

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* on Race Consciousness

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Readers of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* often disagree about whether or not Fanon is arguing for or against the perpetuation of racial categories.¹ One interpretation suggests that Fanon's sociogenic analysis demonstrates the inevitability, if not the necessity, of racial categories. These readers, namely Kathryn Gines in "Fanon and Sartre 50 Years Later: To Retain or Reject the Concept of Race"² focus on Chapter Five, "The Lived Experience of the Black." Originally published as a response to Sartre's "Black Orpheus," Fanon's essay introduced Léopold Senghor's anthology of *négritude* poetry. In "Black Orpheus" Sartre claims that the *négritude* movement is essential for a new kind of humanism that will free us from racist thinking, free us from a world divided by race:

The unity which will come eventually, bringing all oppressed peoples together in the same struggle, must be preceded in the colonies by what I shall call the moment of separation or negativity: this anti-racist racism is the only road that will lead to the abolition of racial differences.³

Fanon's response is direct: "Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal. ... I *needed* not to know. This struggle, this new decline had to take on an aspect of completeness."⁴ Sartre's declaring an end to racialism undermines the power of experiencing blackness positively; rendering it as a temporary move on the way to universal humanism makes it almost powerless. To succeed, *négritude* has to be able to be experienced as absolute.

The other interpretation suggests that Fanon, although giving an amazing and important description of "the lived experience of the black," ends *Black Skin, White Masks* by moving

¹ This essay takes a look at a small body of work at the intersection of two large bodies of work: Fanon Studies and Critical Race Theory. To think that one encompasses the other is a mistake, for there is much more to Fanon Studies than a discussion of what it means to be black, and plenty of Critical Race Theory does not include Fanon, although more often than not anthologies on race, racism, and race theory include Fanon's fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The Fact of Blackness." That such works—including Adams and Savran, *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, Blackwell 2002; Alcoff and Mendietta, *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, Blackwell 2003; Back and Solomos, *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, Routledge 2000; Bernasconi, *Race*, Blackwell 2001; and Zack, Naomi, *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: The Big Questions*, Blackwell 1998—do not use the more apt translation "The Lived Experience of the Black" (except Bernasconi's *Race*) tends to reproduce the same tired debate about the biological unreality of races and undermines, as I shall show, the existential force of Fanon's works. These anthologies are generally set up to argue against the long-term retention of racial categories even when they do not argue for explicit colorblindness, which is the position of Emmanuel Eze, especially in *Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future*, Routledge 2001, and Anthony Appiah in *Color-Consciousness*, Princeton 1996 and *In My Father's House*, Oxford 1992. Tommy Shelby's *We Who Are Dark*, Harvard 2005 and Diana Fuss' *Essentially Speaking*, Routledge 1989 and "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," *Diacritics* 1994 also present interesting interpretations of race consciousness insofar as each argues for retention as well as transcendence of the concept; and, especially for Fuss, much hinges on how one reads *Black Skin, White Masks*. Finally, I want to note that this discussion parallels a similar debate concerning the interpretation and importance of W. E. B. Du Bois' "The Conservation of the Races," see especially Bernard W. Bell, et al, *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture*, Routledge 1996.

² Kathryn Gines, "Fanon and Sartre 50 Years Later: To Retain or Reject the Concept of Race," *Sartre Studies International* 9 (2003).

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Black Orpheus," in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2001). 118.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, (New York, Grove Press, 1967). 135.

away from racialism and toward seeing each man as only a man, not seeing color at all. The close of the book, it is argued, suggests exactly this. When Fanon concludes with “My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”⁵ he is gesturing to a universal humanity which is rational and inquisitive. This is exactly the reading Sonia Kruks gives in her book, *Retrieving Experience*. She explains, “in the final chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon develops his own vision of a transition beyond *negritude*,”⁶ or what she calls “an abrupt final shift to a universalizing, abstract rationalism.”⁷ Ross Posnock gives a similar read in “How it feels to be a problem: Du Bois, Fanon and the ‘Impossible Life’ of the black intellectual.” He writes with praise about “the extremity of Fanon’s turn from Negritude to universalism,”⁸ and sees Fanon as clearly recognizing “Negritude [not] as an endpoint or a fixed identity; rather they were moments, critical stages, to be worked through to reach a telos of the universal.”⁹

The racialists read Fanon’s final chapter as such an abrupt move that it cannot be read as undermining the force and significance of the entirety of the text. As Gines explains, Fanon’s apparent move away from race consciousness is only a move away from the past in order to bring about a new and different future; it does not require the elimination of race consciousness or a move to a universal notion of humanity. She says:

[H]e seems to deny the existence of the Negro and the white man when he states, "The Negro is not. No more than the white man" (*BSWM*, 231). But Fanon does not require the Negro (or the white man) to reject race consciousness. Rather, he requires that they both "turn their backs on the inhuman voices ... of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible" (*BSWM*, 231).¹⁰

The anti-racialists read Fanon’s response to Sartre a little differently from the racialists as well. For example, Kruks claims that “Fanon’s objection is not that Sartre is in error in asserting that *négritude* is a transitional movement. Sartre’s mistake, in fact, is to have told the truth!”¹¹ Fanon can acknowledge that the movement is transitional; what else could it be? However, making the transition is better and more possible if one imagines it to be not a transition but a legitimate way of being forever. Knowing it is only a transition “destroy[s] its vitality”¹² by making it less an end, more a means to another end. One’s race matters, but once realized can then be left behind and one can be reasonable and simply human again. Interestingly, Kruks goes on to explain that Fanon works out a much more complicated notion of identity in his later works, but she is clear that *Black Skin, White Masks* takes a terrible turn toward a universal humanism. Furthermore, she says that it is this kind of mistake that undermines the positive contributions a politics of recognition or identity can still make. Kruks explains that Fanon’s involvement with the Algerian liberation struggle served a greater goal of freedom than could “be sought in the realm of

⁵ Fanon 1967, 232.

⁶ Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*, (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 2001). 103.

⁷ Kruks 2001, 98.

⁸ Ross Posnock, “How it feels to be a problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the “Impossible Life” of the black intellectual,” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Winter 1997): 324.

⁹ Posnock 1997, 327.

¹⁰ Gines 2003, 65.

¹¹ Kruks 2001, 102.

¹² Kruks 2001, 102.

interpersonal affirmation and recognition alone.”¹³ Notice that this is not an anti-racialist move but one toward more concrete action to change the material and political situations for many people.

Even when not referencing Fanon specifically, these are two positions that set themselves as opposite one another—one is either for retaining race consciousness or for working toward its abolition, even if that occurs by making it well known in the present. And, these two positions are understood as contradictory as well as the only two options available. We find ourselves impaled on the horns of a sharp dilemma. One horn is held up by the like of Gines and Lucius Outlaw; the other horn would represent positions of Anthony Appiah and David Roediger, to name just a few. But, like most dilemmas, giving us only these two choices is misleading, and the fight between these two sides will not be resolved. One should not read Fanon to figure out what it will or even can mean to be “raced” in the future. Fanon exposes injustice by writing about experience and by projecting a future shared community of hope and freedom without clear indication of the role our group identities might play. If freedom is about being able to be actional, being able to make meaning in the world, then whether or not we will be raced is not as important a question as what race is about now.

Fanon’s response to Sartre is evidence neither of Fanon’s racialism nor his universalism. Fanon says, “a consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, has to be ignorant, of the essences and the determinations of it being. ... Sartre’s mistake was not only to seek the source of the [*experience* of being black] but in a certain sense to block that source.”¹⁴ This is not a call to some permanent racial consciousness; rather, it calls for a commitment to the experiences of living in the world, which is at present quite raced. When Fanon ponders “One day, perhaps, in the depths of that unhappy romanticism ...”¹⁵ the ellipsis does not clearly point to a realization of Sartre’s accuracy. When he states that Sartre “shattered my last illusion,”¹⁶ Fanon is not admitting that authentic race consciousness is an illusion in such a way as to require the giving up of the illusion of race. Fanon is insisting we live in the present with indeterminate hopes for the future, i.e., he is demanding that we *not* look to some end and assume we know what is to come.

Also, if we do not have to decide whether or not Fanon is committed to authentic race consciousness or to a raceless vision, then we will not see a break or an abrupt shift at the end of the book. Fanon is not shifting positions, nor is his stance unclear. He is arguing for experiential analysis which cannot be closed off by assuming we know what race will (or must) come to mean in the future. Of course, “this Negro who is looking for the universal. He is looking for the universal!”¹⁷ because he wants to be a man, not something inferior.

But in June, 1950 the hotels of Paris refused to rent rooms to Negro pilgrims. Why? Purely and simply because their Anglo-Saxon customers (who are rich and who, as everyone knows, hate Negroes) threatened to move out. The Negro is aiming for the universal, but on the screen his Negro essence, his Negro “nature,”

¹³ Kruks 2001, 104-5.

¹⁴ Fanon 1967, 134.

¹⁵ Fanon 1967, 135.

¹⁶ Fanon 1967, 137.

¹⁷ Fanon 1967, 187.

is kept intact. ... I need to lose myself in my negritude, to see the fires, the segregations, the repression, the rapes, the discriminations, the boycotts.”¹⁸

So, if he wants to not have to consider race, he quickly realizes this is not his choice to make. Everywhere he turns, the Negro is reminded that he is a Negro. His only option is to turn to these experiences and seek to understand them. But he still wants to be a man, just a man. We can see that these two positions might not be contradictions. One can be fully human and raced. One can remember the past while not being bound to an identical future.

Fanon can argue for a new humanism and for recognition of himself (and all persons) as equally human without necessarily arguing against race consciousness. Race consciousness and universal humanity are not necessarily contradictions. Jeremy Weate’s analysis of Fanon’s phenomenological method and its similarities and differences from his contemporary and interlocutor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, gives us a clear explanation of the possibility of an ontology of difference, an ontology under development, that can also be universal. He says:

What is is what is to come. As Fanon says, we are indeed a part of being to the degree that we go beyond it. Being, as the possibility of (comm)unity, becomes the form of the ideal. Moreover, precisely because it cannot be given and does not function as the *a priori*, being is therefore an *ethical* ideal—it is the ideal of a community that is yet to exist and yet ought to exist, as the fulfillment of transcendence within immanence. ... The ethics of community is therefore the inverse of the repression of difference.¹⁹

Weate is explaining that as Fanon turns away from the past, toward the future, at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks* he is attempting to fulfill an ethics of community that respects plurality and difference while simultaneously including everyone equally. Kruks makes a similar point: “the affirmation of identity can be liberating only in the context of a struggle to transform wider material and institutional forms of oppression.”²⁰ Even Posnock recognizes Fanon’s efforts to work outside these dilemmas and dichotomies when he tells us that Fanon “destabilizes the identity logic of us/them, identity/difference, inside/outside, native/stranger.” He continues, Fanon’s life “eludes these binaries.”²¹ One wonders why, if Posnock sees this, he still forcefully insists that universal humanism, not identity politics, is the main thrust of Fanon’s work. Posnock seems stuck in the either/or binary that he recognizes Fanon will not entertain. Posnock needs to either argue for or against racial categorizations, but he has not learned, not even from Fanon, that this is a fight we should not engage. Rather, we should be able to be who we are and more, to be raced and fully human, or even to be willing to give it up, if that is what brings freedom.

To argue about whether or not to keep or eliminate the category of race is a mistaken argument for a few reasons: first, it misunderstands how categories are generated, function, and are destroyed; and second, it misunderstands that analyzing experience cannot be bounded by knowing what the eventual “right” experience must be. This is not the place for a thorough study

¹⁸ Fanon 1967, 187.

¹⁹ Jeremy Weate, “Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology,” in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2001). 179.

²⁰ Kruks 2001, 104.

²¹ Posnock 1991, 330.

of categorization; that is a book itself. Still, we can get a sense of the problem. We imagine that because we have evidence asserting that race is not a rigid biological truth, that race is not real and should not be used as a category of analysis. However, I think it is more often the case that the biological reality is disproved only *after* one decides to eliminate the category for political and social reasons. Surely we can conclude as misguided all those eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth century studies from Buffon to Blumenbach to Darwin and everyone in between²² who thought they had proven not only that there are varieties of mankind but also often that some are superior to others. As well we can accept that the human genome project claims that there is more genetic diversity inside each “race” as there is between them.²³ However, all this does not close the book on the use of race as a category of analysis, not even biologically.

Regardless of the above possibilities, to think that doing away with biological facts does away with racial categories grants legitimacy and power to Enlightenment rationalism and its belief that only scientific facts give us truths. The word “race” has had many meanings, often seemingly contradictory, but each was a kind of category. Things and people have been grouped into races based on sex, nation, language, skin color (or other external physical characteristics), and religion to name a few. A cursory review of the Oxford English Dictionary’s twenty-nine definitions of the noun “race”²⁴ that relate to groups categorized by descent or common features reveals that race could refer to all humans, “the human race,” to one family, to one species, to a tribe, to a band of tribes which make up an ethnicity, to one class, and many more. The birth of scientific racism did, somewhat successfully, reduce the meanings of “race” to only a few possibilities all centering on inherited biological characteristics separating our subspecies of humans, which supposedly also explained moral and cultural characteristics. It is the attempt to explain those moral and cultural characteristics, especially insofar as they are ordered in decreasing value, that leads us to want to eliminate racial categories altogether. But “race” can have many meanings, not all of which involve notions of superiority and inferiority and result in invidious racism. Insofar as all categorizations are in some sense arbitrary,²⁵ some physical and cultural differences can be quite relevant in certain situations. To demand now that we can no longer use these categories could do a serious disservice to many people.

There is value to studying biological differences between people that we take to be from different races. First, there’s the medical significance of race, i.e., different diseases and treatments correlate with different races. Recent studies in the *New England Journal of Medicine* suggest African-American males respond differently from European-Americans to certain heart related drugs therapies. The National Human Genome Center at Howard University is collecting genetic data with racial classifications as well. And the Howard University Medical Center is also running programs to assess racial factors in medical treatment from a purely physiological perspective. The Human Genome Diversity Project does not have full support and funding, yet it is underway and has more scientists joining. Population geneticists, like Spencer Wells, are rushing around the globe collecting DNA from various peoples, especially ethnic minorities, to

²² For a nice collection of various writings on race spanning over three hundred years, see Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lott’s *The Idea of Race*, (Cambridge, MA, Hackett, 2000).

²³ See the Human Genome Project web site: http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/home.shtml (accessed February 26, 2005)

²⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed, 1989. (accessed February 26, 2005)

²⁵ See Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (New York, Vintage, 1994) and Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997).

trace the migration and evolution of humans for tens of thousands of years.²⁶ Kruks explains how these biological facts affect the social realm as well:

Of course, all group identities become fuzzy at the margins. But this is not to say they lack any basis.²⁷ For example, black women still face higher mortality rates from certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, than do white women. Thus race may affect how different groups of feminist activists prioritize health-related demands.²⁸

So, race matters not only because the biological aspects cannot be accounted for by a simple social explanation but also because the social realities of race affect our biological realities.

The most common explanation given for the meaningfulness of race is that it is not a biological fact but a social one, i.e., race is a social construct. This claim is made by both those who want to work for authentic race consciousness as well as those who argue for its elimination. The former explain that whether or not races are “real” they have been and continue to be meaningful. The latter suggest that insofar as race is not some external fact but only an idea, one which has been used exclusively to oppress, we can and must refuse to continue to validate the idea. Still, and this is especially true for the latter group of theorists, asserting that something is a social construct is the beginning, not the end, of coming to understand it. Lewis Gordon, in *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, makes this point explicitly, and he also explains that it is from Fanon that we can learn this:

Granting that certain conceptions of human reality, like race and racism, are unmasked as bogus claims—that they are, in contemporary parlance, social constructions—it is also important for us to understand that such a conclusion is not the end of the issue, but the beginning of a whole new set of problems. ... We will find ourselves in a trap if we propose the purely natural or the physical as our non-social alternative. For all we would show is that there is not extensional, prior-reality of race. But then, so what? We *know* that the importance of race is a function of racial and racist *concern* ... The term ‘social construct’ only identifies society as a constitutor of race. But that tells us nothing if we do not understand how, in such an instance, a society can create anything. To construct society suprastructurally (above or beyond human involvement) would manifest a failure to heed Fanon’s warning that “society, unlike biochemical processes, cannot escape human influences. Man is what brings society into being (*BSWM*, 11)” ...

²⁶ To begin to get a sense of the scientific work currently being done on race, look at <http://www.genomecenter.howard.edu/> (accessed February 26, 2005) and <http://www.stanford.edu/group/morrinst/hgdp.html> (accessed February 26, 2005). See also *Discover*, December 2004, for Robert Kunzinger’s “Hidden History of Men” to learn about Well’s project and genetics and diversity. In all its endeavors to declare race a social construct, even the Human Genome Project has had to admit that certain markers are helpful for determining a person’s race. By no means are they substantiating any kind of scientific racism; however, it is clear that we cannot declare race to have absolutely no biological reality.

²⁷ Here Kruks is also demonstrating how giving up such categories in the face of scientific facts that undermine their truth only legitimizes science as the (only) bearer of truth. That these categories of identity are not rigid, that we cannot so easily tell who belongs to what class or where one class ends and the other begins, is significant; however, it does not deal a death blow to the category (or the act of categorization). Instead it shows us that human experience and understanding is not so clear and accurate, so we must always be cautious when categorizing.

²⁸ Kruks 2001, 83.

The concept of the social constructivity of race is of no value without a prior understanding of what is involved in the construction of any phenomena.”²⁹

What we learn from an existential phenomenological method, such as Fanon’s, is that to be (a free) human is to create and bestow meaning on the world, and this is done intersubjectively.

So, essentially, everything is a social construct. Biology, as an organized investigation of living things, is itself a social construct. Kruks, defending existential phenomenology, shows that this is fundamental to phenomenology.

Beauvoir argues that none of these [biology, psychoanalysis, and class] is a destiny in the sense of possessing natural causality or inevitable determination. Rather, it is through custom, “this second nature,” that the “facts” of biology come to play such a dominant role in woman’s situation. Merleau-Ponty too would say that biology acquires its significance only in culture.³⁰

But how does *society* construct something? Through its members. Still, we do not and cannot give just anything any meaning we want. Rather, we are limited by many things, not the least of which are the sedimented and habituated meanings we inherit (in every sense of the word). Institutions, even though made up of individuals, do take on certain powers of perpetuating concepts and practices even when we consciously work to change them. So, we must turn to phenomenological analysis whereby we first attempt to bracket our prejudices and analyze the phenomena directly. To demand that race come to mean this or that, or nothing at all, is to add a prejudice to our analysis, not to bracket prejudices. Gordon again:

one can talk about the world in meaningful ways without committing oneself to the thesis that the world “must” continue to be as it is presently conceived. Whether it “must continue to be” as presently conceived is not relevant to its description. What is important is *that* it is presently conceived in such-and-such a way and that the conception itself can be communicated reflectively both to oneself and to others.³¹

²⁹ Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, (New York, Routledge, 1995). 47.

³⁰ Kruks 2001, 48-9. Understanding just what it means for a phenomena to be constructed is at the heart of both Gordon’s and Kruks’ defenses of existential phenomenology and their corresponding criticisms of postmodernity. Gordon writes, “the ascription of agency to the amorphous societal subject hides itself as metaphor in such instances. For society, in such a case, is a projection of the anonymous individual who severs as the microcosmic version of macrocosmic agency. Here we find complete agreement between individual and societal reality” (47). And, Kruks writes, “perhaps the most striking—and problematic—displacements in postmodern thought involve the shift of such “interior” attributes of the classical Enlightenment subject as intentionality or volition, as well as agency and freedom, from individuated human selves to discursive practices, language games, the free play of signifiers, and so on. Although there is no longer an overarching telos, Hegel’s “cunning of reason” still continues to resound here in the continued attribution of such human qualities to discursive structures and systems. What is valuable and exciting about postmodern theory includes its ability to demonstrate the power of discursive systems. But the fact that this power is so often described through *personification* is a symptom that something is amiss here” (11). How does *society* construct anything? We persons, in social situations, give meaning to our world.

³¹ Gordon 1995, 57.

The overarching purpose of all this analysis is supposed to be justice, an end to the oppression Fanon is experiencing and telling us about. In describing the ways that all blacks are not free, Fanon is demanding a change: freedom for everyone. My concern is that a misreading of Fanon, an attempt to achieve justice via an already worked out concept of race, will fail to liberate. Joy James ends one important anthology of Fanon studies by reminding us of the importance of first seeing Fanon as a liberation theorist and second understanding what it takes to actually do liberatory work. In “‘Bread and Land’: Frantz Fanon’s ‘Native Intellectual’” James reminds us that Fanon is always

reminding intellectuals that radical liberatory theory serves those lacking sufficient land and bread. ... Fanon warns us not only of intellectual concealment, but against an intellectualism that distances itself from the specificity of justice struggles in order to offer truncated concepts of liberation and a myopic view of repression.³²

Similarly Kruks’ most basic concern is reinvigorating a notion of identity politics that neither oversteps its bounds by requiring inaccessible abstract universals or a subjective solipsism and that can also return to its earlier invocations which called not only for recognition but for a redistribution of material goods.³³ Bernasconi is also focused on Fanon’s liberatory struggles. The general purpose of the essay “Casting the Slough: Fanon’s New Humanism for a New Humanity” is to defend and encourage Fanon’s work toward justice. Bernasconi concludes with a warning that “theoreticians should avoid trying to disarm [the old order] ahead of time by presuming that they always know where it will lead.”³⁴ Of course, that final remark is meant to claim that the end of racialism may not be the end of the dialectic of identity. So, there is an appropriate openness, but it is limited by first assuming the end of racial categories. And, what we find in common with all these readers of Fanon, along with Lewis Gordon, is their commitment to understand him as an existential phenomenologist. So what might go wrong when we do not leave the end open and are not committed to a phenomenological analysis of experience? We close off possibilities, and areas of study and activism fail to fulfill their missions. A quick look at three ostensibly liberatory projects, Critical Whiteness Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Development Studies, will show that the endeavors of many practitioners who claim to already know what various identities will (should) or will not (should not) mean for us truncates the projects.

Critical Whiteness Studies, insofar as it is almost exclusively undertaken by “abolitionists,”³⁵ often fails to see what other kinds of experiences it is missing out on and how it alienates, rather than informs, many white folk. Surely, important work is being done by exposing whiteness as the norm for human being and by revealing the many (invisible) privileges afforded to whites. We need to understand that “Whiteness is parasitic on Blackness” and other

³² Joy James, “‘Bread and Land’: Frantz Fanon’s ‘Native Intellectual,’” in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renee T. White, (Cambridge, Blackwell, 1996). 309.

³³ See Kruks 2001, especially pp. 86-8 and pp. 105-110.

³⁴ Robert Bernasconi, “Casting the Slough: Fanon’s New Humanism for a New Humanity,” in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renee T. White, (Cambridge, Blackwell, 1996). 121.

³⁵ Here I am invoking David Rodger’s phrase for the effort to eliminate all racial categories as meaningful.

non-white identities.³⁶ However, Gordon, in “Critical Reflections on Three Popular Tropes in the Study of Whiteness,” carefully reminds us that the discussions of white privilege often imply that whites need to give up basic human rights. It is claimed that whites have privileged access to (fair paying) jobs, (adequate and fair priced) housing, (adequate) health care, (quality) education, and the like. Yet, Gordon explains, “in effect the constitution of these goods as privileges would mark a serious problem in society itself, and most critics of whiteness who advance this notion argue just that—there is a serious problem in, say, American society of that sort.”³⁷ That is, these and other such things that are fundamental to continued existence are rights, not privileges. That non-whites have limited access to them is not equivalent to there being a privileged access for whites, at least not access that should be given up. Refusing to participate in a system of benefits does not generally serve well as a form of resistance, especially because those doling out the benefits do not notice or care that some people are not taking advantage of available access. As well, Lucius Outlaw, who repeatedly reminds us that he is not of the majority, explains that just as blackness demanded a new meaning, from ugly to beautiful, from weak and powerless to capable and powerful, etc... so too can (and must) we engage in “symbol-reversal work on notions of whiteness.”³⁸ He does not, in fact cannot, tell us what this new meaning of white will be, but he thinks we need to seriously consider rehabilitating the notion of whiteness and engage all people in the effort to make a global multiracial democracy of free citizens. Whiteness Studies is important for challenging white normativity as well as for taking away from racist white power movements and associations the power to define whiteness; however, aiming almost exclusively at abolitionism often misses the mark on how best to understand and deploy past, present, and possible future senses of whiteness.

Indigenous Studies offers a similar sort of subfield to Critical Race Theory as Whiteness Studies. Although an indigenous identity is usually differentiated from racial or ethnic identities, this seems only necessary for certain specific political strategies and goals of different groups; however, all three are related to passing on traits and traditions to future generations. Ronald Niezen, in *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity*, stresses the role of lineage in defining indigenous peoples:

In the absence of a uniform creed, membership is usually determined by *birth*. Outsiders of various kinds can be given nominal or provisional membership, but at the international level, to belong—to unquestionably participate as an indigenous person—one has to represent an indigenous nation, preferably as an elected leader, at the very least as a citizen. And within the indigenous nation itself it is mostly *blood and place of parentage* that determine who belongs and who does not.”³⁹

³⁶ George Yancy, “Introduction: Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness,” in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed George Yancy, (New York, Routledge, 1994). 7.

³⁷ Lewis Gordon, “Critical Reflection on Three Popular Tropes in the Study of Whiteness,” in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed. George Yancy, (New York, Routledge, 2004). 175.

³⁸ Lucius Outlaw, “Rehabilitate Racial Whiteness?” in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*,. ed. George Yancy, (New York, Routledge, 2004). 162.

³⁹ Ronald Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity*, (Berkeley, U of California P, 2003). 13, emphasis mine.

Indigenous Studies, like Critical Race Theory, presents explicit challenges to white normativity and both colonialism and neocolonialism, especially given “its goals of antidiscrimination and self-determination.”⁴⁰ As well, it is tightly connected to the legal field where claims for recognition, rights, and sometimes even redistribution of goods are related claims. Nonetheless, it can potentially forestall Sylvia Wynter’s call to reinvent “the study of letters as the study not merely of literature but more comprehensive of the *ordo verborum* as *the* projected causal and lawlike source of our behaviors.”⁴¹ Wynter challenges us to look at 1492, the “discovery” of the New World and the birth of modernity, in a new way where we are “neither celebrants nor dissidents.”⁴² The celebrants are typically Westerners reveling in the growth and progress that followed Columbus’ voyage, whereas the dissidents are the indigenous populations and their advocates who see 1492 as the advent of their genocide. These two sides cannot resolve their differing views of the event.

Wynter’s third perspective calls us to first acknowledge the third category of people affected—those of African descent who were taken from their homes and enslaved in foreign lands (as well as to acknowledge the effects of those remaining Africa but whose lands and lives were devastated by the removal of so many millions of its citizens). Also, we must see both the celebrants’ and the dissidents’ perspectives—see what was exchanged, what the world is and will be in this new era of “a poetics, as the expression of the universalistic conception of the *propter nos*.”⁴³ We are indebted to Fanon for making this possible, because we can now “look for the explanation of our human behaviors not in the individual psyche of the ostensibly pure bio-ontogenetic subject, but rather, in the process of socialization that institutes the individual as a human, and therefore, always sociogenic subject.”⁴⁴ Fanon’s phenomenological method, as it unveils the significance of social factors of identity and understanding, is key to thinking and acting out of the celebrants/dissidents divide about an event we cannot change or undo but must make use of for our future. The indigenous movement needs to be open to this new poetics and not remain locked into the dyadic model of interpreting Columbus’ voyage as either a cause for celebration or for protest. There needs to be an openness to the definition of an indigenous population that does not point to 1492 as the herald of all acts of colonization and genocide, or the field will forever be locked into an identification that does allow for an open future of new meaning. It will remain tied to its past; it will be a slave to “the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors,”⁴⁵ which Fanon implores us to not become.

One place Indigenous Studies has challenged white normativity is in challenging development programs. Studying and implementing economic and political development programs for the Third World has become an entire field of study at universities and institutes across the globe. Very few of these programs have been (appropriately) challenged as racist (and sexist and classist) Third World development programs. “Development is a relational and teleological term,” says Gordon. He continues, “to aim at development requires not yet being developed. To be developed implies achieving more than an end but an end that *ought* to be

⁴⁰ Niezen 2003, 217.

⁴¹ Sylvia Wynter, “Columbus, the Ocean Blue, and Fables That Stir the Mind: To Reinvent the Study of Letters” in *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding, and Textuality*, eds. Bainard Cowan and Jefferson Humphries, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State UP, 1997). 146.

⁴² Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, eds. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, (Washington DC, Smithsonian, 1995). 5.

⁴³ Wynter 1995, 47.

⁴⁴ Wynter 1995, 47.

⁴⁵ Fanon 1967, 230.

achieved.”⁴⁶ And what is that end established? A standard of living equal to that which most Americans or Europeans enjoy. But if America and Europe are still white cultures and political systems, not yet thoroughly multiracial or successfully colorblind, then how are development programs not exporting whiteness onto nonwhite peoples? How are these development programs not new, or continued, forms of colonization? Introducing the collection of essays “Beyond the Lost Decade: Indigenous Movements, Development, and Democracy in Latin America” Jose Antonio Lucero reminds us that “during the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, indigenous peoples in Latin America have posed serious challenges to existing models of nation-building, economic development, and citizenship.”⁴⁷ But there is still much work to be done, and Wynter, following Fanon’s challenge to think humanity anew, has begun it for us.

Combining Wynter’s writings with the work of Irene Gendzier, a Fanon scholar herself, Gordon proposes a theory of development based on “an African postcolonial phenomenological treatment of freedom as a dialectical relationship between the lived reality of choices and social options and the need for a radical humanistic globalism with which to fight contemporary neoliberal and conservative ones.”⁴⁸ In other words, development programs need to first abandon the racist and classist and individualist assumptions about the superiority of Western white culture and politics, American-style democracy and capitalism, so as to not simply export and impose those values and practices on others as if they are universally good. Development programs need to actually increase the options available for people to live well, not for fewer to live better and better at the expense of many.

Fanon challenges us to establish a goal of creating a new humanity. Much work has gone into discussing what role notions of race will play in that new humanity; however, more work needs to go into marking out phenomenology as the path to this new humanity. Fanon’s sociogenic principle demands we look to the social world, the world of meaning and creativity, to find the freedom we so desire and deserve. We must make sense of the past while remaining open to ever new and ever more possibilities for the future. Freedom is being actional, living in the social world as a creator and bestower of meaning. Unfreedom is the failure (often by force) to be actional; deciding ahead what, if anything, “race” will mean only limits our freedom. Race may come to mean something altogether different; it has changed much over the past three hundred years. It may come to mean nothing at all. We need to work together to challenge racist enemies instead of fighting with each other about how best to battle racism. Right now we need to form coalitions that demand affirmation and recognition in the present as well as material and institutional changes.

⁴⁶ Lewis Gordon, “Fanon and Development: A Philosophical Work,” in *Africa Development* XXIX (2004): 71-93. 76.

⁴⁷ Jose Antonio Lucero, *Beyond the Lost Decade: Indigenous Movements, Development, and Democracy in Latin America*. (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2003). 1.

⁴⁸ Gordon 2004, 71.