community. Here the word ‘live’ is not to be taken in a physiological sense but rather as signifying purposeful living, manifesting spiritual creativity—in the broadest sense, creating culture within historical continuity. It is this that forms the theme of various humanistic sciences. Now, there is an obvious difference between healthy growth and decline, or to put it another way, between health and sickness, even for societies, for peoples, for states. In consequence there arises the not so farfetched question: how is it that in this connection there has never arisen a medical science concerned with nations and with international communities? The European nations are sick; Europe itself, they say, is in critical condition...(1)

...Let us summarize the fundamental notions of what we have sketched here. The ‘crisis of European existence’, which manifests itself in countless symptoms of a corrupted life, is no obscure fate, no impenetrable destiny...The ‘crisis’ could then become clear as the ‘seeming collapse of rationalism’. Still, as we said, the reason for the downfall of a rational culture does not lie in the essence of rationalism itself but only in its exteriorization, its absorption in ‘naturalism’ and ‘objectivism’. (23)

For Husserl, this is to be done with the merging of the humanistic and the natural sciences. We are not, however, forwarding a Nietzschean argument that Europe has become decadent and weak, as was claimed in the *Genealogy of Morals*, but that the European sciences have, in a sense, attempted to separate spirit from nature, and in this separation attempted to make a ‘science’ of each which had no bearing on the other: we study nature, and we study ourselves studying nature, without the reflexive element we referenced in the first chapter with regards to the original question. For Husserl, the crisis of European sciences is the crisis between the objective science world and the human life world. This, in a sense, represents a shift in Husserl’s own work, and a distancing from the Cartesian cogito in favor of human spirit. One might say a movement away from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and towards Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

technology. The modern techno-science turn,²³⁶ typified by the objectification and quantification the external world, has caused some theorists question whether philosophy is, or should be, post-phenomenology. Lewis Gordon, though, argues that this crisis of the European sciences is not simply that of the divide between the human world and objective world, nor that of the divide between the natural sciences [*Naturewissenschaften*] and the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*], but, and more fundamentally, a divide within reason itself, “in that noble and genuine sense, the original Greek sense”²³⁷, a crisis on the level of the “inner life of the spirit itself,” one that arises in the form of a challenge: beyond the historical nature of spirit and the spiritual community, what Husserl terms the “spiritual image of Europe”, has surpassed the ‘fellowship’ and ‘strangeness’²³⁸ of cultural and geographical distinctness²³⁹ and has become Otherness and estrangement. For Gordon the challenge of the crisis of the European sciences has left us with not only the problem of industrialization and modernity, but also the problem of humanity as a whole—what Kant (1784) will term the problem of History itself.²⁴⁰

Heidegger, too, notes in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1949) that the crisis of the European sciences is the crisis within the “spiritual image of Europe,” expressed in our de-humanization within the framework of modern techno-science and the disavowal of our more fundamental experiences of being-in-the-world. In the process of scientifically

²³⁶ For more, see Martin Heidegger. *Question Concerning Technology*.

²³⁷ Edmond Husserl. *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, 16.

²³⁸ Edmond Husserl. *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, 4-5.

²³⁹ Edmond Husserl. *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, 2-5.

²⁴⁰ In *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* Kant not only ranks the world cultures according to the model of the European nation-state, and deems non-European cultures inferior therein, but also claims the necessity of their being overcome for the telos of all of human kind as both a moral and a historical natural and humanistic scientific project.

articulating the world, European man lost his originary experience of “standing in a field,” as Maurice Merleau-Ponty says. For Heidegger, perhaps more than Husserl, the problem that modern techno-science created is ontological in the sense of enframing—that is, the problem is essentially one of language: European man found himself trapped within the language reflective of the lived-world [*Lebenswelt*] of modern techno-science and searched for a way out, a way to express the inexpressible *inner-relatedness* to the world that was not purely “objective” and/or quantifiable.²⁴¹ Phenomenology, understood as revealing or unconcealing, offered a way to express their “primordial” relation to the world prior to the ‘turn,’ while traditional ‘existential philosophy’ attempted to found a kind of language to capture or express how modern Europeans felt after the advent of techno-science. The two methods of analysis offered(s) European man a way of theorizing and rethinking the intersection of consciousness and materiality; it also allowed(s) them a way to recapture what had(s) been lost, a return to innocence (so to speak), in which the pairing (existential-phenomenology) seems almost ‘natural’. Yet, each methodological position found itself, again, facing the problem of universalizing from a relative position.

The problem of traditional ‘philosophical existential phenomenology’ can be witnessed *in* its limits, and *as* its limit: it is particular to the European experience, and to the problem of the cultural milieu of Europe having lost itself within the mechanization of the world, and thus, as a methodological approach, needs to be adapted, if to be used at all, by persons other than European, who have traditionally found themselves on the other

²⁴¹ For examples in the history of Western philosophy, see Edmund Husserl’s *Crisis of European Sciences*; Martin Heidegger’s *Question Concerning Technology*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Visible and Invisible*; Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* and “What is Emotion”; Friedrich Nietzsche *Twilight of the Idols*; and, Lewis Gordon’s *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*.

side of modern techno-science's gaze. Returning to, though extending, Gordon's claim [as well as those of Husserl and Heidegger in a certain way], the crisis is more fundamental than a certain way of thinking: the crisis of European sciences that phenomenology was set to think through was spiritual. The crisis was one of the manner through which man dwelt in the world itself. The problem was with being-in.

This is where Thomas F. Slaughter's essay, "Epidermalizing the World: A Basic Mode of Being Black,"²⁴² proves itself a useful intervention between that of Gordon's claims and those of Husserl and Heidegger, mediating the crisis between the human world and the objective world, between of natural and the human sciences, and the problems posed within modernity itself by Otherness and estrangement in colonization and dehumanization. What Slaughter offers us is a way of thinking existential phenomenology that, while recognizing traditional 'existential phenomenology' as emerging from a European *lebenswelt*, forwards its own "spiritual image" reflective of what Fanon termed "black consciousness": that is, to Fanon's puzzle of consciousness in the night of the absolute, Slaughter offers phenomenological exposure in the form of *magic*, or what he will term, black-being-in-the-world.²⁴³

²⁴² Thomas F. Slaughter. "Epidermalizing the World: A Basic Mode of Being Black," in *Man and World* (10), 3: 1977.

²⁴³ It is to be noted here that black is hyphenated with being in the world because it is not incidental to one's existentiell analysis of the world and the "world". What is more, the hyphenation of black with being in the world emphasizes and illuminates that the simple "being-in-the-world" has built within it an invisible and silent "white" as in white-being-in-the-world.

The Hinterland of Broken, Being

Slaughter's essay, "Epidermalizing the World: A Basic Mode of Being Black", phenomenologically engages the intersection of materiality and consciousness for "black consciousness". What Slaughter attempts to accomplish in this essay is a description of what it means to be black in a Western anti-black world, to be born into the *Zeitgeist* of modern techno-science,²⁴⁴ and the process of becoming self-conscious within this oppressive time. Along the way Slaughter illuminates the relationship between consciousness and language, and works to display the emergence of a black consciousness that is not simply oppositional, but affirmative.

In the opening "moments," Slaughter offers an intriguing phenomenological insight that is, perhaps, peculiar to what he terms the "principle posture of being-Black." The principle of existence for "New World Blackness" emerges in the form a question: "if my black Being has this suggested unity of a body, how then does the duality of double-consciousness come about and persist in its existential prominence?"²⁴⁵

Contemporary existential phenomenology, in particular that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, concerns itself with demonstrating the unity of the body (with itself and the world

²⁴⁴ *Zeitgeist* is defined as the 'spirit of an age or spirit of the time'. *Zeitgeist* is a much more expansive term than that of spirit or national spirit, or what Husserl earlier noted as "the spiritual image" of a people. *Zeitgeist* refers to an "innate entelechy" towards which the human spirit as a whole is drawn in its perfection, interpreted in certain way at a certain time. In *Dusk of Dawn*, W.E.B. Du Bois captures what we claim to be the *Zeitgeist* of the modern world when he writes

Crucified on the vast wheel of time, I flew round and round with the *Zeitgeist*, waving my pen and lifting faint voices to explain, expound and exhort; to see, foresee and prophesy, to the few who could or would listen. Thus, very evidently to me and to others I did little to create my day or greatly change it; but I did *exemplify* it and thus for all time my life is significant for all lives of men.

²⁴⁵ Thomas F. Slaughter. "Epidermalizing the World," 283

through experience/perception), critiquing and overcoming the problem of mind, body dualism, and the dimorphism of the objective and the human worlds, that is, *the* “world” and *our* world. Slaughter, following Frantz Fanon’s claim of a bifurcated self, following W.E.B. Du Bois’ notion of double-consciousness, problematizes these traditional European existential phenomenological claims about/towards embodied existence. What is important here, though, is not solely the implicit critique, but the articulation of principles for a black existential phenomenology, that “species of philosophical description,” that tends to “disclose for us what is already before us in a new, sometimes deeper light”: those “familiar notions about black experience.”²⁴⁶ And, this is not to say that blackness is a psychological phenomenon, rather it is a horizon opening onto things differently than that of European existential phenomenology. Fanon writes, “Below the corporeal [white] schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema.”²⁴⁷ Or, as Slaughter notes, “The multiplexity occasioned by double-consciousness is not an existential dimension distinct from a unity constituted by my lived-body. In fact, the stubborn primacy of my lived-body is the *precondition* of double-consciousness.”²⁴⁸ Thus, this apperceptive reality is not a distortion of the normal horizon onto things, but *my* opening onto the world, one that highlights not only itself as black, but that of normal or traditional existential phenomenology as European, as “white.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ Thomas F. Slaughter. “Epidermalizing the World,” 283.

²⁴⁷ Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

²⁴⁸ Thomas F. Slaughter. “Epidermalizing the World,” 283; emphasis mine.

²⁴⁹ It is from within this critique of the relativism of even phenomenological embodiment that we meet with the claim within black existential phenomenology that traditional ‘existential philosophy’ and phenomenology is concerned more with power—in the Foucauldian sense—and less with a theory of embodiment. That is, traditional existential and phenomenological accounts of embodiments are but expressions of present but ‘forgotten’ social and political

What Slaughter posits as double-consciousness, the phenomenological posturing of black-Being, is an elucidation of his “subjective conditioning.” That is to say, white-Being (white anti-black racism) further misdirects existence from its primal relation to the world by creating, *ex nihilo*, a subjective world around the black subject where blackness is “impregnated with values and mores of my environing society.”²⁵⁰ Black Being comes to have an ethical articulation that far outstrips its intentional structure towards the world. Double-consciousness, then, as a “primal peculiarity” of black-Being is but the latent reminder of monocular vision as the unity of my “synergic body”—to see is to be seen, to feel is to be felt, to touch is to be touched²⁵¹—which traditional phenomenology posits as an existential structure of lived reality, and is for Slaughter *felt* as the *existentiell* of the lived-body-black. In Slaughter’s “body-in-this-society”²⁵² he asserts a key philosophical divergent moment between European existential phenomenology and black existential phenomenology; European philosophers seem to only give us flat and unmarked bodies in and through analysis, while Slaughter’s body has the edges, contours and sides of the critical turn.²⁵³

My racio-epidermalization (also understood as *ratiocination*) of the world, though, is not simply a construction of the white “eye,” but *is* the way that the world not only unfolds for me, is the way that it beckons me forth, and the way I articulate it, cutting

power formations of modern techno-science. Instead of the post-metaphysical assumption of embodiment and intentionality, the relativity of phenomenological turn has given us another moment towards post-phenomenology, or the abandonment of phenomenology.

²⁵⁰ Thomas F. Slaughter. “Epidermalizing the World,” 284.

²⁵¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 402.

²⁵² Thomas F. Slaughter. “Epidermalizing the World,” 284.

²⁵³ That is, in European phenomenology we witness an attempt at overcoming the metaphysical baggage of post-Cartesianism and post-Kantianism; while, in Slaughter we witness an attempt to move *through* the baggage itself to forward an historical consciousness of engagement.

reality at its joints. Ironically, it is through this *rationation* that I simply am seen (by white eyes) as “black,” for philosophy in its dealing with universals, even those concrete universals, through the embedded particular that I am seen—because I am black and assert my blackness as a mode of being-in-the-world—as particular. The problem that black-Being faces, both philosophically (theoretically) and practically (praxis), is that, given traditional existential phenomenology focus on structures that are normative to themselves—the able bodied white heterosexual male—when Slaughter, and others announce²⁵⁴ their being as black, the existential [structural] elements of an investigation are reduced to an *existentiell* analysis of pure body, removing all “signs” of consciousness, or ‘spiritual image’. The black is but an object in the world, an object to the world. The problem of objectifying the world, of opposing “consciousness of” to its object ceases to be a problem for the black, since “consciousness of” is the body *as* object, and not as Merleau-Ponty meant by the “pre-reflective and pre-objective unity of my body.”²⁵⁵ This is why, to borrow a phrase from Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the black is seen as “world-poor,”²⁵⁶ unable to signify and symbolize meaning, accomplishing place or achieving

²⁵⁴ Announce in the sense of pronouncement or an announcement of the existence and purpose of.

²⁵⁵ Maurice, Merleau-Ponty. *Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 402. What is more, this is why blackness does not take part in the *Lebenswelt* that brings about the distinction of mind and body *as the* philosophical (that is, epistemological) and social/political problem of “human existence.” It is this scientific eye of whiteness that places Sarah Bartmann in the cage, dead, cold and lifeless on the operator’s table and George Curvier looking “at” the cage and standing “over” the table. The space and physical approximation of bodies to one another illuminate the political place of sociality.

²⁵⁶ In Heidegger’s *Being and Time* he differentiates animals from Da-sein stating that only Da-sein can see itself in the world as it constructs itself and the world into an dynamic arrangement self-directed towards a project, which ultimately is its own death/finitude. I am borrowing the assessment of animals to apply to the perception whites have of black-Being, for like animals, black people are seen as natural, organic, and without the ability to direct themselves towards

history. Whatever appears to be innovation and creativity in coming to terms with the world as a temporal structure of/for being is mere and humorous imitation, not a sign of “being-there.”²⁵⁷ The world, then, as opposed to that which I belong to, constitute myself in, and orient myself towards, is merely my “surrounding ring”.

* * * * *

Hinterland is a German term, which literally means “a land beyond (a city or a port)”; developed in the American context it has come to mean that in addition to “back country,” that which is less populated, where few people *live* and where infrastructure is low. It is a rural area surrounded by the urban development of larger cities; an arid and vapid region. By *hinterland*, I mean to signify that which is “back country,” or underdeveloped and extrapolate its definition towards its possible existential phenomenological meaning as when one says, in a pejorative way, that a place constitutes a *hinterland* or that a place is “back” or “low” country.

a future to which they would hurl themselves forward, and find themselves late. In a word, black people, in the white imagination, lack culture.

²⁵⁷ Similarly, Husserl notes

On the other hand, Indians find us strangers and find only in each other their fellows. Still, this essential distinction between fellowship and strangeness, which is relativized on many levels and is a basic category of all historicity, cannot suffice. Historical humanity does not always divide itself in the same way according to this category. We get a hint of that right in our own Europe. Therein lies something unique, which all other human groups, too, feel with regard to us, something that apart from all considerations of expediency, becomes a motivation for them—despite their determination to retain their spiritual autonomy—constantly to Europeanize themselves, whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, will never, for example, Indianize ourselves. (5)

Existentially and phenomenologically, what is expressed in *hinterland* is a notion of cultural difference, of a marker that is historically set within Otherness and estrangement, constituting what John Friedmann termed the ‘core and periphery model’²⁵⁸ to give political expression to the ontological distinction earlier noted (between the human and objective worlds). It is this distinction that accounts for the idea of “outside” as in that which is outside of the core, making it periphery. Blackness, for Slaughter, comes to have/embody the ontology and meaning of the *hinterland* in the Western anti-black world when it comes to one’s place within its ever expanding sociality: that which is outside, lacking in history, wild, unwilling; that which is peripheral to what is civilized, to modernity and cultural life.

And, yet Slaughter’s accounting is different from than that of Gordon’s black existentialism, or many post-colonial theorists. *Hinterland*, as opposed to the subaltern²⁵⁹ is an ontological designation as well as a metaphysical mediation—that is, *hinterland* designates both the space of existence (core and periphery designations), and the place of being (culturally and historically designated). And, here we are faced with the irony of anti-black racism: that which Europeans seek to return to through the philosophical method of phenomenology, the pre-reflective unity of the body, is what blackness has come to signify, *and* for which it has come to be “despised”.

²⁵⁸ Gerald R. Pitzl, *Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 28-9.

²⁵⁹ Subaltern, a term forwarded by Antonio Gramsci and popularized by Gayatri Spivak (2008), to designate persons in politically, socially, and geographically oppressed positions with respect to the hegemonic power structure of a colony or the colonial mother country. It is a term which designates less the ontological positions of persons, and more on power relation of social groups to the state apparatus.

Philosophically robust, Slaughter is writing from within the *hinterland*, spatially located within the axiological and geographic framework of the West, but, in terms of its place, is quite far removed indeed. Slaughter notes, "I am civilized to the smallest detail in a system of instrumental relations which offers no trace of my *occupation*. In a sense, my being 'borrows.' My existence may be characterized as a state of 'indebtedness.' I own nothing. I just pay rent."²⁶⁰ I inhabit space within "this" (modern) world, but I *am* not of "this" (modern) world. My horizon opens onto, not "this" world, nor "this" historical time, but another place, another time. Slaughter tells us, "I am thrown-out-of-mesh with the processes which surround me. I don't belong here. I belong to neither this place nor this time. I am an African person. I come from an ancient past; and I lean towards a cosmic future in which the principle of *life* will mangle the bind of race."²⁶¹ What Slaughter is telling us is not that he is not part of the material world or that he somehow exists in a parallel dimension where water is twater,²⁶² rather he relates to the world differently than

²⁶⁰ Thomas F. Slaughter. "Epidermalizing the World," 285.

²⁶¹ Thomas F. Slaughter. "Epidermalizing the World," 285; emphasis mine.

²⁶² From a thought experiment proposed by philosopher Hillary Putnman (1973), the term 'twater' was presented to signify that "meaning just ain't in the head."

What words mean, and similarly what thoughts words express, depends on whatever it is with which speakers and thinkers causally interact. 'Water' in your mouth means water (and not twater) because you are causally related to water (and not twater).

...Applying this theme more broadly, we can say that the meanings of the words we use and the contents of our thoughts (what our thoughts concern) depend on causal relations we bear to our surroundings. (*Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction*, 216)

Bearing in mind, though, that we are aware of the sets of relations we engage in in the world. One can think that we don't say things such as "Jewing someone down" to signify 'ripping them off,' but we do often say, 'gypping' someone to signify the same without knowing the roots of 'gypping', a derogatory distinction for Gypsies. Here, though, with Slaughter our problem is not semantic or contextual, it is ontological, where ontology sets the context.

his white counterparts. His relatedness to the world cannot be mapped directly onto traditional phenomenological or historical becoming.

“Being in the open, outside the system, I begin to question. Through my ‘throwness,’ the sanctity of the system of credits begins to fade. I act in judgment on it. Whereas before my being to the world through my body was my condemnation, now, my body is my vindication.”²⁶³ The *hinterland*, thus reborn, is no longer the ‘low’ or ‘back’ country, or the space outside of the core, but a place of spiritual renewal through which Slaughter is transformed, and *becomes* self-disclosed. The hinterland becomes the *briarpatch*.²⁶⁴

The Magical Process of Being, Black

Who else has learned to sling these *ancient* ideas like dead rats, held by their tails so as not to infect this newly oiled skin?
I can think of nothing *heavier* than an airplane
I can think of no greater conglomerate of steel and metal
I can think of nothing less likely to *fly*
There are no wings more weighted
I, too, have felt a *heaviness*,
The stare of a man, guessing at my being,

²⁶³ Thomas F. Slaughter. “Epidermalizing the World,” 285-86.

²⁶⁴ I am using the term “briarpatch” to signify both the people loric tradition of African Americans of the South, and the historical trajectory of these people who locate themselves as Southern (Remember, the briarpatch in folk tales like Br’er Rabbit was meant, initially, to speak of the relative outsidership of blackness, but was transformed in black peoplelore as a place of dissemblance and power: Br’er Rabbit uses his cunning to manipulate the power dynamics and achieve a sense of power). It is a phenomenological statement of “finding” and “locating” home, a mode of “dwelling in” that is affirmative of the development of human personality. Its usage for Slaughter’s essay is that it illuminates his idea that black-Being becomes, through the deconstructive process of reappraisal of concepts, a created person. (For an analysis of the phenomenological “meaning” of briarpatch, see Albert Murray’s *From the Briarpatch File: On Context, Procedure, and American Identity*)

In a similar note, Ralph Ellison writes of American democracy of the paradox of place in the history of the racial polity this existential phenomenological gem: “The way *home* we seek is that condition of man’s *being at home in the world*, which is called love, and which we term democracy.” (“A Completion of Personality” In *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 799; emphasis added) And, this is where Slaughter’s essay is heading: to a phenomenological theory of democratic practice and ethical ethos.

Yes, I am *homeless*, a homeless man making offerings to the *after-future*...

Saul Williams, *Release*

And, at this junction, for Slaughter, "...language becomes most crucial. In my rage I scour my environment for resources to meet my needs. Key among my findings is 'the language,' the very tool so instrumental in the previous process of my devaluation. Thus in order to appropriate it for my own needs, I 'brutalize' the language. I jar the syntax and shuffle its semantics. Through my violence to the language, I mediate the being I was to the world through my body."²⁶⁵ It is Slaughter's accounting of our being illuminated through language that closely associates him with the phenomenological tradition. Our being dwells in language, and through an analysis of our being, we come to have a better understanding of existence: "Language," Heidegger writes, "is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home."²⁶⁶ If Heidegger is correct, and language is the house of Being, then, in "this" language, I am unhoused; and it is here, in another language, that I must be made whole—recompense.

Language, though, is paradoxical (phenomenologically speaking), for it is the place where Being is both obscured and exposed; it is the medium through which/in which Being is unwrapped and unbraided. And, thus, it is the grounding of *Weltanschauung* philosophy.²⁶⁷ To do again, to make anew, to understand language anew—Slaughter's task

²⁶⁵ Thomas F. Slaughter. "Epidermalizing the World: A Basic Mode of Being Black." Page 286.

²⁶⁶ Martin Heidegger. *Letter on Humanism*.

²⁶⁷ An interesting, and at times powerful essay on this is George Yancy, "The Power of My Nommo." Also, see John H. McClendon, III essay, "Philosophy of Language and the African American Experience: Are There Metaphilosophical Implications?" Another interesting, and

is to look more intimately into the way language unfolds and expresses existence and how our existence expresses itself in language. And, what is more, it is not Slaughter's "consciousness," as it were that deconstructs "this" language, but his lived-body unity, his blackness deconstructs. It is his blackness that resists "this" language—a reflection of "this" place and "this" time. Slaughter writes, "It [lived-body] poses the impossibility of my succumbing totally to that thorough denigration (!) of Blackness, apparently intended by society."²⁶⁸

Language expresses the unity of the body towards the world while simultaneously hiding it from ourselves; thus, we need a creative language, one that can free our relation to ourselves without the mediation of "the reductive process of technical control."²⁶⁹

The problem with "this" language for Slaughter is that he cannot locate himself *in* it. If our existence is illuminated through language, where I am in "this" language? *Lebenswelt. Umwelt. Mitsein...Hinterland. Herrenvolk*. Where am I? Perhaps in the words, that is, the letters, the signs themselves? Perhaps *between* the words themselves—perhaps between each letter as we sound them.²⁷⁰ L-E-B-E-N-S-W-E-L-T. Perhaps that is where truth lies. Merleau-Ponty seems to think so. In the gaps of words themselves, is, perhaps, where the "invisibility" of existence can be located, in the "residual" of language. *Wesen*; or, W-E-S-E-N. The mystical, *magical* language; an incantation, an invitation to/for existence to emerge from its hiding. The invisibility, though, is never truly hidden—it is us who have failed existence in *our* being, in *our* language. But, where am I in all this? U-M-W-E-L-T. Am I the

often overlooked essay on the being of raced persons, but this time, white persons is James Baldwin, "Being White and Other Lies."

²⁶⁸ Thomas F. Slaughter. "Epidermalizing the World," 283-84.

²⁶⁹ Joanna Hodge. *Heidegger and Ethics*, 85.

²⁷⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Signs*.

dash in the shared world? If existence is located in the dash, in the space, in the silent silence, pregnant with the loudness of a pause, and if this being is not mine, where, then, am I? The truth, as many have told us, is *I am nowhere*. Not to say that I am nothingness. *I am not powerful* in “this” language as it is presented to me. What it means is that there is no space left for me to be. The invisibility—that is, the carved out space between words, or within words—is already filled with a presence, an ontic-metadiscourse that discloses persons, beings of sound that elocute/enunciate themselves, their being, their world—U-M-W-E-L-T. Problematically, for us historians of existence, while Europeans *found* themselves, Anglo-Americans simply inserted themselves²⁷¹ in this gap, but, here I am [seemingly]—toothless, rootless—words spilling out of my mouth, stumbling over my lips “Par” and, “...thenon...”²⁷² When I think of myself, I imagine myself elocuting the most perfect form, “Parthenon.” Unable to precisely articulate the *fullness* of the word, unable to utter the spaces, inhabit the carved out space, my lived-body stumbles.

I seem to occupy a necessary, but “external,” position in this whole phenomenon. It is as if I am the ink which spells the words themselves, the air that carries the sound, allowing white being to exist between the words. I am the dark sky that allows the lightening to stand out as lightening. In either case, because it is not *my* ontic-metadiscourse that is taking place, it *can* become a *white* one that does take place. This is

²⁷¹ I cannot keep count of the many times that white American philosophy graduate students think and speak of themselves *as* Kantian, Heideggerian, Hegelian—not in agreement with or a student of, but *of the same kind*—ignoring the historical, geographical, and, most importantly, *linguistic and spiritual* distance between themselves and their authorial kin. White Americans simply insert themselves within a history and a culture they presume to ‘white’ over being German or French, or even English. Black students in philosophy are not afforded this conceptual shift.

²⁷² Jean-Paul Sartre, “Introduction: in *Wretched of the Earth*, 7.

the irony noted earlier: to be black, in part, means to stand in/occupy necessary position as an outsider, giving shape to the structure of the “inside.” And this is why I must borrow, why I maraud. But, how do I do so; how do I make “this” *mine*?

* * * * *

My words, my concepts are always already in “conversation” with the world before I have uttered them, before I have even theorized them. They are there, sitting, waiting, like the fog on the shore “sitting on haunches,” like a cat²⁷³, waiting—*in* my body, in my way of dealing with the world. I have already “spoken/sung the world” before I have acquired language to represent the world. The unity of my body with the world means that I always already have a relationship with the world. Language is the icing on the cake as it were. There is a kind of embodied constitutive intuition. My black-Being intuits the world, rejecting “this” language, for my body has its own.

And, while the meaning-intention structure of language may place me inside “this” language, I am not trapped within (it). I break the veneer by breaking its meaning-intention structure.

Only a black person alienated from black language-use could fail to understand that we have been deconstructing white people's languages and discourses since that dreadful day in 1619 when we were marched off the boat in Virginia. Derrida did not invent deconstruction, we did!²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Carl Sandberg, “The Fog.”

²⁷⁴ Henry Louis Gates, “Authority, (White) Power, and the (Black) Critic: It’s All Greek to Me,” in *Cultural Critique* 7 (Fall 1987), 34. I take the words themselves back to their root, back to the world that they shape (and are shaped by), and deliver to that world, through its world, a new shape, a new world. I am more than just a word-smith, creating new, catchy word memes; I am, through my deconstructive act announces the presence of my own body through my dis-closure of my world.

Slaughter's deconstructed world through his body is further deconstructed with the language he adapts to critically reflect the "flesh". His black-Being deconstructs at two levels: the material and the symbolic. His entire being deconstructs—what is left from the old is but a residual in the new. Slaughter writes, "Having moved, but yet not having destroyed or fundamentally altered the usurping society my maneuvers are never *only* my own."²⁷⁵

It is as if the language waiting there in my body for me to speak it is not "this" language, but some other language; for when I speak "this" language it is no longer "this" language, but *my* language. When I speak through my body "this" language it is transformed. My being deconstructs "this" language. And in its deconstruction of "this," in transference to "mine," I have not just performed a deconstructive act which can be thought of or known phenomenologically, but I have performed an ethical act as well, for I have inserted into the world another axiological framework through which world can be known and lived. *My blackness is ethical.*²⁷⁶ Slaughter writes, "My being is borrowed. My 'dues' revolve in the surrounding society, inseminating its soul with 'life,'"²⁷⁷ not only characterizing the act of deconstruction as a gift, but one that gives life through the organic process of insemination. His new, deconstructed language gives the society profound ways of re-examining itself.

²⁷⁵ Thomas F. Slaughter, "Epidermalizing the World," 286; emphasis added.

²⁷⁶ Here we have a reversal from the claim Slaughter made earlier in his essay where he writes, "'I own nothing. I just pay rent. The wretchedness of my being colonized secretes 'guilt.'" (285) Here we have a reversal; while before his blackness secreted guilt, in which the ethical valuation of blackness was external, now we have a new valuation where blackness takes on the necessity of human existence: "My 'dues' revolve in the surrounding society, inseminating its soul with 'life.'" (286)

²⁷⁷ Thomas F. Slaughter, "Epidermalizing the World," 286.

For Slaughter, because white ontology is captured and expressed within “this” language, whose soul life is expressed in the modern-scientific turn and in the tension between the human and objective worlds, whites are in constant search for a way out, for a “new method” to express existence and the world. In a sense, what Slaughter has discovered is that within “this” language there is no outside once one has been constituted inside, for this metaphysics, as a closed and totalizing system, traps. Trapped within this soul life, by “this” language, “this” mode of being, inside “this” crisis what is to be the “new mode of sociality and a new form of enduring society, whose spiritual life, cemented together by a common love and creation of ideas and by the setting of ideal norms for life, carries within itself a horizon of infinity for the future”?

Phenomenology can be seen as Europe’s movement towards this freedom of “intentional infinities”. Where is Slaughter’s freedom in this axiological matrix? Where is freedom when one’s existence is determined and closed, known and already sketched out? This, Slaughter realizes, is the strength not the weakness of blackness and its relatively settled and yet unsettled position of determined indeterminacy. I am the object of “this” time, “this” language but am reducible to neither—I don’t *belong* to this place or this time, as Slaughter reminds us. “This” language is not mine, I cannot belong to it as an instituted being like whites; I am free because I am institutional—the values and rules for thinking do not belong to me and thus do not constitute me: “Through my ‘throwness,’ the sanctity of the system of credits begins to fade. I act in judgment...”²⁷⁸—I cannot be constituted in “this” here and now, I belong to that long ago and much theorized liminal space wherein truth and existence reside. I do not need the *epoche*, for I do not have the natural attitude of

²⁷⁸ Thomas F. Slaughter, “Epidermalizing the World,” 285-86.

“this” world, my *Lebenswelt* is not Cartesian nor is it the “scientific” episteme of “this” world and “this” language. *I* am free, that is, yet to be determined, constantly becoming so my language to describe this and me has to reflect this (becoming).

What Slaughter offers, as much as a narrative or a descriptive of black existence in a white racism society is a deconstructive method about language and the accomplishment of culture. This is Slaughter’s phenomenological method at work: to subtend and upend traditional power dynamics in which he, a given in-itself, becomes a for-itself, and in the process negates the mastery and slavery dynamic imposed on the imaginings of black life and black existence. Facing social death, Slaughter affirms life and his willingness to re-affirm life. Slaughter deconstructs the dynamic of black death and offers a phenomenological accounting of it.

What Slaughter’s deconstructive method offers is a way of opening us up onto language itself, to a mode of expression that had come to “constitute,” and thus trap, its users. Without a way out of the matrices of discourse, what Slaughter offers is a radical transcription in which he measures himself as other—“I do not belong to this place, to this time...I own nothing, so I am free...” —which issues, for him, an indeterminacy with respect to “this” language, calling forth an opening onto the very creation of language itself. Having his being in transition, “belonging to neither this place nor this time,” Slaughter finds himself in a liminal position, one of ambiguity: a position from which one actually stands in the clearing, the openness of the open, and creates. It is quite awe inspiring to be in a position to witness the creation of being, the creation of language to witness people inhabiting the critical spaces on the horizon. Slaughter’s essay invites us to bear witness to

the emergence of African Americans, not as a unitary consciousness, but as people. Of this W.E.B. Du Bois once wrote,

...the sociologists of few nations have so good an opportunity for observing the growth and evolution of society as those of the United States...European scholars envy our opportunities and it must be said to our credit that great interest in the observation of social phenomena has been aroused in the last decade...In one field however, —and a field perhaps larger than any other single domain of social phenomena, there does not seem to have been awakened as yet a fitting realization of the opportunities for scientific inquiry. This is the group of social phenomena arising from the presence in this land of eight million persons of African descent.²⁷⁹

This is what Slaughter has given us a glimpse into: I infuse the world with *life*.

²⁷⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois. "The Study of Negro Problems" In *W.E.B. Du Bois on Sociology and the Black Community*. Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver, eds. (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1978). Page 70.

Conclusion

...the true subject of democracy is not simply material well-being, but the extension of the democratic process in the direction of perfecting itself. And that the most obvious test and clue to that perfection is the inclusion, *not* assimilation, of the black man [and woman].

Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*

I am black. I am here, which is, perhaps nowhere and everywhere, “straddling Nothingness and Infinity”²⁸⁰, trying on my white suit—a patchwork, a white madras if you will, fashioned from an infinity of white stories, legends...*historicity*...sayings, affects, and the totality of whitely ways of being-in-the-world. But, it [the suit] does not seem to fit quite right. The tailoring, which is sloppy at best, needs to be more precise. *Lebenswelt. Umwelt.* I am trying to do the alterations. *Prefabricated Negroes are sketched on sheets of paper and superimposed on the Negro community.*²⁸¹ But, as soon as I attempt to alter the suit to my body, it is that very thing which betrays me. I open my mouth to properly announce these white words, and my body obfuscates my intention. *Used to speak the King’s English, then I caught a rash on my lips, so now I check jus’ like dis.*²⁸² That rash is my betrayal. My body, my lived-body protests the white suit. My being, my body cries out in protest, all the things that I do not *want* it to say. The black body is not to be trusted, even by me—*especially* by me. There is no telling what it is going to say, what it *can* say, and there is no stopping it from talking, from speaking. I am the unwilling rebel.²⁸³ “And it is this which frightens me”:²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, 140.

²⁸¹ Ralph Ellison. *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 170.

²⁸² Mos Def. “Hip-Hop.” *Black on Both Sides*.

²⁸³ Ralph Ellison’s famous scene from *Invisible Man*, “Battle Royal” is an excellent example of the body’s betrayal of the intention of “consciousness”. The narrator, a self-effused Booker T. Washington ‘accommodationist’ type, thought of himself meek and grateful, happy to be in the

perhaps I, on some level, embrace the rebellion of my body. *Watch out there, Jack, there are people living under here* and they're not saying *Lebenswelt*; and they're definitely not "studyin' them white folk". What, then, is my body, strapped in my white suit, to say, and *how* should it be said?

Slaughter instructs me that I have to remember I am black, borne of and into institutions with an important twist. The white man²⁸⁵ is an instituted man; I am an

presence of wealthy white men making a speech found himself, in the battle royal, not only fighting other frightened black boys, but his own body and its resistance to the dehumanization that it had endured that night. His speech, memorized, the narrator "spoke automatically, and with such fervor" against the fury of noise of the white men, drinking, smoking. The deliberateness of the speech, of the moment was interrupted when the narrator "misspoke":

I used the phrase "social responsibility" and they [white men] yelled:

"What's that word you say, boy?"

"Social responsibility," I said.

"What?"

"Social..."

"Louder."

"responsibility."

"More!"

The room filled with an uproar of laughter until, no doubt distracted by having to gulp down my blood, I *made a mistake* and yelled a phrase I had often *seen* denounced in newspapers, editorials, *heard* debated in private.

"Social..."

"What?" they yelled.

"...equality—" (30-31)

I am reading this moment as one of the body's active resistance, even though, and especially because, the narrator has tried to quiet it; it may also be said that the "slip" of the tongue was the intentional state of the narrator. And, this is what frightened him, that there were beneath his operative intentions, deeper intentional actions that even he did not know about: that he was in fact, like his grandfather, a *traitor*. (17)

²⁸⁴ Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*, 581.

²⁸⁵ An important note needs to be mentioned here. In very few phenomenological descriptions of the colonial or racialized situation is there mention of white or black women. This issue has become one of white men and black men. It has become a homoerotic affair of power and sexuality tied to physical struggles and psychic wars—that is what Hegel missed from the master and bondsmen, the sexual nature of power. It is my hope that with a re-evaluation of Slaughter's article 30 years later we can come to rid ourselves of this pattern of analysis, and

institutional man—while the opposite is usually thought to be the case.²⁸⁶ The white man is determined by the institutions of “this” world, and I am not, I am simply trapped within them and find ways of escape; the white man can only escape *through* me. Therein lies my freedom; Thomas F. Slaughter was correct. Since I am an institutional man, my being is not tied to “their” language, I can deconstruct it,²⁸⁷ I *must* deconstruct it to locate myself. My being deconstructs; it alters space(s), manufactures place(s), carving up, reapproximating and repositioning the world, articulating it at the joints to reconstitute a new space, a new place that has to take into itself *my* language, *my* being. It is a transformed world, a world that is given life through the fecund moment of creative necessity which brings my being as

while sexuality and power still remain tied, we would not simply enrich ourselves and our analysis, but make each accurate in the ways the world is lived out and be honest about how we have been living out the world by the inclusion of women’s voices and narratives into the preexisting ones as well as utilizing them to reconstruct the old narratives.

²⁸⁶ I am here playing with the space between an ontological distinction and a political distinction, as noted above in footnote X. But, here the distinction is between being ‘instituted’ and being ‘institutional’. To be ‘instituted’ here means to be constituted, to be made within an axiological framework, to which one contributes, but does not subtend. To be ‘institutional’ is to be within its power forces, but not to be constituted by those forces. The distinction is drawn finer by noting that those who runs prisons have their values within the framework of imprisoning others and punishment; their language reflects these very values. On the other hand, to be an inmate one must not necessarily agree with or confer legitimacy onto such a system. Rather, these persons are usually the ones who have a clearer view of the system itself. The irony, though, is that it is often thought that those imprisoned are instituted by the system, while those enforcing the punishment are institutional, rather than the other way around (For more, see George Jackson, *Prison Letters and Blood in My Eye*; Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*; Huey Newton’s *Black Power Pamphlet*; Angela Davis’ work on prisons; and, the impassioned response many whites have to Foucault’s work on punishment and prisons, *Discipline and Punish*, which was greatly influence by the preceding works, especially that of The Black Panthers—see Brady Heiner’s s article, “Foucault and the Black Panthers”)

²⁸⁷ Language is instituted and we are constituted in this institution. Yet, there are some people who are not constituted in the institution of a language. Whites have trouble getting “outside” of their language because they are constituted in it, it is *who* and *what* they are. Not so for black people, according to Slaughter.

the foundation for this new world, the dawn of “that” old world.²⁸⁸ In light of Slaughter’s contention, what conclusions for contemporary political thought and philosophy can be drawn from his article 30 years later?

* * * * *

What is enduring about Slaughter’s article is not that it is “first” article on the phenomenological underpinnings of being black in the world, but the necessity of craft, even at the expense of racial affiliation or faithfulness. The phenomenological method, Slaughter reminds us, is not “white” or “European,” but a way of understanding the world that whites have given the task and name, “Phenomenology.” The same is true of “deconstruction.” Slaughter reminds us that craft is *mixed* with who we are, what we are, such that when a black subject, steeped in the cultural and historical milieu deconstructs or performs a phenomenological investigation it is not going to mirror Derrida or Merleau-Ponty—other than as a distorted reflection—and in that there is nothing wrong or defective in our inability to copy one another. Rather, it is a failure of philosophical insight and rigor to copy, to reproduce a work, a method as if *you* were somehow those other people. And this is not to say that we in the philosophical community do not study, learn from others, from the past incorporating both into our present. It is to say, as Fanon

²⁸⁸ Here is a reappraisal/reinterpretation of Fanon given anew in the light of the American context and the black American situation. It is instructive to revisit Fanon’s work:

The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position. Still in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is*. It is its own follower. (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 135).

does, the phenomenological significance of who we are and our present moment: “When the Negro dives...something remarkable occurs.” That is the phenomenological “proof” of Slaughter’s deconstruction. My body and my language are one moving through space emerging as new, as different, both phenomenologically illuminated and a deconstructed truth about this new mode of being: *my blackness is ethical*. Slaughter has given us a performative ethical theory constituted in my embodied historical reality.²⁸⁹

And here is the strength of Slaughter’s essay: it subtly argues for a place-based phenomenology and epistemology. Rather than offering a colonial or post-colonial narrative in which the white man asphyxiates the other making it Othered, that is, colonial, Slaughter offers a subject who consciously and unconsciously changes, alters his surrounding with both his very being as presence, and his activity. *I* am not the underside of modernity or outside of “their” world; *I* represent a new world, a new being-in-the-world, a new way of being-with, and a new manner of being-for.

²⁸⁹ To recap, Slaughter claims that his being, as black, exudes “guilt,” which on its face, seems to argue that blackness, that is, racialized embodiment, has a certain ethical dimension to it. Where one speaks of blackness, one is already involved in or within and speaking of an ethical world. One’s body is the site of ethical content and context. This makes sense within the context of my body exuding meaning in the world. The body exudes the structure of the world, the foundation for any further relatedness that we want to have.

-CHAPTER FIVE-

Race, Place, and the Geography of Self-Discovery

[T]he rules and cognitions associated with the natural environment are usually more central to the overall worldview of the society than are the cognitive structures associated with other subsystems.

Jay Mechling

It will take a deeper science...to analyze what is happening among the masses of Negroes. Much of it is inarticulate, and Negro scholars have for the most part ignored it through clinging...to the sterile concept of 'race.'

Ralph Ellison ("An American Dilemma: *A Review*")

Existentialism, generally speaking, as a philosophy concerned with the meaning of human existence, is tasked with revealing not only the meaning of the word, but also the process of meaning-making in the world. Existentialism, in general, understands the world as an already constituted phenomena engaged by human consciousness. From Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness*, Albert Camus' notion of absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Soren Kierkegaard's concept of Anxiety in *Fear and Trembling*, and Simone de Beauvoir's mixture of embodiment, authenticity, and alienation in her understanding of gender in terms of the '*Second Sex*', existentialism has presented itself as the individual's psychological response to an always already existing, external world.

Phenomenology is more a philosophical methodology than a traditional philosophical position in that it does not promise any grand theories of existence, but offers novel analysis of our experience(s) in the world. As a methodology it is tasked with releasing us from both the grasps and limitation of everyday experience as well as from the theoretical grasps of philosophical abstraction. As a philosophy *of* experience, concerned *with* existence, phenomenology challenges both the duality of philosophical theory—e.g., idealism versus materialism—or the monism of lived experience—i.e. that of brute perception—by offering us a way into the essence(s) of experience which are neither wholly perceptive nor wholly cognitive. There are many, varied approaches to phenomenological methodology, from Hegel's dialectic (1860) to Edmund Husserl's reduction (1903), to Martin Heidegger's ontology (1927), to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's

embodiment (1960).²⁹⁰ What, each has in common, though, is revelation by indirection. That is, the essence(s) of experience are revealed to us only by way of looking away from the experience itself and towards the basic ways through which we come to know an experience to be an experience.²⁹¹ What is significant for us is the idea that phenomenology “makes explicit what is only implicit.” Phenomenology, thus, as a methodology is principally concerned with an appropriation of the essence(s) that are implicit in an experience, and making them, that is, revealing them, *as implicit*, but in an explicit manner.

Existential-phenomenology is the gathering of existential philosophy and phenomenological methodology. As both an approach to and an analysis of existence and experience, it is tasked with the revelation of human meaning-making of the world itself. What is significant for us here is not only the meaning-made, but also the *process* through which meaning is made and the world constituted in the meaning itself. Here we are bridging the coherency of cognition and materiality in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, the “direct and primitive contact with the world” of Merleau-Ponty, and the hermeneutic phenomenological belief that the meaning *of* the world is *in* our interpretation of it. As such, we are neither solely interested in embodied relationality nor empirical cognition but *how* and in what way the material world as such becomes *our* world, what Heidegger refers

²⁹⁰ These are but large movements within the history of phenomenology; they constitute what could be called critical moments that their predecessors were in response to.

²⁹¹ In Hegel’s dialectic, the essence of human being, or Spirit is revealed through the movement of Spirit in the world to reveal the inner necessity of each movement. Husserl’s reduction, we turn away from the experience of the subject to focus on the subject—in bracketing out both the natural and social worlds, we come to understand not only the essence of the subject itself, but the nature of the world by the subject’s interaction with it. In Heidegger’s ontology we look towards a certain being to understand nature of being itself; that is, we look towards the activity of human being to understand the nature of human being. In Merleau-Ponty, we look away from the world to the body, and it is through the body that the world reappears for us.

to as the 'worlding of the world': that is, it is not sufficient for us to claim "*that people are immersed in a world that normally unfolds automatically*,"²⁹² rather, we are concerned the interpretative process through which the world is transformed from brute reality into a that in which we dwell.

The coherency of consciousness and materiality, the embodied posture, and the hermeneutic interpretive framework are brought together here through the concept of place. Philosophy of place seeks to overcome the dualism between subject and object, between consciousness and consciousness *of* something. Our primitive relation to the world is not as subjective consciousness towards an objective essential known in transcendental intuition. Place forwards the concept of the duality of the self with the world. Place is where consciousness emerges as such, as the contextualization of material space. Consciousness finds itself already in a place because to be conscious one must have already constituted meaning *in the material* and constituted it *as* world. The hermeneutic approach offers meaning as well as consciousness and materiality as the foundation of the world and our being-in-the-world.

The result of the interrelation between consciousness and materiality is place. Our interpretation of the world is revealed in the manner in which place is dwelt: and, dwelling, here, is reconstituted through the terms we will introduce: 'accomplishment' of place and 'achievement' of history.

The objection to traditional phenomenology, tracing its way through Descartes and Kant to Husserl, is not so much the methodological approach, but the assumption that consciousness as subjectivity can be abstracted from the world in order to 'know' it as such.

²⁹² John Cameron. "Place, Goethe and Phenomenology: A Theoretic Journey", 177.

Philosophy of place, as it understood here, does not object to the epistemology at work, but to the metaphysical speculations as to what constitutes the subject/consciousness, the world, and the subject/consciousness' experience in the world. Philosophy of place reorients the traditional notions of world, subject/consciousness, and experience through the lens of 'interpretation' and 'inwardization'.

The reorientation of traditional phenomenological concepts is predicated upon the insistence of the *inner* necessity of place in the constitution of what is termed the self/consciousness. Phenomenology of place distances itself from the Cartesian notion of the self, and the Husserlian project of *epoche* to locate the movement of consciousness in the world in its interaction *with* the world; rather than consciousness attending to the world (by means of its own private world and *apresentation*), consciousness exists *within* the world. Phenomenology of place, then, is more closely related to hermeneutics than traditional phenomenological analysis of *intentionality*. Hermeneutics problematizes Husserl's phenomenology, and by proxy Descartes' philosophy, by situating the "subject" within the "world" in such a way that it is impossible, even for the sake of method, to separate the two and offer a genealogical review of the human *Lebenswelt* or shared world. We are so taken up with the world that the world as such appears as it does according to the meaning that we engrave in it; this meaning is itself not solely a cognitive event (for this would be Husserl in another form), but it is equally a material *and* a cognitive event—an event that is equally pronounced in our physical comportment as well as our cognitive arrangements. As such, phenomenology of place takes into account both the physical world and the cognitive world. More properly, philosophy of place offers to existential phenomenology, physical geography and cognitive mapping—what can be taken together

as “human ecology”: that is, the entire ‘ecosystem’ which encompasses and is encompassed by being-in-the-world, once located in consciousness now located *in place*.²⁹³

In the preceding chapter, Robert F. Slaughter teaches us the magical process of being, the emergence of human existence on the plane of immanence. Yet, what will unfold here is the seminal role place plays in the unfolding of human existence on the plane of immanence. It will be argued here that place is the site through which existence *is* and beings *are*. That is, what was missing in Slaughter’s account, though, was the backdrop, the scene in which and through which consciousness becomes *self*-consciousness, through which self-consciousness has a subjective experience.²⁹⁴

Though phenomenology has come a long way from the stage of Husserl’s transcendental ego, nevertheless, the perspectival position of transcendental philosophy has not completely fallen away: vestiges still remain. Within African American philosophy, black existentialism, black phenomenology, and Africana philosophy, and within the specialized interests of philosophy and race and critical philosophies of race, we still face a problem of universalism when it comes to thinking and investigating subject matter of methodological inquiry—in this case, we are talking about the practices of understanding and analyzing black people. It is not uncommon to see black figures separated by ages, continents, and context sharing the same page, paired together on an issue no more profound than what others, meaning whites, have thought about them. 20th century figures like W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Fanon—two of the staples of in each of these approaches and

²⁹³ See, W. Arthur Mehrhoff, *A Phenomenology of Place*.

²⁹⁴ Although the notion of the *hinterland* as briarpatch offers us a glimpse, an insight into the constitution of subjectivity within the physical geography of place—“born and bred in the briarpatch”—more can, and must be said of the entanglement to explore this magical unfolding.

within each these specialized interests—are often paired together, ignoring the vast difference between existential psychoanalysis and sociological inquiry; and the vast difference between the islands of the Antilles and the state of Massachusetts.

Yet, and still more, this pairing is done in the method and for the sake of existential phenomenological analysis. That is, this pairing is done for the sake of and in name of an internal evaluation of one's direct, and immediate life. We are no longer speaking of macro-structural analysis, as is done in social sciences and economics, but a personal perspective in which individuality, ironically, is caricatured under the universality of race, or in this case, 'blackness.'

Black existential phenomenology, then, as a philosophy tasked with not only the meaning of black existence, but the process of meaning-making of black existence has to offer from within. We find ourselves asking, is the meaning of black existence and our understanding of black experience predicated on, and guided by external forces of white anti-black racism and oppression? Or, can there be, and must there be, on existential phenomenological grounds, other ways to connect and evaluate black human being? That is, on existential phenomenological grounds can we not offer other ways to understanding black being in the world? Why not place?

* * * *

If what we have said thus far concerning existential phenomenology is adequate, then, the oversight of place in black existential phenomenological analysis has rendered it as a methodology, empty, only in possession of the pure abstraction of the *concepts of* meaning and experience in black existence, and not the actual(ization) *meaning and experience* in

the *process* of existence.²⁹⁵

In this chapter we will be investigating place—the meaning of place, the experience of place, and what is more, the process by which place is constituted. In particular, we will be investigating what constitutes “experience”, and how we “experience” [the] world.

²⁹⁵ Remembering our earlier remarks that the meaning of existence is revealed in our being-in-the-world, which is found in our dwelling; and, that dwelling itself is concerned with what is produced within the world. We, thus, measure the meaning of existence by way of the productions of people in the world. By ignoring place, black existential phenomenologist are ignoring the main, anchoring production of human being dwelling upon the earth.

Polemics and Preamble—Space, Place Phenomenology

Where have all the places gone? In the long wake of Aristotle, the answer has become increasingly evident: submerged in space.

Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place*

Edward Casey, above, raises his question to Western philosophy. Space is all around us; it is omnipresent throughout the tradition of Western philosophy, though there are many debates surrounding both its definition and its role in knowledge construction and consumption—from the absolutism of the physical sciences to the relationism of transcendental philosophy. Place, though, as a concept has been more controversial, often having been subsumed under the concept of space.²⁹⁶ Part of the concern over place reflects the concern over the status of metaphysics in Western philosophy—both in its understanding as well as in its role in the dispersion of knowledge and truth. The hesitation concerning place is over the tension between determinism and free will. That is, depending on how place is understood, the individual may be consigned to the meaning of *that* place, even though it is often not a result of the direct free choice of that individual. Immanuel Kant's infamous texts, *Idea for Universal History With a Cosmopolitan Intent* (1784), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic View* (1798), and *Physical Geography* (1804), link historical telos and history determination, ethical and religious norms, and, freedom and responsibility to both physical geography and cultural anthropology; G.W.F. Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817) understands geography and history as systematic philosophy to reveal inherent hierarchies amongst the 'races' of the world. The

²⁹⁶ See Edward S. Casey. *The Fate of Place*, 197-202.

problem of geography, generally, and as evidenced in the Kant and Hegel, is that the metaphysics of the materiality *is* deterministic—not just of one’s outer form, in their skin color, but also one’s inner form. In both Hegel and Kant, physical geography became one of the main frameworks to guide ethical, normative, aesthetic, religious, ontological and metaphysical judgment *about* and ranking *of* persons throughout the world. For each of them, physical geography became both placialized and racialized.

Yet these determinitive notions of place are not the only options we have. The metaphysical conceits of Kant and Hegel are not endemic to the essential nature of place, but one interpretation of places’ way of essentializing nature.

Within the discipline of existentialism, phenomenology, and existential phenomenology, the relation of space to place, or the relation of space to the meaning, is critical to an understanding of existence and the experience of being-in-the-world. In existential terms, brute or bare reality, that is, those aspects of human living universally belonging to us all, are called factual elements of human existence. They include a diverse range of elements from one’s historical circumstance to one’s own embodiment within the world, and though these elements may overlap, they may also remain independent. For example, one could be born a woman in United States of America prior to 1920, or one could be born a woman in America after 1920. The importance of factual elements for existentialism is that they help to inform, shape, and guide the sort of existence and experience they may have. That is, for existentialists, these factual elements affect their conception of human freedom and possibility: the life projects a woman can imagine for herself prior to the tenth Amendment giving women the right to vote is, perhaps, different from the life project of a woman born after the Amendment. For existentialist, factual

element are influential but not determinative.

However, the question must be raised: if these exogenous elements into which one is born, both material and cognitive, that is, meaning informed, what is their relationship to space? That is, in existential terms facticity is concerned with life projects, that is, with one's conscious projecting of oneself into the world *as a future possibility*, one that is informed and influenced and guided by these concrete elements. So, for the existentialist, brute reality and cognition meet in one's life project: that is, materiality and cognition are cohered around the concept of meaning. What, though, is the status of brute materiality of facticity to that of the brute reality of space?

Given that existentialism is concerned with the cultivation of human meaning *in a situation*, which includes all the factual elements surrounding the individual, what role does space play in this decision making of the individual? That is, what role do these factual elements play in the process of decision-making? How are these elements experienced by the individual? Are they experienced as abstract concepts in the formula of a possible future life? Or, are they experienced as the raw material for human consciousness itself, like that of space? Can facticity and space be brought together as the raw brute reality out of which human consciousness is formed; or, are these brute realities only what they are against the backdrop of an already formed human consciousness? That is, is space conceptually that of facticity? Is space factual? A projection into which and out which place emerges, as in: is the factual that out which human meaning emerges, or does human meaning condition our experience of the factual elements? Is there something *before* these elements, or are these elements determinative in a certain way? Can a woman prior to 1920's America think of herself not qua "woman", but as something else which will

inform her view of the category, or must the category inform her view of herself—does the category “woman” explain itself?²⁹⁷ Is the factual *of* bare space the meaning of existence and experience? Or, is the meaning structure of place the brute fact of human existence? These questions become especially significant for our discussion of the existential phenomenological investigation into and analysis of black existence and the experience of being black.

* * * *

Noted space/place theorist Marcel Eliade offers clear distinction between space and place in terms of what he calls “the sacred and the profane.” Though Eliade is concerned with differentiations within space, what he says can easily be translated into what we are to say about the differentiation of space and place. In his 1949 essay, “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred,” Eliade writes

For religious man, space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others...There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous. Nor is this all. For religious man, this spatial nonhomogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred—the only *real* and *real-ly* existing space—and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it.

It must be said at once that the religious experience of the nonhomogeneity of space is a primordial experience, homologizable to a founding of the world. It is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world. For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation...

So it is clear to what a degree the discovery—that is, the revelation—of

²⁹⁷ The upshot of which is, “can experience, if its predicated as a factual matter, explain itself, reference itself, justify itself? Or, does something outside of experience as a factual matter serve to explain experience? This will become more important later in this chapter.

sacred space possesses existential value for religious man...²⁹⁸

What Eliade is referring to as the “primary religious experience that precedes reflection” is the basic organization of consciousness and materiality to constitute place and world, a constitution which makes possible self-conscious reflection. Prior to this reflection, there is an already existing world, a world that is constituted not by self-consciousness, nor in what is simply given, but a world that is constituted by us and a ‘we’ that is already constituted in consciousness in immediate and direct interaction.

What is important here for our discussion is the relationship between space and place. Place is what grounds and creates the space surrounding it. Phenomenology reveals to us is that we are already grounded in the world, and that we already have a relation to the world in our constitution of it. That is say, by constructing place as a grounding axis, the surrounding can come to be understood as “what is around it.”²⁹⁹

Though Eliade speaks of sacred space and distinguishes it from profane space, much of what he says is relevant for our discussion here. For Eliade, sacred space is both

²⁹⁸ Marcel Eliade. *Sacred Space*, 20-22.

²⁹⁹ One may even argue that with traditional ‘existential philosophy’ [Cartesianism] and traditional ‘phenomenology’ [Husserl] that reason or the Cartesian subject is the marker of sacred space carved out the profane of the chaotic material world, and that method—for Descartes reason; for Husserl, the epoche—is the marker of this sacred space, the portal through which we move from death into life. If this is the case, when one engages in traditional existentialism or phenomenology, one is merely engaging in the self-conscious gathering of sacred space, laying it before themselves and worshipping, so to speak, the answer to our original question. In this way we can read all of philosophy as an attempt to carve out the sacred from the profane. And, what is more, constituting the outside by way of the inside. Our analogy, though, stops short of this revelation, for in traditional existentialism and phenomenology, the *inside* is constituted by its distinction *from* the outside—the outside is seen to come first, through our disillusionment with our lack of ‘knowledge’ of it. Traditional existentialism and phenomenology have forgotten their own roots and have taken themselves to be doing the inversion of what they are actually *accomplishing*, even in their abstract activities.

cognitive and material, its meaning equally metaphysical as it is constructed, equally ontologically given as ontologically made. What is significant is not so much if sacred space is given or made, but its meaning in the living of human being. Even the non-religious man constructs sacred space; the difference between the religious and the non-religious man is the where they place the emphasis in the origin of their sacred space—is their sacred space ‘holy’ as with Moses in the Bible, or is it simply ‘privileged’ as with one’s childhood home or birthplace.³⁰⁰ Eliade writes,

It must be added at once that such a profane existence is never found in a pure state. To whatever degree he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior...even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world.³⁰¹

Eliade goes on to further note of the importance and the constructionist element of all sacred space. He writes,

If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point—the center—is equivalent to the creation of the world...³⁰²

It is well worth noting here that Eliade does not claim that a world cannot come to be within chaos, but that world itself cannot *be* within the chaos of meaningless, homogenous bare space. Here Eliade seems to distinguish between the idea or the concept of chaos from the experience of chaos, a distinction and methodological move that will become increasingly important as we move along. Eliade writes

Naturally, we must not confuse the *concept* of homogenous and neutral geometrical space with the *experience* of profane space, which is in direct contrast to the

³⁰⁰ Marcel Eliade. *Sacred Space*, 20, 24.

³⁰¹ Marcel Eliade. *Sacred Space*, 23.

³⁰² Marcel Eliade. *Sacred Space*, 22.

experience of sacred space and which alone concerns our investigation.³⁰³

In existential hermeneutic phenomenology, the meaning of existence turns on our understanding of experience and what constitutes experience. For Eliade, experience is both the grounding of the world and our being in that world; it lies both in carving out of sacred space as much as it is the exclusion of profane space. Yet, he does not quite tell us how this carving out happens, only what it means and why it must occur. The phenomenological concern that remains is how we constitute the world and ourselves prior to reflection: are we talking of Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment, where consciousness is taken from the realm of 'mind' and placed in the realm of 'flesh'?³⁰⁴ Are we talking of pre-predicative 'discourses'? Can we be speaking, phenomenologically, of all of it, while really speaking of none of it? That is, can we speak of these concepts—embodiment, pre-predicative, flesh—without speaking of these in the terms we are given in traditional phenomenology: can we speak of them, then, in terms of the search for the origin itself; in the search for what coheres the world as constructed with our self-conscious appropriation of it? Phenomenology here moves away from itself by way of indirection, and closer to that of hermeneutics: origin is revealed *in the process of its revelation*. That is, in the process of revealing the origin of this coherence we also dis-cover the element of its coherence. Martin Heidegger in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1934/5) offers us a clue as to this 'element.' He writes,

But what is it to be a world? The answer was hinted at when referred to the temple.

³⁰³ Marcel Eliade. *Sacred Space*, 22.

³⁰⁴ Or, in other terms, 'indirect ontology,' which David Abram explains as "the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its spontaneous activity." For more on this see, David Abram. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than Human World*, 66.

On the path we must follow here, the essence of world can only be *indicated*. What is more, this indication limits itself to warding off anything that might at first distort our *view of the essential*.

The world is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are at hand. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added to our representation to the sum of such given things. The *world worlds* and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm of in which we believe ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keeps us transported into Being...

A work, by being a work, makes space for that spaciousness. 'To make space for' means here especially to liberate the free space of the open region and to establish it in its structure...The work as work sets up a world...

When a work is created, brought forth out of this or that work material—stone, wood, metal, color, language, tone—we say also that it is made, set forth out of it. But just as the work requires a setting up in the sense of a consecrating-praising erection, because the work's work-being consists of setting up of a world, so a setting forth is needed because the work-being of the work itself has the character of setting forth.³⁰⁵

The world as such is the accomplishment of consciousness cohered with materiality; it is what appears, emerges out of this coherence. Being at home is more than just an activity, but what comes to be, what is borne, created; or, in Heidegger's terms: what is shown, or what allows itself to be shown in being present.³⁰⁶ Similar to Eliade's "church" Heidegger's reference of the "temple" is not as merely as a holy site (in terms of transcendental

³⁰⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art", 170-1

³⁰⁶ The coherency between Heidegger and Toni Morrison opening lines of *Bluest Eye* are brought together under the concept of the worlding of the world and the world as that which is allowed to appear or presence itself: the worlding of the world is our letting things show themselves as what they are. Morrison writes of the relationship between the characters in the novel to the land:

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did...For years I thought my sister was right; it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding...What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth.

ontology), but in terms of gathering space through which and into which meaning is constituted as “place.”³⁰⁷ World is understood hermeneutically, that is, in terms of direct indirection: what is gestured towards in living, understood as directed towards Being, that is, towards its own source of constitution, which is itself non-objective: things point beyond themselves, and what constitutes experience is always beyond what is directly experienced. The meaning of the church/temple and the experience of being in the church/temple lie beyond the simple construction of its elements (bricks or stones), but what it as a symbol points to: the church/temple gathers the earth as element and consciousness itself and unfolds each into the other to manifestly express the coherency of the earth to consciousness in what Heidegger calls the worlding of the world, or what Eliade calls the making of sacred space.

The world is not a material reality, but what is constituted in the confluence of materiality and consciousness: what is created by letting it be in how it is engaged. Representation, then, belongs to self-conscious as presentation belongs to consciousness: the church/temple exists prior to and beyond the actual structure; the structure itself is but the re-present of being-in, which consciousness has manifested in the activity of building (the church/temple as structure). The self-presentation of what is, what has been constituted as world, then, is the process of acknowledging what one has done to oneself, and the way consciousness makes itself at-home-in-the-world. Our understanding of ourselves and our world is through representation, or through an analysis of what has been

³⁰⁷ The temple, like our original question, gathers in itself both that which questions, us, and that which is questioned, the meaning of existence. We are gathered in the temple as a signal of our own dwelling, but also as a gesture towards that which we seek, the meaning of existence.

constructed by us. Self-consciousness, then, is but the self-apprehension of what we always already are or have been. The self-apprehension of the church/temple as our place is but the self-apprehension of the already constituted world through the direct engagement that comes to have meaning, but only in a secondary manner, as re-presenting that which already is. But, this self-representation is necessary for the digestion of what is as ours and the world as that which we exist in. This is what is meant when Heidegger notes of the indirection of existentiality: “We come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself.” Truth is the indirect revealing of the world in our existence in the world. Heidegger writes more specifically of this hermeneutic phenomenological method, but, here the ‘worlding of the world’ is transformed into the notion of “gathering”—or more specifically, in terms of what gathers—in the constitution of being and place. In his essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (1951) where writes,

The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on earth is...dwelling...

In what way does building belong to dwelling?

The answer to this question will clarify for us what building, understood by way of the essence of dwelling, really is...A bridge may serve as an example for our reflections.

The bridge swings over a stream ‘with ease and power.’ It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge expressly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighborhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream...

The bridge lets the stream run its course and at the same time grants mortals their way, so that they may come and go from shore to shore.³⁰⁸

Earlier, in the first chapter, we spoke of ‘gathering’ in terms of the question, generally, but

³⁰⁸ Martin Heidegger. “Building, Thinking, Dwelling,” 349-354.

specifically, that of the meaning of existence. Here, we are shifting our perspective from that which we question to that which we produce.³⁰⁹ We can see the development from the concept of worlding of the world to that of dwelling, and into the concept of gathering, the movement from what allows itself to be present into that which gathers, to allow something to show itself. In a more basic sense, dwelling is related to the primordial sense of being-in-the-world, which underlies or reaches beyond any of the physical structures we may construct in building. Heidegger notes this when he writes, “For building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling—to build is in itself already to dwell.”³¹⁰

The temple, like the bridge, gathers: it brings together in setting-forth. What builds builds only in that it sets forth; the church/temple/bridge [the question] are built in that they set forth all that surrounds them in an already existing mode of interrelation manifested in the structure. The way in which it gathers is setting forth: the temple, like the bridge, is built, that is, erected, but not by stones and mortar, but by a setting forth of the world as such as a gathering of itself in place. The building of the temple is set-forth as an achievement of consciousness to erect place from space; the actual temple as stone and mortar is but the re-presented form of conscious appropriation of the material; is but the (self-presented) disclosure of the already constituted world to consciousness itself.

When we experience the church/temple/bridge, we are but apprehending what is already re-presented. As such, what is called ‘experience’ is but the self-appropriated actuality of consciousness represented back to consciousness itself in its dwelling-in-the-

³⁰⁹ For Heidegger, the movement from the question to our productive activity is necessary for self-consciousness; we can remember that, for Heidegger, the question of the meaning of existence is only answer by existence itself, that is, through our analysis of the ways in which we dwell in the world, which was by way of our productive activity

³¹⁰ Martin Heidegger. “Building, Thinking, Dwelling”, 348.

world. Heidegger notes this when he writes,

[N]ot every building is a dwelling. Bridges and hangars, stadiums and power stations are buildings but not dwellings...dwelling would in any case be the end that presides over all building. Dwelling and building are related as end and means. However, as long as this is all we have in mind, we take dwelling and building as to separate activities, an idea that has something correct in it. Yet at the same time by the means-end schema we block out view of *the essential relations*. For building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling—to build is in itself already to dwell.³¹¹

For Heidegger, that we build is an indication that we already dwell in place. The outward manifestation of dwelling is building, as Moses might build a temple to announce to others, and to himself, the sacredness of the land [under which the temple stands]. The temple simply marks the already sacredness of land itself and makes for a portal from the “world” of profane *into* the world of the sacred, from chaos and entropy to meaning and significance.

For Heidegger, place is constituted through our dwelling as our work-being, and in becoming place, it sets all else around it in *relation to itself*: place constitutes space; as with Eliade, sacred space “interrupts, breaks” profane space; and in its interruption comes to constitute the profane in grounding what is to have meaning. Our interpretation of worlding, then, necessitates an understanding of experience: the phenomenology of dwelling, that is, being-in is understood in terms of the experience of self-consciousness appropriation in its world. As noted earlier, since we “come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself”, the meaning of dwelling, that is, its disclosure is to be understood in terms of what is “indicated” the dwelling. Existential philosophy, thus, has an emphasis on experience, as in, “the experience of consciousness in

³¹¹ Martin Heidegger. “Building, Thinking, Dwelling”, 348.

the world.”

But, what has already been said, what is experienced indicates beyond itself: stated plainly, experience is not explained by what may be located in experience; or, the factual elements of experience do not explain themselves, but must be apprehended and re-presented. It is not enough for Moses to have stated the ground as holy, but he must also have marked it so, and in its marking to leave indication for others to understand the significance of the place as holy.³¹² To allow the factual elements to explain experience would be to totalize existence in terms of such facts: the un-thought bare appropriation of the concept, without the self-reflected Notion: the church would simply be stone where God lived at some point in the past, but no longer resides; and, if one were to worship there, it would be but an empty act. Experience, then, is but the interpretation of self-conscious internalization of the material. To have a religious experience, to walk across the bridge and be suspended over the earth while still residing on the earth is to experience what is beyond the material itself *through* the material itself: it is to dwell on earth in such that the earth as such is present-alongside-to-be-experienced-as-what-it-means-to-be-in-the-world. Place, as the result of experience is accomplished.

Hermeneutically, ‘experience’, then, belongs to self-conscious reflection within the world. It must be remembered that what we are concerned with here is the manner in which and through experience is possible and the method by which it can be revealed. The point here is that the world as such, which appears to be given, is in fact made, but, thus,

³¹² Marcel Eliade, “Sacred Space,” 20.

can be re-made. Husserl, enightenly³¹³ writes of this in one of his later works in “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science” (1911)

Pure phenomenology as science, so long as it is pure and *makes no use of the existential positing of nature*, can only be essence investigation, and not at all an investigation of being-there; all ‘introspection’ and every judgment based on such ‘experience’ falls outside of the framework.³¹⁴

What he understands as “pure phenomenology” was earlier referred to in Heidegger as “the view of the essential”. Phenomenology is interested in the methodological investigation into experience and not what experience itself yields. As such, it is not interested in the specificities of what emerges from a particular experience and does not define experience in terms of some particular facet (or facticity); rather, it takes the approach of the essence of experience as such: that is, phenomenology explores the process of how we come to have an experience at all. We must not confuse “phenomenological intuition” with ‘introspection’, that is, confuse consciousness with self-consciousness, or as Eliade illumines, confuse the concept of space with the *experience* of space. Or, more explicitly, we must not allow the facts of an experience to speak for the experience itself: we must remember that facts are themselves interpreted moving parts of a total experience which always gestures beyond itself.

What is of ultimate concern, though, is not the search for concepts of our experiences, but the conditions of our experiences, and this is not solely an interior and or an exterior phenomenon, but one that emerges and posits mutually. What is at stake here is differentiating the concept of experience with actual experience: in self-reflection we are

³¹³ I note it as surprising to the extent that it was with Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* that we get the first glimpse of phenomenology in terms of the Cartesian cogito, nevertheless, here, we get a phenomenological picture in terms of *Weltanschauungen*.

³¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*, 116

concerning ourselves with the concept of experience rather than with actual experience, which belongs within consciousness. Place, then, belongs to consciousness, while its manifestation(s) belong to that of self-consciousness.

* * * *

So far place has been understood in terms of the (stationary) matrix of consciousness and materiality, as with the church/temple/bridge; but place can and must also be understood in terms of movement, transience, and impermanence. This understanding of place is relevant when thinking of the phenomena of emigration and immigration, as well as migration more generally; for it is in this understanding that place can be constituted within the individual or groups of individuals *in* their movement. Place, though, understood within movement, must be rethought; instead of the representation being held in a location, an object, or a structure, place is held within the imagination.³¹⁵ Imagination, here, is what “fixes or holds fast experience” with one’s life. What is more, imagination helps us to rethink the definition of place altogether from the locatedness in a particular thing or object to the condition that the thing or the object represents. On the move, place, then, takes us beyond materiality to the immateriality of the *inner-relation*

³¹⁵ In her text, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, Dolores Hayden argues that place can be retained within memory after a physical location no longer exists. For Hayden, this is especially prevalent and important in those places where gentrification occurs [is occurring and has occurred] in which ‘place’ and the meaning of ‘place’ is only present in our recollection. Also, in Tim Cresswell in his text, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* discusses the importance of the imagination in retaining a notion of place and belonging for those who have been displaced—one can think of internal or international displacement through war or famine where one is said keep their country or homeland alive *within* them. In terms of aesthetic production, literature has always been a site where place is kept within one’s imagination: from Wendell Berry’s *The Distant Land* to bell hooks’ *Belonging: A Culture of Place* to Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*

that makes place possible at all. If consciousness is no longer able to apprehend and re-present the world in terms of material structures, it must, then, re-present the world in some other form. How, though, is movement to be represented?

* *

In his text, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern World*, geographer Tim Cresswell frames his understanding of place in terms of mobility. Mobility in the simplest form “involves a displacement—the act of moving between locations.”³¹⁶ But, in more specific terms Cresswell offers “an analytic distinction” between movement and mobility which is useful for our previous conversation about sacred and profane space in Eliade and ‘the worlding of the world’ in Heidegger, and pure phenomenology for Husserl. Cresswell writes of the analytic distinction

For the purposes of my argument, let us say that *movement* can be thought of as abstracted mobility...Movement, therefore, describes the idea of an act of displacement that allows people to move between locations...Movement is the general fact of displacement before the type, strategies, and social implications of that movement are considered.

We can think of movement, then, as the dynamic equivalent of location in abstract space—contentless, apparently natural, and devoid of meaning, history, and ideology...If movement is the dynamic equivalent of location, then mobility is the dynamic equivalent of *place*...A place is a center of meaning—we become attached to it, we fight over it and exclude people from it—we experience it.³¹⁷

If we understand Cresswell’s ‘location’ in terms of space, then, the concept of the abstraction of mobility is here akin to Eliade’s notion of the *concept* of homogenous space versus the *experience* of sacred space. Movement is not the actualization of mobility, but is itself what is externalized within theory. Movement is a sort of theoretical possibility, but at

³¹⁶ Tim Cresswell. *On the Move*, 2.

³¹⁷ Tim Cresswell. *On the Move*, 3.

the same time the impossibility of its own actualization. That is to say, as space is the abstraction of place, movement is the abstraction of mobility, it is free flowing movement without direction or meaning. For Cresswell, mobility is equivalent to place in that each is a constitution of where [the] world exists.

For Cresswell, the place that emerges from mobility is quite different from that which emerges from the stationary. Mobile place engages three interweaving dimensions: the “brute fact—something that is potentially observable, a thing in the world, an empirical reality”; the “ideas of mobility that are conveyed through a diverse array of representational strategies” that “capture and make sense of it [mobility] through the production of meaning”; and, mobility as “practiced”, “experienced” and “embodied.”³¹⁸ All three of these aspects are brought together or cohere in that, “[o]ften how we experience mobility and the ways we move are intimately connected to meanings given to mobility through representation.”³¹⁹ For Cresswell our explanation and understandings of place are within “the interface between mobile physical bodies on the one hand, and the represented mobilities on the other.”³²⁰ These dimensions speak to our own hermeneutic understanding in which consciousness and materiality form what is experienced as *place*; or, what can be constituted as the placeness of place.

What Cresswell introduces within the scholarship of geography that is instructive here are the questions: “why is place thought to be stationary”; and, “what happens to our understanding of place when it is thought as mobile?” These questions engage us in the debate within human geography between those concerned with what is stationary and

³¹⁸ Tim Cresswell. *On the Move*, 3.

³¹⁹ Tim Cresswell. *On the Move*, 4.

³²⁰ Tim Cresswell. *On the Move*, 4.

those concerned with movement, within what is termed the “geographic imaginations that lie behind mobilization in a diverse array of contexts.”³²¹ The history of immigration and emigration, the history of movement through space from one place to another necessitates the need for such a discussion.

In addition to metaphor (cognition) and physical geography (materiality), place is also concerned with movement—that is, with “moving, staying put, resisting dominant flows”³²²—which makes it often intangible and difficult to quantify. Though it is elusive, it is incumbent upon us to define, since it is an essential element of existence. With the modern world immigration and emigration narratives have captured and shifted the meaning of place from the century’s old rootedness in a particular place³²³ to the condition of transience, “more about routes than roots”.³²⁴ Mobility in turn is what has come to ground us to the earth as well what lifts us *from* the earth; equally immanent and transcendent.³²⁵ At the end of his autobiographical work, *Black Boy* (1945) author Richard Wright understands place in the three ways Cresswell forwards: as mobile in his migration from Memphis, Tennessee to Chicago; as an understanding of South through imaginative representation; and as his blackness as practiced, experienced, and embodied. He writes,

I was leaving the South to fling myself into the unknown, to meet other situations that would perhaps elicit from me other responses. And if I could meet enough of a different life, then, perhaps, gradually and slowly I might learn who I was, what I might be. I was not leaving the South to forget the South, but so that some day I might understand it, might come to know its rigors had done to me, to its children. I

³²¹ Tim Cresswell. *On the Move*, 2.

³²² Tim Cresswell. *On the Move*, ix.

³²³ For example, those found in Martin Heidegger’s essays, “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?”

³²⁴ Tim Cresswell. *On the Move*, 1.

³²⁵ This, though, is not to argue for the dissolution of borders and concrete national identities in the way of cosmopolitanism. The grounds of what engage the human consciousness is still metaphysical, but not deterministic.

fled o that the numbness of my defenitive living might thaw out and let me feel the pain—years later and far away—of what living in the South had meant.

Yet, deep down, I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South. So, in leaving, I was taking part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom...³²⁶

Wright in his autobiographical work of immigration/emigration discloses the elements of what makes place so difficult to define. The South, as place, is both physical *and* an idea.

Wright engages it both as the sedimentation of physical events and exogenous forces *and* the place through which he comes to understand himself. But, beyond this discussion of place, Wright also engages the pure phenomenological process of place-making, that is, the accomplishment of place: there is something that engages the materiality of space to create place; he understands this pure phenomenological process in terms of an “ecological project”. That is, the South as a region acts as a total and enclosed system of meaning, one that is equally painful, and also liberating; equally immanent and transcendent. But, is the South the location of historical and exogenous forces that act on and distort personality? Is the South a place in which one can *be-in-the-world*? Is the South a place at all and not a collection of abstractions? Is the South *just* the idea of “Southern living”? It seems for Wright the South is all of these things and more.

* * *

As we see with Cresswell as with Wright, mobility implies time in a standard way, as movement over distance. And, every movement, like every change, implies duration

³²⁶ Richard Wright. *Black Boy*, 284.

through or over which change occurs. Our movements in the world reveal an even more basic experience of time in our relation to things themselves. As we move through the world, our movement is held in relation to the things that surround us. We understand the passing of time, and take note of it to the extent that the things or relation between things in the world change—grow old, come to be, and cease to be. Without changes in things or states of relations, it is said that we would not really ever experience time. Nevertheless, existentially speaking, the world as we experience it is what we have ordered it to be within the consideration of our own life projects. That is, the objects and/or sets of relations we experience are themselves already ordered according to the future projections of our own existence. If we do not include an object or set of relations within our future life project, we would not order it within the sequencing of events, thus, we would not directly *experience* it. As such, our experience of time itself is conditioned upon our own life projects.

Time simply *is* existential interpretation. Yet, existentialists rarely give an accounting of the process of interpretation. If our future projects condition our experience of time, what conditions our future projects? And, it is here that existentialist and phenomenologist part ways: for traditional 'existential philosophy' the world is already given, and we are simply thrown into it; but, with the phenomenologist, our interaction with the world—both cognitively and bodily—is what constitutes the world itself. It is our interpretation with the world that creates our experience *of* the world; there simply is no meaning without us constituting the meaning. With this said, then, our experience with time is through our constitution of the world itself in meaning. As such, if place is the accomplishment of consciousness, then, time is the achievement of self-consciousness. That

is, time is but the self-representation of the world, in a self-conscious way. The *representation* of the world as second order phenomena is the ordering of the world as sets-of-relations-within-it. These sets of relations are what we call *history*. History is but the self-representation of the sets of relations from within an already constituted world or place.

History is a result of time, and time is result of a self-conscious representation of our movement through a constituted place. History, like time, is achieved *by* a consciousness that has come to know itself as the creator and maintainer of the meaning of its life, which includes its own physical and cognitive geography. Place, consciousness, and self-consciousness are not givens, but are *accomplishments*.

Within phenomenology, though, the concern of time is our experience of it; that is, how time *seems* to us, *feels* to us, and how this seeming, this feeling can be revealed to us: phenomenology not only deals with the experience of time, but also the methodology for how we talk about and reveal time as phenomena. Tying back our earlier conversation about abstract concept versus experience, time as an abstract concept is not experienced, but what is quantified—as in clock time. Time as we experience it, though, is often dissimilar to that of it as quantified—e.g., when engaging in an activity one finds to be displeasurable, clock time may seem or feel as if it is slowing down; while, on the other hand, when engaging in activities that we enjoy, clock time may seem or feel as it is speeding up. What is important here is the distinction between what is experienced and what is abstracted: as with Eliade's distinction between sacred and profane space; as with Cresswell's distinction between movement and mobility; what existential hermeneutical phenomenology reveals is that our interpretation constitutes not only the meaning of our

existence, but our experience of being-in-the-world.

The difficulty in any existential phenomenological investigation occurs when an abstract concept, not yet inwardized in dwelling, trapped within the narrow confines of determinacy—of either space, or time, or exogenous forces, or factual elements of existence—becomes understood to *be* the experience of being-in-the-world, for example, when exogenous forces or factual elements are taken to *be* the experience of being-in-the-world *and* the interpretive frameworks to explain themselves rather than elements that are in need of interpretation. The problem inherent here is that one becomes, then, cast outside of oneself, as if the meaning of one's life is exterior to them, and yet still somehow theirs. As a cautionary note, we must remain on guard against mistaking the bare externalization of reality for the inwardization of the meaning of the world; that is, we must guard ourselves against mistaking actual history, actual self-conscious accomplishment, for what simply tells and speaks to and for, but not through; this is especially important for black existential phenomenology, where the exogenous forces of white racism explain the meaning of black life, and offer the only interpretive framework for being-in-the -world.

What we must not lose sight of is that place is constituted, that is, accomplished; and, that as an accomplishment it cannot be understood in terms of what is merely *given*. Existential accounting of human existence, then, cannot be reduced to factual realities, but is already grounded *in* existence itself. We cannot conflate the concept of experience with actual experience, the concept of world with the actual world; the concept of place with actual places.

* * * *

Importantly, what phenomenology teaches us, and what Slaughter emphasizes, is that history as such, event as such, sequencing of events, and meanings of events as such are constituted, and in being constituted work to constitute us. How would our understanding of the meaning of black existence and the experience of being black change if we were to locate place in all of its permutations at the center of existential phenomenological investigation: in the “mobility turn”, within the dialectic of materiality, within history and the production(s) of dwelling? Much of what tasks us in black existential phenomenology involves history, events, the sequencing of events and the meaning inherent in them under the titles, “the modern turn”, and “the African diaspora”: that is, much of what constitutes the content of black existential phenomenology locates the meaning of black existence and the experience of being black within the brute movement of black bodies from one space to another, rather than in the mobility of those bodies within different places.

We find ourselves again, at the beginning, learning how to ask the question itself: what is the meaning of blackness and how do we begin to ask the questions concerning it? Do we begin assuming that there is a ubiquitous element that presides over all instantiations of blackness? And, if so, is it constituted from within (by one’s own adjudication of space and place) or from without (from the mass of whites who constitute others as black, thus, making them and the category exist as what we think of raced)? Should it be understood as “an object in midst of other objects”; as “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”; in “but one challenge...[W]hat is to be understood by black suffering?” What of “natural landscapes and

environments”³²⁷, and the geographical imagination of George Lamming’s *Castle of My Skin* where the Village as place, as setting, is also the *central character*.

In the Castle of My Skin introduces us to a world of poor and simple villagers; and the village functions both as place and symbol of an entire way of life...The book is crowded with names and people, and although each character is accorded with a most vivid presence and force of personality, we are rarely concerned with the prolonged exploration of an individual consciousness. It is the collective human substance of the Village itself which commands our attention. The Village, you might say, is the central character. When we see the Village as collective character, we perceive another dimension to the individual wretchedness of daily living. It is the dimension of energy, force, a quickening capacity for survival.³²⁸

And Richard Wright’s aural imagination

Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings. There was the wonder I felt when I first saw the brace of mountainlike, spotted, black-and-white horses clopping down a dusty road through clouds of powdered clay...

There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez...

There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky...

There was the experience of feeling death without dying that came from watching a chicken leap about blindly after its neck had been snapped by a quick twist of my father’s wrist.

There was the great joke that I felt God had played on cats and dogs by making them lap their milk and water with their tongues...

There was the love I had for the mute regality of tall, moss-clad oaks.

There was the hint of cosmic cruelty that I felt when I saw the curved timbers of a wooden shack that had been warped in the summer sun...

And there was the quiet terror that suffused my senses when vast hazes of gold washed earthward from star-heavy skies on silent nights...³²⁹

The markers of physical geography—rivers, bluffs, and dusty roads—and the phenomena of the natural world—spotted horses and flying geese—signify the continuity within life, reveal the human world of meaning intertwined with the physical world of geography and

³²⁷ *Black Nature*. Camille Dungy, ed., xx.

³²⁸ George Lamming. *In the Castle of My Skin*, x.

³²⁹ Richard Wright. *Black Boy*, 14-15.

natural phenomena necessitating the imagination. In Wright, the normative constitution of meaning—love, feelings towards life and death, nostalgia are all generated from within the physical geography and the process of biological life. Each mystery stood not only for itself, but extended beyond itself, to a general understanding of the essence of life. These phenomena did not just evoke feelings and insights, but were, themselves, the way through which these feelings and insights in part were constituted—as between consciousness and materiality. Wright’s “Story of Childhood” approached his existence and his experiences in terms of magic: the transmission of meaning throughout communities of people, the creation of meaning in the world, and the relation of consciousness to materiality. But what is more, for both Lamming and Wright, place was pivotal not only to the construction of the novel as a whole, that is, as an imaginative force in story-telling, but was revelatory of the constitution of world and the meaning and experience of being black.

Place in both these texts, and others as well, offers a framework through which to understand the meaning of black existence and the experience of being black. What, though, can place—nature, physical geography—offer to our understanding of the meaning of black existence and the experience of being black?

We discover that if what we mean by ‘experience’ is an additive or quantified discussion of events (also known as facticity), then, there can be no accounting of place or geographical understanding of what it means to be (a human being). But, if what we mean by “experience” is the matrix of consciousness and materiality, then we can begin to speak of history not in terms of exogenous events, but in terms of the dialectic relationship between geography, materiality and consciousness; and we can begin to understand history as not what happens to people, but what people in fact *do*, and not in response to

what is done *to them*, as a necessary moment of negotiation through which self-consciousness emerges, a condition for the possibility of human existence. Experience, thus, understood this way, brings together human consciousness and materiality, brings us closer to our place. The question then turns: not what has happened to black people, or what is meaning of black suffering, but, what have black people created?

Conclusion

What is important here is to note that this chapter is not a critique of the methodologies that enable us to understanding the meaning of black existence and to analyze the complexities of being black in the world. The purpose of this chapter is ask the question if the previous ways are the *only* ways; it is to question how our research, our understanding altogether would change if we altered our framework. We are concerned with the fluidity or the movement of consciousness in the world, in revealing what is dis-covered, in mining what has been accomplished and investigating what has been achieved. Part of our task is an historical recording of what has been accomplished, and taking this record from within its own interpretative framework and offering to it and to ourselves something like the hermeneutic grounds of possibility.

This chapter is by no means to discredit the other geographies of reason or the work of others, but to help us appreciate the uniqueness of our own position, to focus on what is universal in human existence, and what, within this universality, makes us unique. This chapter is an attempt to understand the geographical realities of an existence; and while it does acknowledge many of similarities of black existence in anti-black societies, it resists the idea that whiteness or oppression marks the constitution or the mode of explanation of

black existence anywhere. It further argues that because the axiological framework of oppression ignores geographical distinctions, which is not only a failure of history, but also a failure of the imagination too, either to *see* our own framework/it or (what is equally worse) to see beyond it!

CONCLUSION

Existentialism and the Future of Philosophy

Art is the setting-into-work of truth. In this proposition an essential ambiguity is hidden, in which truth is at once the subject and object of the setting. But subject and object are unsuitable names here. They keep us from thinking precisely this ambiguous nature. Art is historical, and as historical it is the creative preserving of truth in the work...Art, as founding, is essentially historical. This means not only that art has a history in the external sense that in the course of time it, too, appears along with many other things, and in the process changes and passes away and offers changing aspects for historiography. Art is history in the essential sense that it grounds history.

Martin Heidegger ("Origin of the Work of Art")

The ultimate movement of this work as a whole emerges from and is animated by and from within the original question of existence. We begin with this ontic, metaphysical question and trace it through its ontological concerns of the meaning of the question *for us*, revealing the *inner-relation* of the two—the ontic, metaphysical question and our ontological formulation—in our being-in, that is, dwelling and the accomplishment of place and the achievement history. It is through the recognition of ourselves in this process, from the ontic, metaphysical question to the ontological analysis of our dwelling, that we become more than just within ‘history’, we become *historical*. We come to our own self-conscious recognition of ourselves as *historical* in the recognition that our dwelling is the representation of ourselves, our world, and, *ourselves-in-the-world*. This recognition is the aesthetic representation of [the] truth [of our own existence in being-in]; such truth is but the ever expanding notion of freedom, which expands along the horizon of our own dwelling(s) *as* the interpretation, that is, self-conscious recognition, of our own [dwelling] *activity*.

Truth is the unfolding of our dwelling in an expressed and self-apprehended form. We show ourselves as we are, to ourselves, in the manner in which we dwell. The truth of existence—that is, the meaning of existence—is set forth in and through what we produce in our dwelling, broadly construed is the ‘work of art’. The ‘work of art’ can be as specific as a work of literature, sculpture, or a painting, or as general as social and political formations or ritualistic arrangements; what is revealed in the ‘work of art’ is the ‘proof’ our own existence, perhaps the clearest ‘sign’ we have of our living—the manner in which we dwell upon the earth, the meaning of that dwelling, and the meaning of the earth itself. The ‘work

of art' is the dis-closure of the truth of human existence. "The happening of truth," Heidegger reminds us, "is at work in the work [of art] ...[t]he work's becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens."³³⁰

The 'work of art' ultimately grounds us in our humanity as a concrete representation for self-consciousness in which it can know itself. The 'work' is a concrete manifestation through which self-consciousness transcends itself and becomes *spirit*: the 'work' transforms the 'world' into an [produced] object, and the transforms the object into the foundation of our world. We bear witness to ourselves *in the* object and mirror our being in the world. Iain Thompson notes,

Great art works *work* in the background of our historical worlds, in other words, by partially embodying and so selectively reinforcing an historical community's implicit sense of what is and what matters. In this way, great artworks both (1) "first give to things their look," that is, they help establish an historical community's implicit sense of what things *are*, and they give (2) "to humanity their outlook on themselves," that is, they also help shape an historical community's implicit sense of *what truly matters* in life (and so also what does not), which lives are most worth living, which actions are "noble" (or "base"), what in the community's traditions most deserves to be preserved, and so on.³³¹

The 'work' is the guiding element in the spirit's coming to know itself and, though, central to human *being* has gone missing in the modern [Western] conceptions of 'museum art'. The 'work' is not a mediation of ourselves and reality; nor is it a 'making sense' of the world—as generally thought to be the role of mythology, for example. The 'work' is not 'functional'; nor is it secondary to the primary concerns of food and shelter. Rather, the

³³⁰ Martin Heidegger. "Origin of work of art," 60.

³³¹ Iain Thompson. "Heidegger's Aesthetics": <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>

‘work’ simply *is*³³² who we are, how we know ourselves: it is the unfolding of our human historical truths and the recording and the form of spirit’s existence on the earth.

“All art, Heidegger tells us, “is the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, *essentially poetry*.”³³³ In the sense that the central function of the ‘work’ in the human life is revelation and poetry, for Heidegger, is *poesis*—that is, poetry is essentially disclosive of being—it “is not an aimless imagining of whimsicalities” or the “mere notions and fancies into the real of the unreal.”³³⁴ The ‘work’ is a setting free of the living principle of a people to see, to recognize, to understand, and to become fully who they already are, in a more *substantial* way. The ‘work’ is inherently an *act* of freedom, and act of liberation of ourselves from the ‘world’ in the restoration of ourselves *to* the world; and, in its return, ourselves to our substantial, historical form.

Freedom is, here, expressed within the unfolding of our existence in the ‘work’—as the ‘proof’ of our dwelling, in place, and our history. Understood within the revelation of the ‘work,’ freedom is, thus, an ever expanding, moving target. It is not simply a singular moment or an Event, but a fluid as our *living* lives. In this way, as dwelling renews itself in its very activity, freedom is always renewed as the possibility of *other*, new modes of dwelling. “Considered in regard to the essence of truth,” Heidegger writes, “the essence of freedom manifests itself as exposure to the disclosedness of beings.”³³⁵ Essentially the

³³² In the sense of *ipseity* as the most concrete and particular aspect of being human; both immanent as self-transcendent, the ‘work’ presents who we are so that we can then cultivate new ways of expressing that being. The ‘work’ grounds, but also signifies on itself and on existence as such.

³³³ Martin Heidegger. “Origin of work of art,” 72.

³³⁴ Martin Heidegger. “Origin of work of art,” 72.

³³⁵ Martin Heidegger. “On the Essence of Truth.” Reprinted in *The Nature of Truth: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*. Michael P. Lynch, ed., 304.

disclosure of beings is the disclosure of ourselves. Our truth is, thus, the dis-covery of ourselves.

*

Existentialism is the sub-field of philosophical inquiry concerned human existence: specifically, with the world and our conscious experience of it. As a specialized field, existentialism investigates 'what-is' *in order to* analyze our [conscious] relationality to it. Traditional 'existential philosophy,' though, has forgotten, perhaps, its most pressing concern: the investigation into the 'world' did not yield an analysis of the questioner performing the investigation. Rather, the inward introspection became a psychoanalytic investigation into itself as a presupposed entity of consciousness. The irony of Sartre's philosophy is that, as an ontologist, he never inwardized the outward subjective gaze on himself into the foundation of himself as to *why* he asked the questions he did and in the manner *that* he did.

We find vestiges of this legacy of traditional 'existential philosophy' in the investigations into black existence and analysis of black experience. In the years since the publication of Lewis Gordon's anthology, *Existence in Black* (1996) we have seen growing interest in 'blackness' and 'race' as a philosophical topic, especially by white philosophers who, early in their careers showed little to no interest either issue. Specifically, in the work of Shannon Sullivan, who began as an epistemologist and a feminist, and Robert Bernasconi, who began as a Heideggerian with a focus on language and ontology, blackness has been within the gaze of those controlling ideas and prevailing notions of history as a

force, and black existence as a public, political concern of ‘justice’ [or epistemic and ontological ‘injustice’].³³⁶As with Sartre, the question of the inward turn from the question to the questioner has not resulted in an analysis of dwelling [of neither place nor the historical], but a psychoanalyzation of the self: Sullivan’s *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of White Privilege*³³⁷ and Bernasconi’s “Waking Up White and in Memphis”³³⁸ are but two examples of this trend. As the requisite inwardization has turned into the self-psychologizing of the self, and the question of ‘race’ and blackness has become a question of whiteness, critical race theory has turned into ‘critical whiteness’ studies, or what has been termed ‘critical philosophies of race’. This transformation has worked to re-center whiteness often to the detriment or erasure of ‘black perspectives’.

As such, we find ourselves facing a ‘new’ methodological approach, ironic because it is ‘new’ only in its application to black people. The concept of the ‘work’ and the historicization of people has a long history in German idealism, but has found little interest in the American academy, which looks upon place as secondary to the possibility of ‘ontological expansion,’ where all information and experiences are ‘open’ and, ultimately, relatable.³³⁹ Our approach is a rather old one that claims that the way that we come to know the world is not as discrete individuals, but as collectives through which and out of which our individuation emerges. The world that we come to know is a product of our pre-conscious engagement with the material ‘world’; our understanding of it is but our self-

³³⁶ These are not the only scholars in philosophy who have ‘new’ interest in ‘race’ and black existence, but, perhaps the most well known in the field of philosophy. They are but an example of a larger trend in the field itself.

³³⁷ Shannon Sullivan. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of White Privilege*.

³³⁸ Robert Bernasconi. “Waking Up White and in Memphis” in *White on White, Black on Black*. George Yancy, ed., 17-25.

³³⁹ We can recall our conversation about Sartre from footnote 91.

reflective activity *of* re-presentation. The world becomes what it is *for* us, consciously, in our inwardization of it and our re-presentation of it in particular ‘works of art’. How we re-present the world to ourselves [and secondary to others] is the way that we find ourselves and locate ourselves as meaningful. If we understand *culture* in the sense of ‘spiritual development,’ that is, in the sense of the conscious intaking of the material world in another, productive form equally material and cognitive; if we understand the world as the cultural product of our ‘spiritual image,’ then we may understand what Ralph Ellison meant when he wrote,

[o]ur task is that making ourselves individuals...we create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created a culture. For you see, blood and skin do not think.³⁴⁰

We may understand why Ellison called for a new science, a “deeper science” in the study of black folk, a science not built on statistics or the “sterile notion of race,” but one built of cultural analysis—the meaning of human existence, then, would not be what happens to a people, but the *manner* in which a people come to terms with what has happened to them, and re-present this reality to themselves in another, interpreted form *as* the ‘work of art’. We may understand why it is that we are in search of, not the pre-predicative interpreted series of events, but what is made *historical*.

And, we may understand our challenge to those academic departments and scholars who ‘study’ race and ‘do’ African American philosophy as to why they have little to no engagement with black cultural products: black arts, literature, social or political theories *on their own terms*, and not as the re-presentation of another, already established and

³⁴⁰ Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*, 354.

'traditional' form.³⁴¹ What we're calling for, in a sense, is the abandonment of traditional 'existentialism and phenomenology' to give birth to a new existentialism and a new phenomenology, one that emerges from a dis-discovery of ourselves in our place(s) and in the ways that we engage [in and with place] reflectively on these accomplishments for the truth of our own self-understanding as being-in-the-world.³⁴²

The Future of Philosophy

The future of philosophy rests, at least in terms of its existential understanding, on whether it re-engages the structures of existence. We must allow the question itself to question us, to interrogate us as to *our* motivations, *our* implicit assumptions in raising it: what do we mean to say, to indicate, what truths are we revealing about ourselves and the world when we ask the questions we ask?

The future of philosophy, the future of questioning itself, rests on whether or not we will excavate, dig ourselves up out of the 'givenness' of the world and mine our products in continual search ourselves, or, if we will take our old frameworks and baseline assumptions as 'fact' and continue to mine them as the 'truth' of our existence.

In this way, what our 'new' approach to existentialism can offer to the discipline is the shifting of our framework and baseline assumptions from the psychologization of self and towards the elements of human living—the re-emergence of place and the historical.

³⁴¹ And, more than the passing reference to 'blues music, ' or 'hip hop'—favorite tropes—which are not engaged on their own, within their own voice, but in terms of an already established voice, to support an already articulated end, but not in terms of either migratory [or, mobility] phenomenon or as an aesthetic form with technique, as *craft*, to name a few.

³⁴² How place is articulated as a product becomes self-reflective and re-presented as aesthetic reformation of space.

Black existential philosophy, more than traditional ‘existential philosophy’, has the capacity to revive existentialism and the philosophies of place and history to talk *about* existence, to re-define *each in terms of* existence; to revive a lost tradition of speaking to the modes of existence, because in black existentialism, as Lewis Gordon has noted, existence cannot be avoided because of the immediacies of living.³⁴³ But this should not be black existentialism’s contribution to the field of philosophy—the addition of “concrete dimensions” to white, European or American, theory. Rather, we have an opportunity, like that of Du Bois’ American sociologist, to move past the bare assertions or concepts, to go beneath and beyond the concepts to the manners of living that themselves animate such concerns, feelings, or approaches to life. Black existential philosophy has the opportunity to return to existentialism its metaphysical roots in the question of existence. In a sense, black existential philosophy has the opportunity to return Philosophy back to itself, to reanimate its soul, and revive its *essential life*.

* * * *

We are back at the beginning, but with the education that meaning of existence *is* self-conscious worlding. But we have yet a notion of what we concretely mean. What does the ‘work of art’ look like, specifically? And, how does the ‘work’ reflect our dwelling as the meaning of existence? In what forms does the ‘black work of art’ appear? As a work

³⁴³ Gordon, in the introduction to his edited collection, *Existence in Black*. Lewis Gordon, suggests that unlike European existentialism, black existentialism cannot live in the reality of abstraction of theory, which is a privilege, because of the concreteness of race and the history of racialization. See Gordon, 3-5.

concerned with preparatory analysis, the end of the work is, itself, a beginning of another work.

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