

# DERRIDA'S BLACK ACCENT: DECOLONIAL DECONSTRUCTION

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**Ornette Coleman:** What I mean is that the differences between man and woman or between races have a relation to the education and intelligence of survival. Being Black and a descendant of slaves, I have no idea what my language of origin was.

**Jacques Derrida:** If we were here to talk about me, which is not the case, I would tell you that, in a different but analogous manner, it's the same thing for me. I was born into a family of Algerian Jews who spoke French, but that was not really their language of origin. I wrote a little book on the subject, and in a certain way I am always in the process of speaking what I call the "monolingualism of the other". I have no contact of any sort with my language of origin, or rather that of my supposed ancestors.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Did Jacques Derrida have a Black accent? I want to explore this as a marginality in the relation between Derrida and deconstruction, particularly following the light and shade of Derrida's last interview with the French publication *Le Monde* in August 2004, a few weeks before his death. This interview has intrigued and puzzled me for many years. Of the many remarkable themes it covered, two stand out. First, Derrida suggested that he had not yet been read effectively, as if there remained a hidden kernel to his work not yet discovered or perhaps if discovered had not been sufficiently recognized for its value to his work. Second, he assigned an overall trajectory to the logic of deconstruction, as directed against Eurocentrism, which up until that time had not been described by him explicitly in that way. While this might not seem to be of huge significance, for me it opens up a pathway worth thinking about for those who remain interested in the relation between deconstruction and decoloniality.<sup>2</sup> That pathway becomes clearer when we also bring into purview an earlier presentation Derrida gave to the *tRace* conference on race and deconstruction, at the University of California, Irvine, in April 2003.<sup>3</sup> In that currently unpublished paper, "An Other Otherness of the Other", Derrida made a distinctive acknowledgment followed by a remarkable claim. First, he acknowledged "having spoken or written very little, thematically,

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on race and racism in a deconstructive mode". Citing two short thematic articles he wrote on South African Apartheid in the 1980s, as evidence of this neglect, he concluded this amounted to a glaring silence. Second, Derrida claimed counter-intuitively to have always had an "investment in the question of racism" and to have been "sensitive to diverse racisms" due to his upbringing in the colonized territory of Algeria. Once framed against that background, Derrida provided a provocative rationale for both his neglect of writing about racism and his corresponding, ever-present awareness of racism. He insisted his silenced interest was mitigated by deconstruction being "through and through ... a deconstruction of racism" (Derrida 2003). An obvious question to ask is, what are we to make of this extraordinary claim, which seems to have escaped the attention of most of Derrida's devoted and even critical followers? But I also want to signal a related but less obvious question, why does Derrida describe deconstruction as directed against Eurocentrism when talking in French to a French audience in the interview with *Le Monde*, and as directed against racism when presenting in English to an American audience almost a year earlier at the University of California, Irvine? What is the relation between these two unconventional accents of deconstruction?

On the whole characterizing deconstruction in any sense is difficult, not least because its putative theoretical progenitor Derrida himself was opposed to tendencies to treat deconstruction as a methodology, outside of the particular textual or experiential reading interventions it is implicated in and at work in demonstrating orders of incoherence in institutions of meaning (Wood and Bernasconi 1983: 1–5). Though this injunction against methodology did not prevent Derrida at times from articulating a "general strategy" or "question of method" for deconstruction, thereby breaking that injunction (see Derrida 1987: 41–43; Derrida 1976: 157–164). At the same time, we should be aware that the term deconstruction, although formulated by Derrida, was not chosen by him to describe his work; it was attributed by critically engaged commentators (Wood and Bernasconi 1983). It is through these other readings of Derrida that deconstruction can be understood methodologically, which is also helpful in exorcising the banalization of the concept as it has entered popular discourse as a term for dismantling a structure in the sense of taking something apart or tearing it down. For our purposes, if we are to pursue the decolonial trajectory of deconstruction, then we need to see it strategically or methodologically in two principal ways: first, as *a critique of foundationalism*, and second as *an exposition of undecidability*. Deconstruction as a critique of foundationalism questions the stability and security of "ultimate foundations" in any representation, text, discourse, or formation (Gasché 1988: 121). It is concerned with and implicated in the exposure of the precarious institution of ultimate foundations in philosophical discourse and in revealing the various concealments of that precarious foundation (e.g., the 1776 US Declaration of Independence, "All

men are created equal” and its erasure of enslaved Black people). Having made evident that foundationalism, deconstruction as an intervention, exposes, marks, interrupts and obliges a re-narration of the grounding logic in any exposition as foundational. As if structurally and thematically questioning the incarnation of an originary foundation that is without foundation, deconstruction underlines the precarious institution of that “non-foundation” (Gasché 1988). Consequently, insofar as deconstruction exposes any injustice or oppression, it is because it is insinuated in revealing and marking as evidential repressed and resistant elements silenced in the foundationalist claim or resistant in their translation to silence. This occurs through locating and exposing that foundation’s naturalization in legitimating fictions whose traditional, representative displays of ritual, celebration, and morality, largely conceal performative and interpretative violence (Derrida 1992a). From a decolonial point of view, however, there is a historical particularity underlying and modulating this universalist account of deconstruction. It is the historical particularity of the West’s colonial foundations of Western civil society, resourced by the violence that underwrites its legitimating fictions of civility, equality, liberty and rationality (Cesaire 1955/2000; Fanon 2008). This is the key to understanding one of the central but dispersed claims in *Of Grammatology* that logocentrism, the dissemination of Western worded, conceived reality as regulative reason in politics, economics, and philosophy, is ethnocentrism, the globalization of those regulative Western forms of reason as and through European colonialism (Derrida 1976).

The second strategy of deconstruction, the exposition of undecidability, “starts with an interrogation of a variety of contradictions and aporias in the discourse” (Gasché 1988: 174). These contradictions and indeterminacy of meaning give rise to what Derrida has variously referred to as “undecidables” or “undecidability” (Derrida 1987), by which he means the irrepressibility of infixity, incoherence, alterity and discrepancy in particular sites of contested meaning within texts, experiences and formations. Undecidability therefore identifies spaces (contrary to the appearance given by the closed, reiterable, foundational logics, discourses, or formations), where an innovated conceptual decision has been or needs to be taken to define what the text or experience can or should mean, and what can or will be excluded from that meaning. Ernesto Laclau describes this as the theory of decision; it is also the rationale of hegemony, insofar as the social, political or literary decision determines and privileges a particular meaning as dominant and normative in a text or experience (Laclau 1996). From a decolonial point of view, this mode of deconstruction shows how European universality as a foundation of modernity, due to its imbrication in coloniality, is susceptible to undecidability. This readily results in its universalist claims being shown as riven with uncertainty, incoherence, and discrepancy in their normalizing meanings of Western civility and rationality. Since these meanings can also be shown to depend on decisions taken to occlude the racial fusions between liberalism and colonialism, humanism and imperialism, civilization and barbarism, democracy, and

white supremacy. Undecidability marks these racial fusions as unsettled, incomplete or contradictory, indicative of the contested meanings attributed to the idea of a natural ordering of the world as Western. Hence undecidability occurs in those spaces and instances where the meaning of this natural ordering can be shown as contingent and equivocal, and requiring its ultimate stabilizing suturing in a particular theory of decision (e.g., the decision that institutes and normalizes the phrasing “white and non-white” as a natural description of human populations, which reduces the world to the primacy of whiteness and comparative negative affirmation of *non*-whiteness, under the regulation of the white gaze). If what I have described as the decolonial critique of Western foundationalism and exposition of Western undecidability are anywhere close to what Derrida had in mind when he suggested deconstruction is formulated against Eurocentrism and racism, then clearly this is not something conventionally associated with the legacies and possibilities of Derrida’s ideas (see Glendinning and Eaglestone 2008; Naas 2008) But it needs to be said too that Derrida himself has not always insisted on taking this decolonial position, often fluctuating between different white and Black accents of deconstruction. All of which raises a further question, how can the decolonial trajectory of deconstruction be reconciled with Derrida in the “monolingual accent of the other”? (Derrida 1998).

## Biography of an Undecidable Accent

The pathway I chart in this article attempts to reconcile these errant accents of deconstruction with its more conventional representation as an immanent, Western disinterring of the aporias, constitutive outsides and foundationalisms of Western discourses. In choosing this decolonial pathway, I have initially turned toward biographical and autobiographical associations with Derrida, as various sites of departure in order to develop conceptual resources to guide and map the methodological significance of colonial-racial symbolism in these mutually reinforcing accents in which Derrida invokes deconstruction. Our point of departure in biographical associations is provided by Peggy Kamuf, a longtime friend and English translator of various books by Derrida. Kamuf recalls a curious travel story relayed to her by Derrida, that describes a time during the mid-1950s when Derrida and his wife Marguerite were traveling by car to the Southern States. This was not long after the 1954 US Supreme Court judgment, *Brown v the Board of Education*, had authorized the racial desegregation of schools. How Kamuf narrates the story as well as how she oversees her recollection of Derrida’s telling of the story is important for our pathway. Highlighting the continuing “obviously” racially “segregated” social conditions of the Southern States during the 1950s, Kamuf informs us:

Certainly, anyone travelling there, *but especially Europeans* unused to these primitive customs and most especially those *whose sensibilities had been*

*sharpened by Algerian Apartheid*, would have remarked it. He remembers that they picked up an African American hitchhiker, a sailor, or a soldier I think, in North or South Carolina I believe it was. The man they stopped for must have been quite astonished to be offered a ride by a *white couple*. Their hitchhiker seemed nervous, ill-at-ease in ways that Jacques and Marguerite *weren't sure that they knew how to read*. As I recall the story at least, no misfortune befell them but doubtless their hitchhiker was quite aware that the trip could have turned out very badly if, for example, they had had a run in with the local police. (Kamuf 2008: 142; emphasis added)

There are a number of racialized themes in this recollection that may seem unremarkable to anyone but those on the pathway we are following, which take on added conceptual significance. First, notice how Kamuf clearly identifies Derrida as “European” and “white”, with imputed white European liberal sensibilities capable of abhorring anything resembling “Algerian Apartheid”. “Algerian” is also a clear reference to Derrida’s birth lineage in a French colony, and “Apartheid” is a recognition of the white supremacy of French colonialism as bearing a family resemblance to South Africa, the inventors of Apartheid as white supremacist architecture. In suggesting Derrida (if not his wife, Marguerite) would have been able to read the signs of white supremacy in the US, based on a prior experience in Algeria and by association an ancillary understanding of those signs in South Africa, Kamuf ascribes to Derrida a familiarity with non-white, principally Black, colonial-racial oppression. However, in also suggesting that Derrida (and Marguerite) were not sure how to read the nervousness of the African American hitchhiker, it is as if Kamuf is insinuating Derrida as both white and non-white in this account, despite her indelible attempts to render him invariably as European and white. Second, Kamuf’s recollection raises another *racialized seeing* question, namely whether the African American hitchhiker, who presumably could read all the signs of performative white supremacy, did in fact read Derrida as white, even though as Kamuf puts it he was picked up by “a white couple”. In other words, what might the African American hitchhiker have seen to reassure him, if only slightly, into accepting a ride from the Derridas in Jim Crow territory?

Perhaps we can infer an embryonic approach to answering this question, from a supplementary recollection Kamuf attaches to her initial recollection. Quite possibly reacting to one of her equivocal descriptions of the African American hitchhiker as a “sailor”, Kamuf remembers something else Derrida once told her. She writes:

Following a kind of unconscious thread, I connect this story about the hitchhiker to a remark he says Paul de Man made to him at some point during their friendship,

which began well after the driving trip through the South in 56 or 57 ... Paul de Man told him that he, Jacques, spoke English “*like a Black sailor*”. And I ask and he doesn’t deny that what he especially likes, is to be told he does not have a typical or *caricatural French accent* when he speaks English as he so often must. (p. 144; emphasis added).

Kamuf’s recognition of an unconscious thread she does not specify but rather shows, requires our conscious attention. Having already affirmed Derrida as white in the earlier recollection, amidst a certain colonial-racial ambiguity, she now connects Derrida to Paul de Man’s description of him as speaking English in the accent of a “Black sailor”. While it is worth speculating whether the African American hitchhiker in the earlier account also heard the accent of a Black sailor, as a form of reassuring familiarity, I want to dwell instead on what de Man could possibly have heard, or better seen and then heard. It is important to know that visually the Derrida of the 1950s was very different from the white-haired, globally eminent philosophy professor of the late twentieth century. As photographs now appearing in many biographical books testify, images of Derrida as a child in Algeria and especially as a young man in France, portray someone with a full head of thick, black hair and dark skin, strikingly bearing the image of someone who might be phenotypically classified as non-white (see Bennington 1999; Peeters 2013). Could de Man have been hearing Derrida through how he was racially seeing Derrida? The “Black sailor” is certainly a racial allusion, and a strange one at that. Not a Black intellectual or a Black artist or a Black musician, but a Black sailor. Perhaps de Man, *racially sees-hears* the itinerant-immigrant quality of a sailor, an African American, assuming that Derrida had learned to speak American English *in a Black way*. In short, what we find in Kamuf’s supplementary recollection is that Derrida could be signified as white/non-white/Black by the white sovereign signifiers, embodied in Kamuf and de Man. At the same time, we learn that Derrida himself reveled in the description of sounding like a “Black sailor” because his main concern was not to sound like the caricature of a French man (presumably white) trying to speak English. Derrida, it appears preferred to be associated with a Black accent.

This question of a Black accent must be understood as conceptual. I want to develop it as a resource to guide our decolonial pathway. I am particularly interested in thinking about it as emphasis, tonality, signification, orientation, interruption, and critique, in order to understand how deconstruction might be understood as directed against Eurocentrism and/or racism as suggested by the later Derrida. What interests me is whether there is one Western idiom of deconstruction where Derrida is the site and sound of a critical philosophical accent on difference, the margins, the other, passing or passed as white; and a decolonial

idiom where Derrida's privileged accent is structurally, occasionally interrupted by a different accent, Black in its critique of Eurocentrism and/or racism, and where deconstruction inheres in the undecidability of Derrida himself.

## Dark Skin, White Accents

I have often wondered if Derrida, the world-famous, Algerian-born, Jewish, French philosopher of deconstruction, was at various times passing and/or passed linguistically and philosophically for white and had to contend with being "outed" or occasionally allowed himself to let the mask slip. Admittedly, this is a counter-intuitive approach to thinking about Derrida and deconstruction. I am aware that most critical commentaries treat Derrida as the consummate, racially unmarked French philosopher (e.g., Naas 2008, Gashe 1998); while only a few others have addressed the Algerian Derrida (Haddour 2000; Cherif 2008), the African Derrida (Wise 2009; Farred 2020), and the Jewish Derrida (Ofrat 2001; Cixous 2004), all in different ways noting Derrida's various direct and oblique engagements, attachments and evasions in those more obvious lineages, pointing to the instability of the subject known as Derrida. Nevertheless, I find myself asking, what was Derrida's relationship with whiteness and Blackness in the idiom of deconstruction. When Gideon Ofrat (2001: 31), in the course of searching out deeply buried Judaic themes and motifs in Derrida's thought, described Derrida as a "French intellectual with nothing Jewish in his external appearance", who was not religiously devout and did not attend the synagogue, I was reminded of Sander Gilman's, famous question, "Are Jews white?" and his historical and cultural exposition of the "Jewish body" in myriad scenes of attempting to assimilate to European culture and to white physiognomy (Gilman 1991). In Europe, at least since the eighteenth century the so-called *Jewish Question* had always turned to whether Jews were *part of* Europe or *apart from* Europe. Antisemitism insisted on the inviolability of Jewish estrangement and in its early twentieth-century convergences with race science, also brought sustained attention to the shapes, colors, and textures of what was increasingly deemed racially as the sinister, dark Jewish body (Gilman 1991). European antisemitism implied and assumed Jewishness deviated from and contaminated the whiteness, idealized in the blond-haired and blue-eyed figures of Nordic and Aryan ideologies of Nazism. The Jews attributed non-Europeanness was defined as an irredeemable, radical threat to Europeanness and to whiteness. This idea was ventilated in Adolf Hitler's 1926 best-selling autobiography *Mein Kampf*, where Hitler was emphatic in positioning the Jews as the anti-race, radically antithetical to whiteness and intent on contaminating and culturally destroying Europe, particularly through their association with "negroes" (Hitler 1926/1988).



The importance of this background to Derrida's personal and intellectual formations cannot be overstated, precisely because its historical proximity is rarely stated. Derrida was recurrently vocal about his school-child experience of the Nazi collaborationist, French Vichy regime, that governed Southern France and the French colonies, once the Nazis had effectively occupied France in 1940. Within two years Derrida was expelled from his school as anti-Jewish racial laws were introduced into Algeria, reducing the number of Jewish children in French schools, removing Jewish teachers, banishing Jews from public life, confiscating Jewish property, and defining Jews as a subjugated race, bringing them closer to the non-white status of the indigenous, colonized Muslim Algerians (Boum 2020: 435–440). Derrida has referred to this expulsion from French citizenship, symbolized by the expulsion from school as an enduring “wound”; he experienced and internalized the antisemitic epithet “dirty Jew”, and found himself disinvesting from religious and ritual identifications with his Jewishness (Peeters 2013; Salmon 2020). This experience of Nazi ideological and colonially structured racism was so traumatic to Derrida that he referred to it constantly throughout his life, and it has been dutifully recapitulated by most of his biographers. Yet there are two things here that highlight the undecidability of the question of race in this psychic wound, that are routinely allowed to escape interrogation, not least by the traumatized Derrida himself. The first concerns the racial logic of expulsion. Derrida was expelled from French citizenship and from the French school, but if we examine the logic of the antisemitic racial laws of the Nazis, that logic points to a foundational logic, which was the expulsion from whiteness. Under the Nazi configuration of race laws, whether inflected through the rule of Aryanism or Nordicism, Jews, as the antithetical race, were rendered non-white. It is worth speculating on whether it was this colonial-racial banishment to non-whiteness, which was the traumatic kernel at the base of the psychic wound for Derrida. Second, the recurrent recollection of this racist experience in Derrida's experience is noteworthy for being the only experience of personal racism Derrida ever refers to or returns to, and it is significant that it occurs not within but outside France. Derrida's student entry into France coincides with the same time period covered by Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which surveys the social, psychic and ideological affects of racism in France, exploring racial analogies between Blacks and Jews, and yet somehow there is nothing from Derrida about his experience of racism in France, nothing but silence.

Yet we know that during the earlier part of his career, Derrida attempted to disguise the visibility of his accent by eliminating from self-representations, any mnemonic traces of his French-Algerian-Jewish-immigrant cultural formations. Throughout the 1960s, he generally avoided giving interviews, was generally secluded about his private life, and up until the end of the 1970s, did not allow any



personal photographs to appear in his publications. What are we to make of these early attempts to appear publicly through publications while disappearing publicly? In Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's documentary "Derrida" released in 2002, the question of Derrida's evasion from public appearance was probed and Derrida answered at length, providing two sequential explanations, seemingly intended to run concurrently, though it was noticeable the first was asserted affirmatively and the second in the form of a supplement was asserted diffidently. Why did he forbid the "publication of any photo of himself"? The reasons he suggested were complicated. However, it is only the first reason that appears to be complicated in any political or theoretical way. It is presented as "one reason", "amongst others"; it concerned the act of his "writing on writing" necessitating the "defetishization of the author", particularly as the "author appears to the photographic code". For Derrida withdrawing from the head shot and excluding "all forms of photography and public images" of himself was part of the calculation of "defetishization". Though one wonders whether an avowed fetishization of the author occasioned by the performativity of name, the signature, Jacques Derrida, was what actually survived the defetishization of the other Jacques Derrida, or Jacques Derrida as the other. However, it is Derrida's second reason for avoiding being publicly photographed, that suggests we need not be detained or distracted by the first reason. According to Derrida:

it is not only for the theoretical or political reasons that I have outlined here. It's also because I have a certain kind of problem with my own image. I have an anxiety that is a mixture of a certain kind of *narcissistic horror of the image of my own face*. I don't like seeing it. I don't like it. In addition, I don't like the death effect so to speak, the kind of death that's always implied when one takes a picture. There's almost a superstition. In my childhood, I had a kind of ambiguity, *a love-hate relationship with my face* and as I aged it became more and more difficult. In any case, I didn't want just anyone to make use of my image. So there was in part a kind of anxiety, it involved in public. It was both a narcissistic anxiety and an anxiety before death. (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002: emphasis added)

No sooner is the second reason introduced as personal and affective, the love-hate relationship with his own image since childhood, than it is recuperated into a theoretical reason, "the death effect", which is juxtaposed with a "narcissistic anxiety". If we separate the affective reasons from the theoretical reasons, it is evident that although they lack the explanation of the theoretical reasons and lack context except for a vague autobiographical reference to childhood, it is the affective reasons that are motivating the political and theoretical reasons. Indeed nearly

ten years earlier, Mitchell Stephens a reporter who had fixated on Derrida's "dark skin" during an interview, asked Derrida, "Why did you refuse to allow yourself to be photographed?". In response, Derrida repeats the same structure and sequence of explanation,

My surface motivation was political. I thought that the things I was writing were not compatible with this silly image of the writer in the office with his book. If there is a deep motivation, it had to do with *my relationship with my face, my body*. (Stephens 1991; emphasis added)

When further asked, why he eventually changed his mind, Derrida is reported to have replied, cryptically, "It's a kind of resignation, I gave up this image of the non-image". As we can see in both accounts, Derrida's intellectual explanations give way to the same personal-affective reasons, his dissatisfaction with and distancing from with his facial-body image.

What could be that love-hate relationship Derrida had with his facial-body image? In the "Circumfession" section of Geoffrey Bennington's 1999 book "Jacques Derrida", Derrida returns in passing to the now famous incident from his childhood in Algeria during the 1940s, when he and other Jewish pupils were expelled from their school under the antisemitic laws of the Vichy regime. He recalls this incident by way of marking an image of himself as a child, a marking that resembles the kind of image that could be captured in a photograph when he had no control over his image, or that might be prevented from appearing in a photograph when he had acquired control over his image. He observes: "they expelled from the Lycee de Ben Aknoun in 1942 *a little Black and very Arab Jew* who understood nothing about it, to whom no one ever gave the slightest reason, neither his parents nor his friends" (Bennington 1999: 58). The visual image of the "little Black and very Arab Jew" seems incommensurable with our received and fetishized image of Derrida as the consummate cosmopolitan French philosopher. It raises the question of whether this is the image that is the object of Derrida's love-hate relationship? According to one of Derrida's most recent biographers Benoit Peeters, at the age of 5 or 6 Derrida had acquired from family members the nickname "'the Negus' as his skin was so dark" (Peeters 2013: 13). The term Negus is a title of royalty, usually translated as "king" from the Amharic language of Ethiopia; metonymically it may refer to Ethiopian or Black. That Derrida seems to have been associated with a dark image or images of Blackness during childhood is clearly confirmed by his own autobiographical accounts and those of his biographers. At the same time, photographs of Derrida as a young man in Paris now appearing in biographies bear out the images signified by his childhood monikers. Was Derrida's attempt to suppress the publication of his image when he was a younger man, part of an attempt

to lose any visible accent of his darkened ethnicity and erase its traceability to his published writing? In effect was he attempting to avert or subvert the objectifications of the white gaze that might in the words of Fanon reduce him to his “corporeal schema”, where the infamous scene of “Look a Negro” also signified “Look an Arab” or “Look a Jew”?

The issue here for our understanding of Derrida is that dark skin could also signify Jewishness as Blackness. These visual entanglements of non-white racial signification had a profound physical impact on the Jewish experience of antisemitism during the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century in European culture. It underwrote a cultural and social orientation among Jews toward the “desire for invisibility” (Gilman 1991: 235). Derrida’s admission of his love–hate relationship with his “corporeal schema” (Fanon 2008), and his exerted endeavors to avoid a photographed public image, ironically reinforced the performativity of the Jewishness he may have been attempting to obfuscate. It bears out Sander Gilman’s analysis of the impact of antisemitism on European culture as augmenting the Jewish desire for invisibility in a synonymous “desire to become white”; that this lay “at the center of the Jew’s flight from his or her own body” (Gilman 1991: 235).

However, losing the visual accent of one’s own body is easier posited than accomplished. In a 1991 article/interview with Derrida published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Mitchell Stephens, a white American professor of journalism, began one of his paragraphs in bold capital letters, “Derrida’s dark Mediterranean skin contrasts with a wide, still full frame of silver hair” (21 July 1991). Three years later, in another intellectual and biographical profile of Derrida, Stephens, this time for the *New York Times* (Sunday, 23 January 1994), once again dwelled on Derrida’s physical appearance, noting pointedly that Derrida’s halo of “almost pure white hair” was contrastingly set off by his “dark, Mediterranean skin – not the ‘clammy white skin of the library bound’ in which novelists ... tend to encase characters who practice deconstruction”. This repeated distinction between Derrida’s dark skin and presumably white skin is curious for many reasons. It is rare to see references made to the skin of a Western philosopher. But Derrida seems to be the exception to that rule insofar as he has often been described in journalistic interviews and biographies as having “dark skin”, as if it was startling or unexpected; this contrasts radically with his treatment in philosophical discussions, where simply because it is not mentioned, it could be assumed Derrida was a white French philosopher, with only the undecidable Jewish accent. However, if indeed Derrida was passing or passed for white, it is in that context of an interrupted white representational embodiment, especially outside of France, that the question of an undecidable Black accent in the deconstruction of Derrida himself, assumes critical, conceptual significance.

## The Other Derrida

From the early 1980s, Derrida's resistance to ethnic marking not only began to diminish, but his cultivation of its tropes and themes flourished; one might even say, his philosophical accent became more autobiographical, darkened, and pronounced. The question of the autobiographical in relation to philosophical or theoretical discourse raises some interesting possibilities for what might be called conceptual accent. It is precisely the intrusion of the autobiographical into a theoretical discourse during Derrida's interviews, talks or reflections that both interrupts the language and marks the tone of the discourse as having an affinity with a particular culture and affective community. While the "literary and erratic" presence of the autobiographical within a theoretical discourse could be read as an irritant, a distraction or even ornamental, in Derrida's case we can consider it in terms of what it accentuates. These accentuations arise from many of the same autobiographical themes repeated and thereby acquiring a particular repetition of emphasis. In an interview in 1983, Derrida briefly invokes one of his characteristic autobiographical themes of writing from and within the margins, and the indirectness of his writing, describing it as a twenty-year "detour" through philosophy to engage with literature in order to return to something he calls "idiomatic writing". When pressed to define it, he suggests it is:

the accentuated flourish, that is the musical flourish of your own most unreadable history. I am not speaking about a style, but of an intersection of singularities, of manners of living, voices, writing, of what you carry with you, what you can never leave behind. (Wood and Bernasconi 1983)

Is this not something that can be captured in the figure of an accent, something you carry with you that you cannot leave behind, especially in the company of or a community of similar accents?

Frantz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks*, meditates at length on the relation between the colonized subject in the metropole and the language of the colonizing metropolis. Fanon's focus on the "Negro" and occasionally by analogy "the Jew", invites comparison with the location and locution of Derrida's accent as inhering in affinity with a colonized subject, an immigrant or someone visually non-white. According to Fanon, "to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (Fanon 2008). However, in the passage immediately before this, Fanon asserts, "The Black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro". Fanon attributes

this self-division to “colonialist subjugation”. This is a pretext to raise the question as to whether Derrida’s accent was split under the impress of the Western liberal-colonial formation in the public space of the academy and outside it, split between the colonial-racially unmarked Western enunciation of French philosophy and the colonial-racially marked critical theory of other spaces. While it is clear that Derrida has regularly proclaimed his French, European, and Western identifications and concerns (Derrida 1992b), it is important to recognize these identifications are regularly interrupted in different textual places by curious dis-identifications, and identifications derived from accenting the place of the other and his place in the other.

An early indication of Derrida’s marking the place of and inscribing himself in the place of the other, as if writing or thinking in a different accent, was his opening address to a French–Latin American conference convened to discuss the institutions and politics of contemporary psychoanalysis in 1981. His presentation was entitled, *Geopsychoanalysis: “and the rest of the world”*. The title itself signals the way in which psychoanalysis with its institutional presence and representation in Europe and its surrogates, effectively conceived the rest of the world, as “virgin territory”, for psychoanalytical colonial conquest. Derrida publicly puzzled over why he had been invited to speak, especially as he was not trained in psychoanalysis, and described himself through critique as a “foreign body”. In having no membership, no belonging to the organization, Derrida described himself as a symptom of a foreign discourse, an outsider, cognizant of the West and the non-West, Europe and non-Europe, divided within the modern European colonial heritage of the world. However, there was yet one more way in which Derrida described himself as an outsider, that marked him as ethnically if not racially other to white psychoanalysis:

I am neither an American – whether of the North or of the South – nor a European, Northern or Southern. I am not even really a Latin. I was born in Africa, and I guarantee you that I retain something of that heritage. My reason for recalling this today is that there is practically no psychoanalysis in Africa, white or Black, just as there is practically no psychoanalysis in Asia, or in the South Seas. These are those parts of the “rest of the world” where psychoanalysis has never set foot, or in any case where it has never taken off its European shoes. (Derrida 1998: 69)

Surprisingly without any reference to his Jewishness, or the specificity of Algeria as his birthplace, in representing himself as a foreign body and as African-born and of African heritage, Derrida’s earlier questioning of why he was invited to present seems calculated to subvert any ideas that he was passing or wanted to be passed for European and white. In this different accent, the non-white, Black accent of

the other, he emphasizes the absence of independent or indigenous traditions of psychoanalysis in the rest of the world, other than through their being “structurally defined in the profoundest way by the colonial State apparatus” (Derrida 1998: 69). In exposing this, Derrida is both reticent and implicit, marking what is at stake in the contemporary colonial-racial condition that occidental psychoanalysis naturalizes, by saying, “I shall do no more than mention the name and work of Frantz Fanon” (Derrida 1998: 69). In Derrida’s avowed familiarity with Fanon, he exposes the colonial-racial inhospitability of Eurocentric psychoanalysis to “the rest of the world”, underwriting his sustained re-embodiment of non-white otherness in the striking, momentary adoption of Fanon’s Black accent.

Although barely formulated in these terms, the question of Derrida’s otherness and related critical accent has not gone completely unnoticed by his contemporary Western philosophers. As is well known, Derrida arises as the overwhelming object of critique for Jurgen Habermas in his strident and uncompromising dismissal of deconstruction at the end of the 1980s. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas defends the European Enlightenment against post-structuralist critics, disproportionately targeting Derrida as the most prominent transgressor against Western reason. However, while there has been considerable discussion of the so-called “Habermas–Derrida debate”, it has regularly been ignored that inside his excoriations, Habermas, without explanation, divides his accused transgressors into “dark writers” and “Black writers”. That fleeting distinction calibrates two kinds of Enlightenment disaffection among modern (“white”) European philosophers. It enables Habermas to adjudicate between acceptable, constructive critics of modernity and unacceptable, destructive dissenters. Although these honorary writers of attributed color, along with Habermas, share similar European philosophical traditions and consume similar European histories, it is the comportments, tones and approaches they bring to their critiques, narrated through their *different idioms and idioms of difference*, that somehow rankles, marking them as either *unsettlingly other* or *threateningly other*. I want to suggest in reviewing this largely obscured aspect of Habermas’s erstwhile opposition to Derrida, that we understand these idioms, in their disparagement, as the marked otherness of *foreign accents*.

For Habermas, it all begins with “dark writers”. These writers were those who went against the grain of contemporary European intellectual culture while retaining some kind of allegiance to it. Although they identified its evils, oppressions, and its seamier side, they nevertheless continued to think within its idiom, drawing for conceptual sustenance upon its intellectual legacy. Dark writers thought of their “disharmonies” in “a constructive way”, offering novel and radical alternatives for changing the terms of the culture but without condemning it overall (Habermas 1987: 106). In principle, despite their dark accents, their foreignness

could be assimilated into the European ascent and accent of modernity. This was not the case with “Black writers”, who were more if not absolutely destructive. For Habermas, it seems *Black accents* were simply irredeemable. Their pathology was that their accents broke forcibly and irredeemably with the traditions and conventions of European intellectual culture. “Black writers” radically questioned and challenged the viability of that tradition in its entirety, even scorning the idea of its acclaimed universal integrity, while espousing values that seemed at best uncompromising and at worst inassimilable. It was as if for Habermas, the unavoidability of radical confrontation compelled his attribution of their excess to Blackness, marking these writers as radically invasive and estranged from assimilation. Beyond European thinkers, it’s not clear who Habermas drew upon for his metaphor of the resistant, non-compliant, insurgent, Black writer, but his descriptions bear an uncanny resemblance to the political, cultural and intellectual movements that crisscrossed Western modernity, and were designated the *Black Radical Tradition* by Cedric Robinson (Robinson 1983).

Although Habermas’s color scheme for Western critics of modernity owes more to the rhetorical than the logical dimensions of his argument, it nevertheless displays an uncanny reformulation of modernity’s racial metaphors of Western colonial and anti-Western colonial antagonisms. Its retrieval of putatively conflictual bodily pigmentations (marked “dark”, marked “Black”, unmarked “white”), reasserts the confluence between Western Enlightenment and colonialist fabrications and tabulations of race, historically fabricated and colored for the gaze of a white regime of European philosophers, anthropologists, legislators, and administrators. Having defined himself performatively through the distinction between dark writers (not quite white), whose accents can be recruited to the project of modernity, and Black writers (distinctly non-white) whose accents most definitely cannot, Habermas (neither dark nor Black, presumably “white”) recuperates the unmarked colonial-racial accent of modernity’s universality. As he does so, he routinely disavows the accents that might speak to modernity’s colonial-racial conditions of possibility. It is in these unacknowledged colonial-racial terms that Habermas’s *dark/Black metaphor of writing* counters the critics of modernity from a position recalling the “white mythologist” whom Derrida memorably described as the “white man” taking “his own logos, that is the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason” (Derrida 1981). Perhaps it is not so surprising how easily and unremarkably Habermas assumes this bearing and *accent* of “the white man” when dispensing his categories of dark and Black thinkers. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said suggested the European colonial demeanor of “the white man” comprised “a reasoned position towards both the white and the nonwhite worlds” (Said 1978). Comported in “the culturally sanctioned habit of deploying large generalizations by which reality is divided into various



collectivities”, the accent of that white bearing designated “languages, races, types, colors, mentalities, each category being not so much a neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation” (Said 1978). Because Habermas appears not to know, or at least does not cite any accredited or recognizable dark or Black thinkers (there is no reference to an Iqbal, a Gandhi, a Du Bois or a Fanon, for example), in effect Derrida becomes his surrogate symbol of a Black accent. The Jewish/Algerian Derrida, the French, *quasi-pied noir*, becomes Habermas’s foreign *bête noir*. Derrida is transformed into the intellectual pathology of Habermas’s fictional “Black writer”, whose accent is castigated for its apparent obsession with exposing and undermining the Enlightenment’s color line, while apparently masquerading as the vernacular of *Western* philosophy. Derrida is rendered dismissible, an apostate, a mystic and a deviant; and as someone who has either gone *native*, never actually left the *other* side, or simply failed to lose his Black accent. Habermas’s characterization of a Black accent as challenging the colonial-racial culture of Enlightenment modernity, and inassimilable to the white adjudication of European culture, is an important conceptualization for our pathway in navigating Derrida’s decolonial understanding of deconstruction. Indeed, the critical force of Habermas’s dark/Black metaphor makes it no less perverse than reasonable to consider the possibility that maybe he was right about Derrida after all.

## Writing Accent and Black Difference

Linguistically an accent refers minimally to pronunciation. It draws attention to the “cumulative auditory effect” of identifiable features of pronunciation which indicate particular demographics of the speaker (e.g., social class, region, ethnicity) and underlines emphases that highlight particular words or syllables (Naficy 2001). However, in generalizing the idea of accent, as accentuation or accented, beyond pronunciation, I am thinking of the emphases given and received in signifying otherness as the site of the elsewhere, the contrary, and the critique in relation to conventionalized or universalized discourses (Rangan et al. 2023). If accents can be written and performed as well as spoken and visualized (Naficy 2001), then the idea of Derrida’s Black accent requires we engage with “the idiom” of his writings that engage, whether sustained or in passing, questions of ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, colonialism and racism; and that we are particularly attentive to “the grain, rhythm, and tone ... as it puts itself to work and into the work” (Fenves 1993). Accents are inscribed in the emphases and pronunciations that provide an idiom with the distinctive tones of its animated discourse. Foreign, exotic, or unusual accents are revealed in the tones and revisions of meaning marked as absent from the unaccented normativity of privileged textual and sonic signifiers and their repertoires. Derrida appears to inhabit a foreign or unusual

accent where he repeatedly qualifies the universalist framings of philosophy and metaphysics as Western, or refers to Europe through Eurocentrism, or invokes the anti-white supremacist Black designation, “the white man”, to question the West’s role in the naturalization of colonial reason and logocentrism (see Derrida 1976, 1992a, 1981). Identified as excessive by the presumptive white sovereignty (Hesse 2021) of the figuratively unaccented, Derrida’s accent in the tones of these conceptual idioms can be read, seen, heard, and *confronted* as the discredited, the invasive and the encroachment, as we saw in Habermas’s extensive critique (Habermas 1987). However, it is not unusual for the accented other, particularly the non-white/non-westerner in the West, to contemplate the prospect of assimilation into the transparency of unmarked white signification through actively losing the foreign accent in order to pass, if not less noticed, then less stigmatized. What we have to weigh here is to what extent and in what ways, an undecidably qualified assimilation may have accounted for the concurrency of Derrida’s apparently more pervasive, unmarked white French philosophical accent.

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida describes his early recognition of how any desire to lose his French-Algerian accent was a rite of passage into the largesse of French literary and intellectual culture. Initially, I want to think about this cultural strategy as a question of social and intellectual navigation confronting Derrida in two simultaneous ways, which are not easy to discount. First, there is Gilman’s general observation on the lure of the historical tradition of Jewish assimilation to European culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, inscribed in the desire to become invisible and hence white, which also included the attempt to “transform that difference heard in the very sound of his or her voice into a positive sign” (Gilman 1991: 236). Second, more specifically, we can also detect accent-switching tones in Derrida’s ambivalences and convictions about his accent(s), his sameness and otherness, his avoiding and revealing of his French foreign markings (Derrida 1998). These features are all raised with a radical sense of forthrightness and vulnerability in *Monolingualism of the Other*, where Derrida reflects on the colonial and elite cultures of the French accent. Recalling his colonial Algerian school formations and particularly his assimilation of the French language, literature, history, and geography, Derrida highlights his critical and idiosyncratic negotiation with the lure and demands of assimilation into exemplary French speech and writing:

One entered French literature only by losing one’s accent. I think I have not lost my accent; not everything in my “French Algerian” accent is lost. Its intonation is more apparent in certain “pragmatic situations” (anger or exclamation in familial or familiar surroundings, more often in private than in public, which is quite a reliable criterion for the experience of this strange and precarious distinction). But I would

like to hope, I would very much prefer, that no publication permit my “French Algerian” to appear. In the meantime, until the contrary is proven, I do not believe that anyone can detect *by reading*, if I do not declare it, that I am a “French Algerian”. I retain no doubt, a sort of acquired reflex from the necessity of this vigilant transformation. I am not proud of it, I make no doctrine of it, so it is: an accent – any French accent, but above all a strong southern accent – seems incompatible to me with the intellectual dignity of public speech. (Derrida 1998: 46)

Derrida in acknowledging losing and not losing his French-Algerian accent, while identifying presumably any regional accent as lacking in “intellectual dignity”, seems to identify accent as something to be repressed even if he chooses to not always repress it. This, however, forgoes the possibilities of deconstructing his accent. The affective theme of monolingualism conveys Derrida’s experience of inhabiting a language that does not belong to him, using a medium of interiority and representation, he does not own, speaking the language of his mother which is not his mother tongue. Monolingualism of the other symbolizes being normalized inside and outside the linguistic culture, domiciled and estranged, a marginalized accent in a mainstreamed discourse (Derrida 1998). Interestingly, this idea of monolingualism of the other is homologous with the Black experience of European colonizing languages, particularly those Black populations in Western nations whose accents are mobilized, marked by and descended from lineages of enslavement in the Americas, and in some cases colonialism in Africa. What this homology also enables us to see is that accents can be liberated as shared vocal intensities and sensibilities, that not only provide specific orientations to the capacities of language but are affectively communitarian, often counter-posed to hegemonic accents represented as unaccented. Derrida’s individualization of his accent represses the meaning of accents as language communities, and every language community as accented. There is no stable or fixed origin to a mother tongue; languages emerge through the generationally mothered accents of differently positioned and configured communities. Derrida has acquired and learned two French accents; in effect and affect, he inhabits the *bilingualism of the other*.

In other words, bilingualism of the other highlights the fact of Derrida’s encountering his own otherness within his birthed French-Algerian accent in France, and the otherness of his acquired white French intellectual accent, none of these languages belongs to him; they belong to the language community in which he has chosen to engage. For example, Derrida notes that having encountered throughout his schooling in Algeria a “doctrine of indoctrination” that inculcated knowledge, familiarity, and affection for all things French, he had learned virtually nothing about Algeria. His immersion in French literature left him in a relationship of discontinuity with the Algerian cultural landscape in which he was living.

A discontinuity reinforced by the high culture values of French literature that formed a “partition” against the cultural specificity of French Algeria. Losing one’s accent reinforced that partition against the French-Algerian lineage. But also evident in Derrida’s autobiography of losing his accent *is* how the narration itself depends on the act of retaining or returning to his status as the non-white, accented other, as the witness to the loss, the site of enunciating the loss. In other words, Derrida’s foreign or non-white accent is not lost, as it might be if it was disappeared without a trace, rather its vestiges as he recognizes are contingent, continuing to haunt the horizon of the white accent, like an ever-present, potential, immigrant intrusion. Reading Derrida’s tone of retrospection in this way against his idealized accentual self, allows us to identify *the losses of two accents*; the first he conveys ostensibly, and the second surreptitiously. The *ostensible loss* is his French-Algerian accent which he conceptualizes as a phonetic-writing excess that can be added to or subtracted from, revealed, or repressed in “the intellectual dignity of public speech”. Derrida’s embrace of losing his French-Algerian accent in public situations, undoubtedly facilitates his passing or being passed as white. The *surreptitious loss* occurs in those private, familial, and familiar, “pragmatic situations” in which he could be said to *lose his white French accent*, thereby recapitulating impulses, emphases, intonations, orientations, tones, resplendent in a non-white, counter-accent, appropriate to, associated with, the affect and architecture of the pragmatic situation. Here we can understand the pragmatic, situational, interruptive accentual affect, residing in a foreign, non-white response, possibly involving anger, at any rate exclamation, to a contingent or structural issue, event, structure, discourse, or a history; the tone and meaning of which is irreducible to the white-accented integrity of *Western* public speech. Bilingualism of the other.

## Black Margins of Deconstruction

The specifically Derridean intellectual political concerns that arise with the bilingualism of the other, can be understood more effectively if we think about two politically specific ideological life-worlds of the 1950s–1960s, post-Second World War French national and colonial-racial conjuncture in which Derrida came of age, matured, and refined his philosophical ideas. The first ideological life-world was associated with sedimenting a French intellectual and political culture inhospitable to the idea of race being used as an analytical or social category. Indeed, an intellectual and political liberal tradition had arisen in which white intellectuals, political activists, and trade unionists, avoided the language of race. Racism had become historically identified with Nazism and only slowly and subsequently attributed to the experience of immigrants, while public policy eschewed the collection of race inequality statistics pioneered in the United States

and the United Kingdom. The hegemonic ideology of French republicanism celebrated and invested in the ethics of citizenship as equality and the ethical primacy of individualism outside of racial and ethnic categories. This underwrote the banishment of race, even as a critical theorization, from intellectual ideas. With notable exceptions like Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Etienne Balibar, white intellectual, Leftist French culture, had mostly occluded the critique of racism cultivated by the Black poetics and intellectual Negritude movement from the 1930s onwards, and theoretically elaborated in the work of Aime Cesaire and Franz Fanon. Race and racism were simply not something white Leftist French philosophers wrote about unless like Foucault in *Society Must be Defended*, they conceptualized racism in the Nazi-Holocaust paradigm and analogies with it. France's subsequent statist and liberal development of an anti-racist orientation within an official color-blind ideology, which it shared with other post-Second World War European nations, meant that the idea of Western ideals as the world's perpetrator of racism through colonial forms of white supremacy was inadmissible if not inconceivable (Bleich 2000). Instead, fascism had shown white Western liberal intellectuals and politicians that Western ideals of liberalism, democracy, science and rationality, were the victims of racism, despite what Habermasian proscribed Black writers like Cesaire, Fanon, or Du Bois might have to say (see Wilder 2005, 2015).

If the first ideological life-world presupposed white accents of Western philosophy, the second ideological life-world resonated with non-white accents of anti-colonial and anti-racist politics. Robert Stam and Ella Shoat have described this life-world as a "post-war rupture". Western Europe, principally France and Britain, was being transformed by national independence movements in their colonies and non-white migratory movements into their metropolises, recruited to undertake the post-war economic rebuilding of these nations. As Stam and Shoat observe,

While anti-colonial movements began to transform relations between nations, minority liberation movements began to transform relations within nations. Just as newly independent Third World nations tried to free themselves from colonial subordination, so First world minorities challenged the white supremacist protocols of their own societies. (Stam and Shoat 2012: 68)

The colonial-racial figuration of Western universalism in human rights, liberalism, democracy, and civilization was under sustained critique, particularly globally profiled in the Algerian war of independence, the US civil rights movement, the South African anti-Apartheid movement, and the anti-Vietnam war in Vietnam movement. Each of these comprised rupturing struggles against the

colonial-racial political modernity that Europe's creation of the West had imposed on the world, attracting Leftist activists and intellectuals in Western civil societies, and creating new forms of critique in the metropole. Yet the way in which European nations reacted to the decolonization and immigration processes, as formerly colonized territories became new nations, and immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, assumed economic and social residence as European citizens, invariably represented these formations as having nothing to do with their racist jurisdictions, denying the violence of European colonialism, electing to navigate the post-war and postcolonial worlds as if the colonial-racial legacies of white supremacist rule were erased by European liberalism or French republicanism not socially sedimented within the incivilities of the metropole (Cesaire 1955/2000; Shepherd 2006).

It is worth speculating about how Derrida's frequent iteration of the West in Western philosophy, Western metaphysics, and Western history, marks a signifier that oscillates between these two ideological life-worlds of the West, with Derrida sometimes caught between, sometimes located in either of their corresponding white and Black accents. It certainly seems likely that these two Western ideological life-worlds of sedimenting and rupturing directly influenced Derrida's thinking in navigating the losing and retaining of both his assimilating white and subversive Black accents, whether to be reticent about Eurocentrism and/or racism or to be explicit; and how to conceptualize these formations, especially in positioning either as the other's other. For example, although Derrida did at times experience liberal equivocations over the radicalism of the Algerian revolution (Baring 2011), it nevertheless had a profound effect on his thinking, particularly in symbolizing the post-war decolonial question as a question for Europe and the West whose universal verities were becoming increasingly exposed in entanglement with white representational violence that destabilized, dislocated, and disseminated them (Stam and Shoat 2012; Shepherd 2006; Young 2001). So, what is deconstruction in this historical context of decoloniality? Various writers have already usefully provided important theoretical genealogies of the lineage of deconstruction and post-structuralism generally in the ruptures and entanglements of the anti-colonial, independence movements in Africa, especially Algeria (Ahluwalia 2010; Farred 2020; Young 1990). Drawing upon this, I want to suggest that deconstruction is a decolonial worldly questioning and decentering of the normalization of the West (Sayyid 1997), that confronts figurations of the West as the structure of worldliness with revelations and interrogations of the West as signifying the colonial-racial imbrication of hegemonic-normative Europe and subaltern-pathological non-Europe.

Perhaps the most important precursor to this decolonial approach to Derrida and deconstruction was undertaken by Robert Young (1990) over thirty years

ago in his seminal book *White Mythologies*. According to Young, deconstruction involved “not just a critique of the grounds of knowledge in general, but specifically the grounds of Occidental knowledge” (Young 1990: 17). It mobilized a critique of a construction of knowledge in terms of the West’s imperialization of the non-West, while the West continues to define its borders against the encroachment of the non-West. Young argues it is this phenomenon that is the object of Derrida’s frequent recourse to invoking the West as an imperial-colonial descriptor of knowledge, metaphysics and logocentrism. Young makes the case for a decolonial deconstruction in unmistakable terms, where he writes, “If one had to answer, therefore, the general question, of what is deconstruction a deconstruction of, the answer would be, of the concept, the authority, and assumed primacy of the category of ‘the West’” (Young 1990: 19). Interestingly, a little over ten years later, he revisited these ideas, reflecting on two personal intellectual exchanges with Derrida (Young 2001). The first occasion was as part of a small group discussion with Derrida where Derrida was asked his about use of the term “the West” and “Western metaphysics”. Derrida replied there was “nothing” that could be “considered the essence of the West in Western philosophy”, that the unity of Western philosophy, “was an illusion”, that there was no continuity in Western philosophy, and that it was the effect of a dogma, based on “splits, fissures, and discontinuities in the corpus” (Young 2001: 411). Following the exchange, Young sent Derrida a copy of his book *White Mythologies* which examines Derrida’s deconstructive decolonial theorizations. Derrida replied noting it identified “a thread” in his writings but was not expansive in his response. Nevertheless, Young suggests the thread Derrida acknowledged enables us to think expansively about the relation between repeatable concepts like other, alterity, and difference in his work. These conceptual symptoms of Derrida’s accent “offered the possibility of redefining subaltern positions both within and outside Western cultural norms but were predominantly predicated in a fifth column politics” (Young 2001: 411). While Young’s idea of a “fifth column politics” seems an overreach and might be questioned about its flirtation with an antisemitic trope, he does find warrant for the idea of Derrida working within and against the Western philosophical system in a conjecture Derrida makes in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics” where pondering Emmanuel Levinas’s redeployment of categories he had previously rejected in a critique of Hegel’s ontology, Derrida wonders in passing about the “necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it” (Derrida 1978: 111). Whatever its incidental status, this observation suggests a decolonial warrant for reading deconstruction as exposing and unraveling the colony inside the metropole, the non-white immigrant/citizen inside the white sovereign nation, and the non-West inside the West. It is indicative of where the bilingualism of the other finds its Black accent.



## Deconstructive Black Accent

In *Black Reconstruction*, W. E. B. Du Bois (1935) reviewed in painstaking detail the colonial-racial foreclosure of Black politics from contemporary historical accounts of US reconstruction (1865–1877), following the civil war and the abolition of slavery; and noted how the abolitionist democracy was overtaken by a “revolution in race”, that established the democratic foundations for a white supremacist polity. Commenting on the erasure of these entangled social developments from historical commentaries, Du Bois observed the slave had been “barred from testifying” (Du Bois 1935). The idea of the barred slave testimony draws attention to the critique of race and white supremacy in the testimony that is barred, and the routine reiteration of that barring, preserving the white accentual representation of democracy, critically unbesmirched by a Black accent. What I have been calling white and Black accents can be further elaborated here to contrast their differential emphases and orientations as two counter-veiling ways of shaping the analytical narration of race, Eurocentrism, and racism. The narration of racism is white accentually, where it forecloses historical and contemporary commentary on the colonial-racial order of the West in any analysis of modern social formations like capitalism, liberalism, democracy, militarism, nationalism, individualism, and whiteness. Conversely the narration of racism is accentually Black, where it interrupts that colonial-racial foreclosure, and discloses the routine conflation of modern social formations with the normativity of white domination and the non-white subordination, through sounding out the Western modernity imbricated tone of liberalism and colonialism, imperialism and humanism, capitalism and slavery, civilization and barbarism, enlightenment and exoticization, democracy, and whiteness (Hesse 2014).

This is the configuration of the Black accent that at times has displaced Derrida’s apparent assimilation into a white accent. The case for the irruptions of Derrida’s Black deconstructive accent is made most compelling when Derrida engages with questions of human rights, injustices, and inequalities in the West, the colonial, and racism directly, especially in his early work. As is well known in *Of Grammatology*, his critique of logocentrism as ethnocentrism, effectively exposed the centering of Western intellectual and political culture on the logos, reason, namely, European calibrated and colonially imposed reason in science, politics, economics, and so on, as if the world was reducible and explicable ultimately in only these terms. His characterization of this as the ethnocentrism of all ethnocentrisms was perhaps a muted Black accent, but it opened up the analysis of a violent metaphysics of racial presence, that in normalizing and erasing the corrigibility of racial hierarchies and segregations under an inherited white sovereignty, endures, even in proclaimed acts of anti-ethnocentrism (Derrida 1976).

In *Margins of Philosophy*, there is one primary essay that evokes the methodological character of a Black deconstructive accent that interrupts and questions the white normative, hegemonic order of Western reason; it is entitled “White Mythology”. In that essay, Derrida discusses the role of the effacement or erasure of meaning in metaphor. He uses this as a basis for thinking about effacement of that effacement or erasure of that erasure in the logic of metaphor, where the “metaphor is no longer noticed and is taken for the proper meaning” (Derrida 1981). Derrida illustrates this through the colonial metaphor of whiteness, its double effacement. There is effacement through racial subordination; hence he argues:

Metaphysics the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West; the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own logos, that is the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason. Which does not go uncontested.

But there is also effacement through disavowal, where he argues:

White mythology – metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring inscribed in white ink, an invisible design, covered over in the palimpsest.

If we can attribute any of this to Derrida’s Black accent, it is because even if only in passing, he identifies the ontological and epistemological problem of white sovereignty in the regulation of the West as white hegemonic Europeaness and subaltern, non-white, non-Europeaness, that has been a characteristic object of exposure and interrogation for the Black Radical Tradition throughout modernity (Robinson 1983).

However, in his articles on racism, Derrida discloses more fully his Black deconstructive accent. Derrida as mentioned previously published, only wrote two short articles that directly addressed questions of race and racism. Both were written in the mid-1980s focusing primarily on South Africa. These were “Racism’s Last Word”, written in 1983 as a contribution to an anti-Apartheid exhibition (Derrida 2007) and “Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela in Admiration”, written in 1986 as a contribution to a collection of articles in support of the then imprisoned Nelson Mandela (Derrida 2008). In these analyses, there is a specter haunting Derrida’s accent; it is not only the specter of Blackness, but also the specter of Fanon. The specter, as Derrida reminds us in one of his various formulations from *Specters of Marx*, haunts through returning, through repetition, and through its “frequentation” (Derrida 1994). Derrida’s approach in these articles is reminiscent of Fanon’s discussion in *Wretched of the Earth* that describes a Manichean

world, divided into compartments, marked by segregations, policed by violence, and presided over by denials, where the question of race is decided by the compartments to which you have been allocated. However, Derrida introduces to this double logic his particular rendition of a Black decolonial accent that associates anti-racism with the logic of its other, another racism, and searches for an idiom in which to express this. “Racism’s Last Word”, impugns Apartheid South Africa as “the ultimate racism, the worst racism, the most recent, or the most racist of racisms”, noting that it emerged at a time after the Second World War, “when all racisms on the face on the earth were condemned” (Derrida 2007: 378). Derrida’s oblique reference to Nazism and the Holocaust reminds us that although Nazism was condemned by the West as the racism to end all racisms, the West nevertheless allowed South African to “campaign for the separate development of each race in the geographic zone assigned to it” (Derrida 2007: 378). What Derrida overlooks that would have made his critique of Apartheid exceptionalism more effective, were two things. First, the world of the 1940s after Nazism was still a colonial and racially segregated world, sanctioned by the Western liberal-democratic discourses of white supremacy, South African Apartheid was a legitimized part of that colonial world. Second, also established in 1948, along with South African Apartheid, was the Apartheid State of Israel, whose displacement and racial segregation of the Palestinians, should equally be considered the most recent of racisms (Hesse 2004: 21). Indeed, Derrida’s liberal tendency not to recognize the State of Israel as a European and Zionist inspired colonial State (Wise 2009), prevented him from seeing how expansive Apartheid was where he argued it “tends to pass segregation off as natural – and as the very law of the origin”, in effect “it, institutes, declares, writes, inscribes, prescribes. A system of marks, it outlines space in order to assign forced residence or to close off borders. It does not discern, it discriminates” (Derrida 2007: 379). Derrida describes Apartheid derivatively as a “juridical racism”, “a State racism”, and the “last-born of many racisms”. There is nothing remarkable in these descriptions; indeed, they are widely recognized. But this is not the only racism, or the only last racism, that Derrida identifies; he also describes this “racism as a Western thing” (Derrida 2007: 379).

It is important not to misunderstand this claim. For Derrida, there is no Apartheid racism, without Western racism, no racism in either South Africa or the West generally (and we should include Israel here), without “*homo politicus europaeus*”. This, he argues, underwrites “a contradiction internal to the West and to the assertion of its rights” (Derrida 2007: 381). Since it is not simply that the West supported Apartheid, but that the West also supported its own racism in the process, condemning that which was named, preserving and servicing that which went unnamed, and asserting its rights, as universal, in effect (although Derrida does not say this), another white mythology. In this Black accent, the West is a

metaphor for modernity as a universal postulation of human rights in denial of its universalization of this racism. All of which facilitates another reading of the generalization of Apartheid and its apartness, the double of it being apart from the West, via Western moral condemnation but not apart from the West in terms of its Western economic support. It is its Western and specifically European inscriptions that intrigue and outrage Derrida. How the West's own racism seems to remain apart from the West's indictment of racism, becoming in effect the racism of racism, the latter's conditions of possibility, and the last racism, white mythology.

"Racism's Last Word" should be read in conjunction with Derrida's "Laws of Reflection", which also addressed South Africa, specifically the political statesmanship of Nelson Mandela, and is also another complex intervention into the political repertoires of white mythology. Derrida addresses the political theme of whiteness more explicitly and emphatically, referring to "white colonization", the force of the "white minority", "white government", "white power", and "the white man" all in the context of South Africa, but also in the context of the Western world, particularly where he is concerned with Western defenders of Apartheid. This accent of the Black Radical Tradition clearly emerges once again as Derrida indicts the West's condemnation of racial subordination that is coupled with obscuring its support for racial subordination; while in South Africa itself, the proclamation of its commitment to Western democracy, effaces its denial of democracy to the Black populations. Derrida is writing in an accentual lineage that evokes resonances of Aime Cesaire, Fanon, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela, all of whom effectively exposed and interrogated the futility and violence of white supremacy condemning and supporting white supremacy under the sign of Western democracy. This political rethinking of the West involves Derrida in folding South Africa into the West, in his reflections on Mandela's ethical but forlorn attempts to use the rule of law to invoke the rule of law under Apartheid, and to recognize this as indicative of the West more broadly. There is a white mythology that the "mastering of Western law" (Derrida 2008: 76) enables it to be used as a weapon against those who oppress; but the white sovereign problem is that the "white man" scorns "his own law" (Derrida 2008: 78) when it is used to redress white wrongs in the proscription of Black rights:

White power does not think it has to respond, does not hold itself responsible to Black people. The latter cannot even assure itself, by return mail, by an exchange of words, looks or signs, that any image has been formed on the other side, an image that might return to it in some way. For white power does not content itself with not answering. It does worse: it does not even acknowledge receipt. (Derrida 2008: 77)

What Derrida conceptualizes here is the white sovereign form of non-recognition. Inherited in the historical gaze and enactment of what he calls “white power”, it disavows there is anything to answer for where its violence against Black populations is concerned. Derrida bequeaths this to us as the contemporary anatomy of white sovereignty (Hesse 2021), whose constituent power over the Western polity is held in the custodianship of white ideological officialdom and in the interests of white citizens (e.g., “we want our country back”, “make America great again”). For the liberal-democratic, capitalist, and Western polity, the rule of law is the rule of white sovereignty in the rule of law. Derrida’s Black accent in the analysis of “white power” speaks to a historical and contemporary sense of *déjà vu*. We can hear it in the conditions underpinning the global Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, ignited by the police murder of a Black man, George Floyd in Minnesota (United States), expanding to indict police brutality, institutional racism, and white supremacy globally; and we can hear it in the enduring silences that have prevailed globally since that year of racial non-reckoning (Hesse and Thompson 2022). This is one of the reasons why it remains compelling to continue to think about the ways in which Derrida’s two short, marginalized 1980s texts on Apartheid South Africa, routinely located outside the white-accented discussion of deconstruction, might be reframed as the prism through which to re-read deconstruction as a decolonial commentary on Western liberal democracies enduring institutions of white mythology. But for this to be remotely rendered intelligible, it will be necessary to lose Derrida’s white accent.

## Conclusion

What does this mean for the West? We have heard that question countless times in Western media; it is ubiquitous; it pops up any time the United States or a European nation encounters difficulties or disturbances with anything or anyone externally or internally marked as non-European and non-white outsiders. What does this mean for the West? Even without knowledge of that to which the indexical “this” refers, the question is always instantly recognizable. It is regularly assumed and fixed as the foundation of all political, cultural, economic and ecological discourse. Intoned in a seemingly incorrigible universal idiom, the question’s compelling geo-political and epistemological lineage seems to oblige and command the urgency of an answer associated with global interests. Routinely disseminated as inscrutable, the ultimatum of the question invariably solicits answers that usually preclude any sense of what “this” might mean for a questioning of the West. Ubiquitous among political correspondents and political scientists of North America and Europe, the question simultaneously and silently invokes an otherness of “this” and asserts a normativity of the West without

signifying why or how. Disinterring and refusing the West's authority to determine the otherness of "this" in the question, including deselecting the answers it inevitably conscripts as natural, brings into focus what might be described as the *deconstruction of the decolonial*. In other words, it is significant that unveiling the other of deconstruction draws our attention not simply to the colonial-racial foundationalism of the West but to its colonial-racial undecidability. Perhaps we can ask that question again, now with Derrida's Black deconstructive accent, what does "this" mean for the West?

## Notes

- 1 In late June and early July 1997, Derrida interviewed the African American Free Jazz musician, Ornette Coleman, in a wide-ranging discussion from language and improvisation to the US and France, they also had a brief exchange about personal experiences of racism. See Murphy 2004.
- 2 Although I do not theorize decoloniality in this article I use it to understand the West as a project rather than a location (Glissant 1989), constituted wherever there is the colonial-racial imbrication of the domination of Whiteness/Europeanness and the subordination of non-whiteness/non-Europeanness. The point of decolonial theory is to detail, expose and mark this formation, contest its naturalization, identify its dismantling and how to eliminate its violences, exploitations, knowledge productions and policing; in order to create new, open possibilities.
- 3 I have not addressed the substantive argument of Derrida's paper in this article. The full transcript of Derrida's keynote presentation, "An Other Otherness of the Other", at the UC Irvine tRaces conference, April 2003, can be accessed on the link below. In the interests of full disclosure, I should mention I was present at that conference as a speaker on a subsequent panel. During my opening remarks I questioned the transparency of Derrida's remarks that deconstruction was formulated against racism and suggested if this was to be taken seriously deconstruction must be thought alongside decolonization. The link for this video is also below. This article is perhaps a reformulation of what I said then which is also my more informed appreciation and critique of what Derrida said then.
  - April 2003 tRACES Day 1: Jacques Derrida Keynote Response to Etienne Balibar – YouTube: [https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_\\_\\_https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfXdYefgKjw&pp=ygURQXBYaW-wgMjAwMyB0UmFjZXNM\\*3D\\_\\_\\_;JQ!!Dq0X2DkFhyF93HkjWTBQKhh!QaFC1pEl-AjqJPxEIppq4XskZx61CsAKzqCOzYXFMsWSahn\\_9xQs8sG6sg7QcL3382yx7WsPZcPMrY27wN2WXXMS\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/___https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfXdYefgKjw&pp=ygURQXBYaW-wgMjAwMyB0UmFjZXNM*3D___;JQ!!Dq0X2DkFhyF93HkjWTBQKhh!QaFC1pEl-AjqJPxEIppq4XskZx61CsAKzqCOzYXFMsWSahn_9xQs8sG6sg7QcL3382yx7WsPZcPMrY27wN2WXXMS$)
  - April 2003 tRACES Day 2 [Session 3]: Barnor Hesse – YouTube [https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_\\_\\_https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cKZZ7lwsge&pp=ygUMQmFybm9yIEhlc3NI\\_\\_\\_;!!Dq0X2DkFhyF93HkjWTBQKhh!VFIS1YBO2OHssLlosvVl6CtChOumh427Wv\\_gTX1dD9IDC\\_L-IoUmtNHm6qmPyUlzLtd3CU4xWBwugYRKlspl8k4\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/___https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cKZZ7lwsge&pp=ygUMQmFybm9yIEhlc3NI___;!!Dq0X2DkFhyF93HkjWTBQKhh!VFIS1YBO2OHssLlosvVl6CtChOumh427Wv_gTX1dD9IDC_L-IoUmtNHm6qmPyUlzLtd3CU4xWBwugYRKlspl8k4$)

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