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"Second Sight": Acknowledging W.E.B. Du Bois's "Double Consciousness" as a Step Towards Dissolution

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Theory and Criticism

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Abstract

This project examines American scholar W.E.B.'s DuBois' idea of "double consciousness", from his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The idea of "double consciousness" has and continues to be utilized by Black scholars and artists in literary, theoretical, and psychological contexts, some of which I hope my paper will adequately survey. I begin by examining "double consciousness" from the perspective of particulars by understanding Du Bois's original idea and the specificities of the American context he himself was a part of and wrote of, considering the legacy of slavery. Then, by focusing primarily on writers such as Frantz Fanon, Richard Wright and Paul Gilroy, succeeding Du Bois, the paper will discuss the various subtleties of "doubleness" present in these works and how they can be cross-referenced to other historical and cultural movements. Framing this discussion in light of "double consciousness" as a "gift" or potential ability versus as a purely restrictive experience demonstrates how the antimonies of "doubleness" works to disprove specific kinds of dualism. Inadvertently the paper will advocate the need for a change in dialectics to centralize Black notions of Being into an academic tradition that has historically limited the definition of humanity.

Keywords

Modernism, Race, Critical Race Theory, Black studies, Double Consciousness, Critical Theory, History of Philosophy, Existentialism, Afro-Pessimism, African American Literature

Summary for Lay Audience

This paper attempts to explore an idea created by activist and academic W.E.B. Du Bois, first written in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. The idea, called “double consciousness” describes the experience of living in racist society where one feels both “Black” and “American”. On the one hand, the individual is made aware of their race through being perceived in a certain way by mainstream American society which considers “whiteness” the default. On the other hand, the individual had only known life in America and had been disconnected from their heritage. Using this idea, the paper looks at how Du Bois used the idea in his life and work and the way it was adapted by other thinkers after him. I discuss how some see “double consciousness” as an ability with great power but at the same time an experience that can greatly limit one’s freedom. In light of this, I look at and consider the history that “double consciousness” is tied to (Slavery) and how this particular experience is related to other kinds of oppression.

Acknowledgments

I firstly would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. John Vanderheide. Words cannot express my gratitude to have been taught by and work with a person of such caliber, both academically and personally. I would never have completed this project without his patience, grace and guidance. I will forever be grateful for the way Dr. Vanderheide helped me reach a potential that I did not think was possible, and I know this is the case for many other students that are taught by him. Dr. Vanderheide brings an incredible body of work to students, and teaches it in a way that not only allows students to become better academically, but to better both themselves and the world. I appreciate your compassion to students and the time you spent helping me with all aspects of my project.

I would like to thank the faculty and administration of Centre for Theory and Criticism for the tireless work you do to maintain the program. I would especially like to thank professors Dr. Brooks, Dr. Roulston, Dr. Pero and Dr. Shuster for your time in reading evaluating my work for the thesis exam. I would like to express my gratitude to Ms. Melanie Caldwell for all she does for the program and for students. Thank you to Ms. Caldwell and Dr. Pero for your support through the years.

Thank you to all my peers I was able to meet at the Theory Centre whom I learned so much from. I will always feel incredibly lucky to have met three amazing women I can call lifelong friends—Won Jeon, Kathryn Carney, and Deanna Aubert. I am constantly inspired by their strength, and always in awe of how much I learn in their presence. More than this, the love and support shared by this group is something I cherish always—more than they will ever know. I would like to thank Jen Komorowski for being a friend and mentor.

I would like to thank my oldest friends, notably the “burrito” group, as well as Lauren, Amanda and Lakeshia. Thank you for accepting me at my worst, and always being there through good times and bad.

Finally, thank you to my family. To mom and dad and Michael, I am so grateful of your unconditional love and care. Thank you for being role models and helping me facilitate my education by your boundless support and sacrifice.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| Abstract..... | ii |
| Summary for Lay Audience..... | iii |
| Acknowledgments..... | iv |
| Table of Contents..... | vi |
| Preface..... | viii |
| Chapter 1..... | 1 |
| 1 The Metaphysical Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois..... | 1 |
| 1.1 Embodying Genre: Coming to Know Du Bois' Methodology..... | 1 |
| 1.2 An American Scholar..... | 5 |
| 1.3 Double Consciousness as a Particular..... | 8 |
| Chapter 2..... | 28 |
| 2 Adapting Double Consciousness as Fragmented by Colonial Narratives Through Frantz Fanon..... | 28 |
| 2.1 Introduction..... | 28 |
| 2.2 Fanon and The Violence of Colonial Identities..... | 30 |
| 2.3 Discourse on the Projection of Morality as Racism..... | 45 |
| 2.4 Double Consciousness Through Affect in Richard Wright's Native Son..... | 49 |
| Chapter 3..... | 57 |
| 3 Double Consciousness in the Legacy of Modernity..... | 57 |
| 3.1 Modernity, Post Modernity and Paul Gilroy..... | 58 |
| 3.2 Despair and Resignation: Afro-Pessimism..... | 66 |
| 3.3 Conceptualizing Afro-Pessimists and Violence..... | 68 |
| 3.4 Noted Critiques of Afro-Pessimism..... | 77 |
| 3.5 Double Consciousness and Afro-Pessimism..... | 79 |
| 3.6 Richard Wright and Double Consciousness..... | 84 |

| | |
|------------------------|----|
| Works Cited | 89 |
| Curriculum Vitae | 92 |

Preface

I began the research and conception of this thesis two years ago, at a time when Black scholars and activists continued to labour the task of recognizing and dismantling systemic racism on all fronts, both in North America and across the globe. As a student approaching this subject, I did not foresee that I would finish my project during the midst of a revolution in the form of the 2020 protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd and systemic racialized police brutality, which grew to encompass the social and economic disparity based on race in the United States and the world. In my experience of witnessing these events (from a place of immense privilege), I watched the arms race to control the narrative of these movements and how they were perceived. I did not have to read a news article to hear early on about the horrors of the “looting and violence” of protestors that had been posed as the main injustice, rather the murders. This was widely accepted too, until confronting ideas and information made their way to the collective consciousnesses. Even if for only a short time, questions were brought up not only on the methods of institutions such as policing; but questioning the roots of this institution and the very role of it altogether. The first view did not cease to exist; nor has the plight of the protestors, or the tragic loss of life. And right before our eyes, we are witnessing the interconnectedness of the many narratives that had been carefully instilled for many centuries, as a kind of inheritance.

Figures like William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois and his successors that I discuss in this paper had to take on the challenge existing in the same narrative that denied the humanity of Black folk in different ways, looking at the world past and present in order to show the manifestation of this. The idea of “double consciousness” as methodology (as well

as a way of being) that was embodied in the task of these thinkers and thinkers today has been largely ignored in academic traditions like philosophy and critical theory. The ideas of Black these thinkers (such as double consciousness) are closely related (and sometimes the unacknowledged foundations) of notions from thinkers that are important to Western European thought. Yet these ideas should not be studied for what they can bring to the hegemony of the academic institution (as they sometimes are) but as crucial to confront the indissoluble memory of slavery and racial violence that is still present.

I state only my subjective experience of the events of the Summer of 2020, and as a person of Canadian settler colonialism descent, I wish to always be reminded of the privilege and bias that my words, actions and perspective holds. Yet as a member of the academic community, I feel it is the urgent responsibility of myself and each person to whole heartedly commit to not only addressing racism of the present, but the foundational inheritance of knowledge that allowed for senseless and continual fatality (in both a literal and metaphoric way). As a student of the “humanities”, we must admit that until the violence towards Black (and other racialized people) ends, we do not have a clue of what humanity is.

Chapter 1

1 The Metaphysical Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois

To begin my thesis, the goal of my first chapter, ultimately, is to explore to what extent certain ideas about race can be placed into spatial, temporal, geographical and historical categories; and to explore the significance of their transcendence beyond these.

Throughout this thesis and specifically this chapter I will take a metaphysical approach to the phenomenology of race, by examining the various traditions that have emerged in critical race theory, stemming directly and indirectly from American sociologist and thinker W.E.B. Du Bois and specifically his theory of “double-consciousness”.

1.1 Embodying Genre: Coming to Know Du Bois’ Methodology

The reason I wish to take this approach, is to look at the way a figure such as Du Bois (among others), in the study of not only his ideas but his life, demonstrates the power in fragmentation of his idea. In chapters Two and Three, I explore some of the subtle ways that this idea embodies the various kinds of splits, not only metaphysically, but geographically and otherwise. As I will elaborate more fully in the last chapter, academic Paul Gilroy describes Du Bois as someone with a “lack of roots” (117). It is not that he did not have knowledge of where he came from (in fact, Du Bois’ family tree is much more well known than many other Black Americans). However, when Gilroy describes Du Bois in this way, he means to signify that Du Bois’ existential mission (or burden) is not to be confined by a certain legacy, whether biographically or intellectually. I would like my thesis to be a reflection of his life—beginning with the idea of where he was born, then branching into the confusion of finding oneself amongst various inflictions and

ideologies (reflecting his travels to Europe), and finally ending in a place with a message of liberation (reflecting the end of his life in Africa).

It may be helpful to understand how Du Bois is regarded by a few relevant thinkers. He is clearly a major influence for the thinkers discussed in this paper, certainly for Frantz Fanon, Paul Gilroy and contemporary “Afro-Pessimist” thinkers. He is recognized by Martin Luther King Jr., who gave a speech during a politically intense time in honour of Du Bois. As Martin Halpern conveys in “Honoring Dr. Du Bois: Martin Luther King's most radical speech”, King reinstates the importance of Du Bois’ work in a historical context and said “Du Bois fought the oppressor with his many gifts” (Halpern 41). The idea of “gifts” is an interesting choice of words considering Du Bois’ ideas about “gifts” which will be discussed later in this chapter. However, when considering all the influences that Du Bois had, from different subjects and contexts, King’s statement rings true—Du Bois was able to combine knowledge from different sources yet achieve a product that does not feel disassociated. His work does not go without criticism, but despite the short time it had been around before the Civil Rights era, it had already made a lasting impact.

An example of Du Bois’s abilities actually come from outside the framework of the humanities or social sciences. It is little known that Du Bois also did incredible research in the medical field. In “After 121 Years, It’s Time to Recognize W.E.B. Du Bois as a founding Father of Social Epidemiology” (2018), Sharon D. Jones and Lorraine T. Dean explore this often “underappreciated” area of his work, which analyzes inequality in medical care due to racism. This topic is coming to light as more questions are being asked addressing medical bias in the present medical care system. As the authors of this

article assert, Du Bois' work is often "unacknowledged" in the field of epidemiology, despite doing extensive work on the issue (Jones & Dean 232). Even though medicine has evolved very much in the past century, these researchers placing Du Bois as a central figure provides a way forward to address racial inequality in medicine, and the same can be done in the humanities. Furthermore, Du Bois' medical research not only shows the breadth of subjects he was able to draw upon in his work, but his great ability to understand the past in order to look ahead.

Even as more of his underappreciated work is acknowledged, his main sociological work and its ongoing potential is still disputed. In the book *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (2015), Aldorn Morris argues this very idea. As Patricia Collins summarizes in "Du Bois' Contested Legacy" (her critique of the book): "Morris's main argument is simple – racism kept Du Bois out of professional sociology, thus denying American sociology access to one of its most significant founders" (Collins 1398). She criticizes Morris' for overemphasizing in claiming how much influence Du Bois might have had, had he gone the institutional route—and not been stunted by the politics of the university. Additionally, she criticizes Morris on the basis of overreaching the impact that one person could have on changing the entire trajectory of an established discipline, especially given the barriers Du Bois faced. Finally, she points out the lack of awareness of intersectionality in Morris' argument, crediting Du Bois for work that Black feminists have done and have received even less recognition for than Du Bois. Collins' goal is not to discount Du Bois' work, or Morris' claim that it should be more central in sociology.

However, Collins does bring up a very important issue that plagues the controversy around not only Du Bois or even something as specific to sociology or critical theory. One of the main problems that Collins has with Morris' claims is described as follows:

The Scholar Denied is based on a core premise that a sociological canon exists that is organized via a metaphor of family lineage. We pay homage to founding fathers or masters of intellectual households whose ideas are perceived as seminal to the emergence of our disciplines.” (Collins 1406)

Collins eloquently describes here the current dysfunction in attempting to combat racism (and sexism) in any established academic or intellectual discipline. In both of the above attempts (Morris' but also Jones and Dean's) to reinstate Du Bois's ideas into a given discipline (sociology and epidemiology respectively)—the tone is concerned not only with using and recognizing Du Bois' ideas but also fitting him in with other (male) “founding fathers” to pay homage to before innovating from this foundation. Such attempts are understandable, given the history of denied access to these worlds, but Collins and other Black feminists dare to ask the uncomfortable question of whether this paternal linkage should be the goal at all.

In many ways Du Bois makes the perfect person *to* add to this legacy, to a list of those that forged the way in questions of how to address social or cultural issues pertaining to race. The breadth of his knowledge may be the very reason why he himself seems to be discussed almost more frequently than his work. However, keeping Collin's critique in mind as well as Du Bois' own “outsider” status, his “lack of roots” allowed him to innovate in a way that clearly still resonates with many today. He unapologetically drew

from Western sources while embracing a Pan-African agenda. Despite the problems inherent to our academic institutions, Du Bois' approach is something to be embraced.

1.2 An American Scholar

Du Bois certainly is in many ways a “global scholar”, at the same time that *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) has a deeply American quality. In a paradoxical way, this American quality can be a starting place amongst the diversity when considering the topics at hand. What precisely is so appealing about looking at American texts in this context is that the theme of “American-ness” is already there, undeniably woven both into the political and personal landscape of the American psyche. Before witnessing this inseparable identity expressed in theory, one may first witness it in art, specifically poetry. Poetry and theory are similar in that they both make sense of chaotic cultural patterns, allowing the reader to look through one tiny window of possibility and clarity—or at least the convincing appearance of clarity. Therefore, one may look to look to a poet's words, and the reality they are trying to portray through them, to get an idea of the essence—or appearance of essence—about a certain group (Americans in this case).

Walt Whitman (1819-1892), for example, was deemed “America's Poet” in part because of the way his poems paint a proud and nationalistic picture of the white working class at the time. Critics debate whether still where Whitman's views on race stand, some hold him up to an egalitarian ideal of a man who was anti-slavery which went against the grain of his time. Others portray him as a product of his time, in terms of his attitude toward the oppression of African Americans in enforcing racist stereotypes. His celebration of a blue-collared working life (in such works as “America” and “I Hear America Singing”), combined with his famous “celebration of himself,” can be seen as part of the history in

the formation of a unique identity to white Americans. Even his now infamous form of verse refused to follow old European poetic traditions for the sake of forming a new one; suggesting he sought to make his vision of “American-ness” a part of the cultural patrimony he believed to be forging.

This thesis is not about Walt Whitman, or his poems, but I bring him up to help articulate an important moment of the longstanding history of American race relations. Returning to the idea of consciousness, it becomes more and more evident that the first person voice in Whitman’s poems, whether he speaks as himself or someone else, seems to give the impression of ultimate freedom to associate or disassociate with any part of the American society, and of, ultimately, possessing the ability to exist as an entity free of any labels. For the soul that inhabits the voice in Whitman’s poems, the presence of one’s body is a conscious decision, rather than a sentence to be forever treated and grouped into a certain category. As Whitman writes in “I Sing the Body Electric” (1855):

The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud,
Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming,
Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving and tightening,
The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the eyes,
The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,
The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the
body,
The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,
The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the
knees,

The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,

The exquisite realization of health;

O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,

O I say now these are the soul! (Whitman, 9.25-35)

Here, the body (of a white subject) is separated into parts, and actions in which the discovery of what the body can do is treated as a luxury, (i.e. “the *exquisite* realization of health”). This is not the same ekphrasis used to describe the physical attributes of a woman in a Woodsworth sonnet, in fact gender is not exclusively mentioned at all. The relationship between connecting the body to the soul is done callously so; as if the subject can discover their body freely. The skin is just that, skin with no prior attached connotations. The celebration of the human form in Whitman’s poem actually avoids specificity; he avoids describing any one body part in a way that suggests diversity. One of the only references to a particular attribute to differentiate between bodies is directly about skin tone, celebrating the inclusivity of all *white* bodies, and all white souls.

The sentiment which Whitman illustrates here, as “America’s Poet”, clearly resonates with many white Americans, and is much different to the relationship to the self and body that W.E.B. Du Bois writes about in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). There are similarities between the idea of these writers, other than both inspiring famous poets to come. In Whitman’s defying many of the rules of classic poetry and Du Bois’ novel defying any easily identifiable genre, one finds an existential notion of reconciling the uniqueness of the American experience to a universal one. Perhaps it is even as far as introducing the American experience as the new default for any experience.

The notion of existentialism and its conceptions and relationship to the idea of double consciousness is an idea which I return to throughout this paper. A tributary of classic existentialism rests with Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of "radical freedom" which lends itself to not only the tone of Whitman's poem in carving an American identity, but also to the legal foundations of the United States found in documents such as the Declaration of Independence (1776). Du Bois' work relates the particular history of slavery in the United States to the experience of oppressed people of any kind; Du Bois himself struggled with his own American identity. He also vastly loved and idolized other cultures, both in Europe and Africa incorporating elements of both in his book. Still, seeping through the lines of *The Souls of Black Folk* is the same spirit of a kind of "radical freedom"—not as a given, but as a goal made with hope. The importance of this relation in Du Bois' book contributes to the idea that his work is uniquely American insofar as freedom is regarded, by Americans, as a very American ideal: not just legal freedom but also and probably more importantly in the way that Whitman approaches it, as a feeling or mindset and not contradicting his other political aspirations.

1.3 Double Consciousness as a Particular

The style (in addition to the content) of *The Souls of Black Folk* lends itself to such an idea. The book is written in a tone that is both stately and metaphoric and definitely indicative of the turn of the century excitement. In the second chapter of the book, "Of the Dawn of Freedom", Du Bois begins with the idea of the present situation, citing the main problem of the twentieth century as he states is "the color-line". He then however spends most of the chapter recounting the recent history of the Civil War, and the formal and legal ending of slavery legally, before returning to the topic of present day. In doing

so, Du Bois reminds the reader that the present is essentially tied to history. There is no easy map for the future without addressing the not so long ago history. The chapter focuses on the great difficulty endured during this time in transitioning the lives of former slaves into a semblance of some kind of freedom, and the progress made but also the great failures, painting a picture of the resulting chaos.

Du Bois' writing is rich with the weight of this history, and throughout the text he balances those historical implications with his own personal experiences and visions of the future in order to create the most comprehensive account of the African American experience available at the time. But while Du Bois does not hide his intentions to gain more access to education, voting and civil rights, it is clear that while he was in part forming the beginnings of American racial phenomenology, the unique circumstances and history can never be removed. As long as there was (or is) still material progress to be made, that is central to any discussion about the relational aspect of body and mind.

The inter-disciplinary nature of Du Bois' work is a facet has been noted by Reiland Rabaka in *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Problems of the Twenty-First Century: An Essay on Africana Critical Theory*, as not only a stylistic component but as a way to deal comprehensively with the extensive and complex structures affecting Black populations (Rabaka 4). While Rabaka's work covers a range of ideas, his ability to address and put into conversation race theorists from various time periods make his work incredibly fruitful. Additionally, he articulates the goals of critical race theory (African critical race theory or "Africana") in a way that both places it within the tradition of "classic" critical theory and philosophy but also its necessity to be distinguished on its own. I argue that Rabaka's usage of Du Bois fundamentally reflects the hopeful and "optimist" element of

Du Bois' work, contrasting other schools of thought (that will be discussed in later chapters) that utilize cynicism to describe the situation of not only Black Americans, but Blackness as a whole.

Rabaka's stance on the critical perspective of Du Bois stems from a frustration that much of this reception tends to overlook the complexity of his work. What he means by this sentiment is that the multi-faceted and interdisciplinary nature of his work is chronically taken at face value and not properly comprehended. It is not solely a way to look at complex issues taking into account many factors, but also a way to give oneself "roots", a history and ancestry that had been violently repressed. Part of Rabaka's analysis seeks to look at Du Bois in relation to mainstream critical theory. In doing so, he not only interprets Du Bois' writing and its significance, but actually reinterprets critical theory itself to broaden its traditional Eurocentric approach. Rabaka notes that Du Bois' work not only utilizes traditionally European perspectives, but also adapts them using classically African perspectives, and melds the two together. For example, each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* begins with a poem or fragment by a European writer and a musical score typically from a spiritual musical score (traditionally African American). Even if, as some of his critics say, Du Bois is contradictory on his stance at times, he already creates with these elements a new and unprecedented trajectory for thinking of America and its racial discord.

Reading Rabaka in relation to Du Bois is helpful not only for the way it breathes new light into an over one hundred years old text, but also for the way that Rabaka is able to take a step back in a metaphysical sense and look first at the goals of critical theory, how

it relates to his own goals, and finally how Du Bois fits in to its history. As Rabaka writes:

The paradigms and points of departure for critical theorists vary depending on the theorist' race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, nationality, intellectual interests and political persuasions. For instance, many European critical theorists turn to Hegel, Marx, Freud, Gramsci, Sartre, and/or the Frankfurt School...among others, because they understand these thinkers' thoughts and texts to speak in special ways to modern and/postmodern life-worlds and lived-experiences...My work, Africana critical theory, utilizes the thought and texts of Africana intellectual ancestors as critical theoretical paradigms and points of departure because so much of their thought is not simply problem-posing but solution-providing where the specific life-struggles of persons of African descent...are concerned...(Rabaka 62)

Rabaka's approach demonstrates the way in which critical theory itself, a discipline which is typically dedicated to being constantly breaking down norms and hegemony is still very much bound to the same biases it critiques. The rootedness of this tendency in modernity will be elaborated more upon in Chapter Three. However, the sentiment in Rabaka's discussion of lived-experience is a reminder of the often unfeasible ability of an academic, writer or person in general to conceptualize the experience of another.

Rabaka's point makes use of this inevitability by embracing his own unique experiences and other's and integrating them into his work. The result of avoiding either extreme is in part to achieve Rabaka's goal of critical theory: "using *all* (without regard to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and/or religious affiliation) accumulated radical thought

and revolutionary practices in the interest of liberation and social(ist) transformation” (Rabaka 66).

This broader goal for critical theory, of which Rabaka’s own writings on Africana studies is a part, is also useful to create inclusivity, both culturally and academically, when attempting to engage with critical works. It seems Rabaka, using figures such as Du Bois wishes not to dismantle the entirety of the “founding Fatherhood” in the same manner as Collins, but rather build on this knowledge using a more inclusive tone. For example, as I discuss in Chapter Two, Jean-Paul Sartre can be included in the discussion since his ideas were adapted by a writer like Frantz Fanon. However, even if a European thinker like Sartre can be adapted and understood by all different kinds of people, his writing, by the examples chosen and way he presents ideas, can be isolating to some because of the way his European and male perspective acts an objective or neutral stance rather than admitting these things play a role in his perspective. With the exemplary figures he uses in *Being and Nothingness* (1956) to describe his idea of “bad faith”—a woman, a gay man and a waiter—and applying the freedom he might enjoy as a white (collar) man in French society, Sartre, like Whitman before him, appears not to recognize the structures that would make the same choices more difficult for the marginalized groups these figures exemplify.

While Sartre may be of his time and prone to these biases, even in recognizing such, Rabaka poses the issue which is central as to why more thinkers from outside a Eurocentric context must be used as “points of departure”. As he claims, there is more to theorizing than “problem-posing”; understanding these “solution-providing” contexts is important in order to create structural changes. Additionally, as Rabaka points out, this

fundamental difference also impacts the ultimate goals of what the theorist is aiming to achieve. He writes: “Africana critical theory is not thought-for-thought’s sake (as it often seems is the case with so much contemporary Africana-philosophy notwithstanding); on the contrary, Africana critical theory is thought for-life-and-liberation’s sake” (Rabaka 67). He continues from this that Africana critical theory is “a new way of thinking and doing revolution that is based and constantly being built on the radicalisms and revolutions of the past” (67). The immediate need for action and improvement in certain communities means that there is a sense of importance about the topics being discussed, and it comes across stylistically in Rabaka’s writing, reflected also in the writing of Du Bois. The way that Rabaka clearly states these goals demonstrates a move away from aristocratic loftiness often found in philosophical texts—i.e. allegorical or overly-metaphoric writing, providing the argument at the end of book or paragraph. He is integrating the idea of “thought-for-life-and-liberation’s sake” and by doing so, making his ideas accessible to not only those privileged to have been trained academically in this history.

While critical race theory as a whole has access to various inter-disciplinary methods, as articulated by Rabaka, the idea of having neat categories of Eurocentric tradition and then African studies, gender studies, etc. being branched is a problem within itself and a reason that it still centralizes the European tradition as a kind of “original”. This idea is taken up in very different ways which will be explored in Chapter Three. However, the way in which Rabaka analyzes Du Bois is one that *celebrated* other cultures and innovated from them despite the racism he endured. More so, Du Bois was passionate about the generosity of people of colour even in the face of oppression or adversity. Even

in his positioning of Black Americans as a “problem” as he does multiple times throughout his work, it fundamentally implies there is a solution to be had. This is fundamental difference from the view of subaltern experience, common in postcolonial studies, that uses language to emphasize the subaltern’s lack of power. In another one of Rabaka’s texts: “The Souls of White Folk: W.E.B. Du Bois’s Critique of White Supremacy and Contributions to Critical White Studies,” he states the following:

Here Du Bois notes major “gifts” or contributions to culture and civilization that various people of color have made throughout human history, many of them in their pre-colonial (or, rather pre-*European* colonial) periods. He does not diminish or attempt to downplay the “greatness of Europe,” but observes that “the triumphs of European civilization lie quite outside and beyond Europe.” From Du Bois’s racial frame of reference, each ethnocultural group or, rather, each “race” has a “great message...for humanity... He was extremely confident in the greatness of Africana peoples’ past and present gift(s) *and* spirit of giving, even in the face of and often, it seemed, in spite of their endurance and experience of holocaust, enslavement, colonization, segregation, and so forth. (Rabaka par. 11).

In this interpretation of Du Bois’ work, Rabaka has already begun to carve out perceptions of a new tradition separate from the Eurocentric sphere, i.e. the idea of *gift* as a means of sharing knowledge as opposed to the capitalization of knowledge or reservation of knowledge for specific privileged classes. The use of the idea of a “gift” changes the relationship between colonizer and colonized to restore some power back to those being oppressed. Ultimately the extreme violence that people of African descent

faced (and continue to face) did not destroy their metaphysical being but rather immortalized it.

Du Bois not only applied to his way of thinking (which in many ways defied and continues to defy the mainstream school of thought) to the roots of Western civilization on a global scale, but to America. In his 1935 book, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* he discusses the history of the Reconstruction Era (1863-1877). This book is more than just an account of this time period. It can be used as a case study to show not only the complexity of Du Bois' work, but the potential. It has become a point of contention as this book in recent times has been reanalyzed with a Marxist lens as its primary interpretation and the question of if such a reading takes away from a Pan-African message (Anderson 1). Looking back at the origins of this book one needs not to look further than the highest earning films of all time, *Gone With the Wind* (1939) made only four years after the book was published as to why an alternative perspective to the Reconstruction Era was necessary. Given that income inequality between white and black Americans has only continued to increase in the United States within the last 40 years, it is not surprising why this book is read as a critique of capitalism (Devounte and Nwafor 161). It was not simple to relay the underling barriers that newly freed former slaves endured during this time in sociological terms alone. As Allison Powers explains in "Tragedy Made Flesh Constitutional Lawlessness in Du Bois's Black Reconstruction":

[Du Bois] argues that this fiction is sustained through a paradoxical pairing of two

separate and contradictory fictions: on the one hand, “that bizarre doctrine of race that makes most men inferior to the few” (725) and, on the other, the “Great American Assumption” that “wealth is mainly the result of its owner’s efforts and that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist” (183). (Powers 108).

The description of these two “fictions” not only work to describe the major issues of the era, but also the challenge Du Bois faced in telling the history of this era and its significance. According to the book *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction* (2013) by John David Smith and Vincent Lowery, a widely accepted view of Reconstruction existed, via the Dunning School, which was mainly based on the ideas of one professor and his students (1-3). The historical view that essentially exaggerated and magnified already existing conceptions about Reconstruction as a time Southern whites were victimized at the hands of Republicans, removing their democracy and rights and in general focusing on white suffrage during this time (2-3). Furthermore, this view was not seen as biased or one of many but actually taken to greatly influence the teaching of this era, up to the graduate level. The Reconstruction era was an opportunity for Black Americans to be seen in a new light outside the idea of slavery, but the Dunning School helped ensure the idea for many that newly developing voting laws and education were mistakes that ultimately hurt whites. So while critiquing the economic system that never allowed individuals to ever “catch up” and the racism that influenced such a system is a main priority for Du Bois, this could not be his final position on Reconstruction. By focusing on the achievements of the “freedman” as important and necessary contributions to Reconstruction, despite the political turbulence, he placed the freedman in a central role, rather than either one of antagonist or victim.

While the Reconstruction era was seen as a failure by the Dunning School for one reason and a failure by Marxists/antiracists for another, Du Bois does not concede to its complete failure, despite recognizing it as a “tragedy”. He does so not to downplay the horrendous injustices of this era, but rather to carefully change the narrative. The Dunning School allowed the legacy of slavery ending to fundamentally portray Black freedom as a threat to order and ideals valued by (especially Southern) Americans. By showing the contradiction of white supremacy which poses Black people as both a threat and inferior, he changes the narratives on two accounts. On the one hand he accepts the white supremacist premises to show how even within their own standards and beliefs, their portrayal of this era was wrong. Then, on the other hand he seeks to work off other premises—whether they are Marxist or Pan-African—to critique the entirety of the American system as a whole. To revert solely to a singular framework is a mistake that does not encompass the entirety of the weight of this history.

While Rabaka speaks on Africana studies as a whole, the question still remains if there can be distinguished a unique American perspective out of the larger Africana one. This is not to imply a nationalistic sense in the work itself, as even Du Bois seems to praise Europe and some notions of European culture in some of his writing. Rather, when looking at a phenomenon experienced by people throughout many times and places, understanding the perspective of the continuity of those who hold these experiences is immensely important.

While Rabaka’s work attempts to shift ideas in critical theory, the entirety of this work (or any work in theory) cannot be disassociated from history. As seen in the case study of the Dunning School, it was not only the policies and movements of Reconstruction that

affected the future but what was said about what happened during this time. In a more relevant sense, adapting the ideas of such twentieth century thinkers as Walter Benjamin and Paul Gilroy, history becomes an important link in overcoming and producing narratives that allow for understanding oneself and others. Gilroy, who comes from outside the American tradition, likens the notion of slavery in both in the literal sense of the institution of slavery and the metaphoric Hegelian sense in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). Further ideas from this book and modernity will be discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, but Gilroy's ability to string the particularity of events that happened in specific geographical locations (i.e. slavery in the United States) to broader themes in history that connect all people of a certain heritage (i.e. all affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade) makes great strides in recentralizing the often fragmented discussion of race.

In his discussion of "Masters, Mistresses, and Slaves" in *The Black Atlantic* Gilroy asserts: "Focusing on the role of intellectuals within modernity is an important way of drawing out the particularity that lurks beneath the universalist claims of the Enlightenment project which was, in theory, valid for humanity as a whole even if humanity was to be rather restrictively defined" (43). Gilroy's work dismantles this particularity by introducing the "black Atlantic" as a singularity—which lends itself easily to Rabaka's notion of integrating into contemporary critical discourse various traditions of thought rather than only European. As he puts it: "Slavery as the premise of modernity also gives us the chance to reopen discussion of the origins of black politics in the Euro-American age of revolution" (54). To pose slavery as "the premise of modernity" indicates a clear shift in thought from a Eurocentric or American-centric idea

of modernity to a Black diasporic one: “The way these populations continue to make creative, communicative use of the memory of slavery away from the twin positions that have overdetermined the debate on modernity so far—an uncritical and complacent rationalism and a self-conscious and rhetorical anti-humanism” (54). Gilroy’s description of these two positions overlaps with Rabaka’s idea about the purpose of critical theory and demonstrates a clear gap in the collective consciousness of the present. The overwhelming refusal to be critical becomes a symptom of modernity, contradicting the goal of theory to make changes. Gilroy then goes on to use Benjamin’s theory in order for the “primal history of modernity” to be “reconstructed from the slave’s point of view” (54). The result of this shift is not the way slavery is viewed but how history is viewed—from a specific event to an ongoing belief system that affects societal and personal relationships today.

The memory of slavery in history, of course, is for the direct descendants of its legacy to dominate the narrative, and for those outside of it is important to take direction in that regard. However in recentralizing the topic in this manner Gilroy also demonstrates the power it holds. Immediately, the idea of the slave trade disrupts the “complacent rationalism” of Western modernity, and the self-perpetuating idea that it was founded in this rationalism. If we are to become connected to history, the history that accounts for racial brutality demonstrates the most major fracture.

Additionally, the relationality between “slaves” and “slaveholders” complicates a very specific version of the problem of “otherness”. The contradiction of the identity of a group being dependent on the hatred of another, and therefore the existence of that group itself, is often pondered in theory; the refocusing through the history of slavery also

highlights this issue. In the slavery context, “slaveholders” will always reproduce the idea that while they may be the perpetrators, they are also the liberators. In the United States, this means that figures such as Abraham Lincoln and the end of the Civil War become more important in the retelling of this history rather than the focus on the resistance or lives of Black figures. Rather than slavery as an integral part of America’s fabric, something that specifically aided its immense economical foundations and the generations of racism to follow, it becomes part of world history that many nations took part in, including African nations. While this is true, it leads to the dangerous idea that the United States specifically ended slavery and holds itself as a beacon of freedom, which allows some of the very real problems of racism to still exist today, generations later.

The complexity of Du Bois’ work accounts for these issues in more ways than one. Du Bois’ approach is always, in many ways, twofold, part of the reason he is so often misunderstood. This does not mean he is not, in any way, moderate; in fact he is quite the opposite. While one may argue that his work should be interpreted in a specific school of thought, and this may be helpful to draw out certain points this can risk losing this useful tension. The tension is neither cynical or romantic and cannot be solved by interpretations—it can only truly be solved by liberation, which makes it different than other points of contention about, for example, human nature. I believe double consciousness is a way of framing this tension, and already has and is being use by Black academics, writers and artists to record the presence of slavery and how it shapes our current culture.

Before understanding it as such, understanding double consciousness in its original context is key. This context relates to a topic I have already been attempting to cultivate, American identity and its significance. As previously mentioned, Du Bois spends a great deal of time focused on cultivating his social theory around the recent history, social institution and position of African Americans using the lens of his own personal experience. He discusses the theory of double consciousness at the beginning of the *The Souls of Black Folk*, but does not necessarily dwell on it for the remainder of the book. He begins by describing how it feels to “[be] a problem” as a “strange experience”, recalling in his memory of the first time he felt “different” because his race and the profound moment of realization (Du Bois 8). He then goes on to explain:

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 9).

In this passage alone, Du Bois already gives the reader many hints (in a subtle yet poetic way) about double-consciousness. He uses the idea of the “seventh son”, which in folklore is indicative of a family's seventh son being born with special power(s). The

“powers” differ dependent on which country the folklore is being told; some countries leaning more towards the powers being a “curse” and some leaning towards the powers being a great ability to understand the world (a view which tends to more common in the United States). Combining the idea of being “gifted” (this idea reoccurring in Du Bois work) with that of “second sight”, Du Bois already affirms the idea that double-consciousness is a positive thing, giving the Black subject a kind of view on the world that is not available to others. However, it is not clear that this “ability” is totally available or accessible to anyone experiencing double-consciousness, at any time. As he defines the idea later in the quote, the language shifts more and more towards expressing the pure exhaustion, and possible destructiveness that the experience of double-consciousness induces on the Black subject.

It is not just that for Du Bois double consciousness can be a gift; it is that Du Bois’ very idea or critical concept of double consciousness is given to his readers as a gift—one that after a century, has kept on giving. Double-consciousness can be taken up and understood in very specific contexts, in the sense of the classic way Du Bois mentions of being Black (race/culture) and American (citizenship/culture). Questions pertaining to this understanding highlight the possibility of a uniqueness to double-consciousness as it pertains to Black Americans as opposed to the experience of Black French individuals or Indigenous peoples in America. In another way, there are many subtle ways that double-consciousness can and has been adapted by Black scholars and Black artists (resulting in some of the most consumed literature, music and movies on the planet) which indicate some of the effect of racism towards Black people that is typically not addressed by institutions when attempting (if it is attempted) to create antiracist policies. Not only is

one looked on in “contempt and pity” by the larger white society but Blackness itself becomes posed as morally “dark”. The “twoness” that Du Bois describes emulates not only the “twoness” of the internal battle one faces but also the nature of duality itself, often contradictory. Thus the possibility of double-consciousness being a “gift” while at the same time being a destructive force can be held in the same breath.

Du Bois does not refer to the particularity of being American and Black as to be exclusive, but rather to first and foremost relate this experience back to the self, and in many ways himself. While writing in a time only decades after the actual institution of slavery itself had ended, Du Bois was less removed from the ever-present material changes that needed to happen in order to gain equality for black Americans. He, however, faced incredible racism and struggled with finding his way as an “outsider” to the university. Still, his work does not dismiss the importance of theoretical changes that society needed to embrace in order to fully reconstruct after the period. Above I had drawn out some of Du Bois goals in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), but his retelling of the era is not all he sought to do. He also posed the question: “Just what did [slavery] mean to the owner and the owned?” (595). This question can be reframed in a number of ways, such as in terms of the colonised and colonizer, but the notion remains the same. His posing of these questions of identity, especially in his early work, serves as a way of uniting all American (or not) Black “folk” who share the experiences he describes. In addition to this, however, his work is in line with the goals with Rabaka outlined: addressing where the collective current cultural and personal perspectives stand, to hopefully not promote racialized (or any oppressed, for that matter) people to become comfortable with a lower standard of living. This idea, that Du Bois felt was already

occurring, was iterated earlier in *The Souls of Black Folk*, in Du Bois' discussion of Booker T. Washington:

Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission.... Mr. Washington's programme naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life...Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races (47).

Much of current scholarship and public thought may not agree with Booker T.

Washington's spirit of complacency that he embraces, and is criticized for by Du Bois.

Yet this attitude is even more at risk of being spread, in some ways, today than in the era of Reconstruction or in the era of Du Bois, since modernity and technological advances as well increased discussion of racialized issues and racism provide a false sense of progress and change. Rather than returning to the root, rather than asking what slavery, what racism, what identity *truly* is, these issues are left to boil under the surface until the façade of normalcy is blown over and radicalism prevails. Double consciousness allows one to withstand this ambiguity, which is uncomfortable, until the issue is resolved.

In this supposedly "post-racial" society, the conversation about race is focused mainly on cultural and social aspects rather than some inherent biological difference. Race becomes an idealized notion and value system, something that is noted by Sarah Ahmed in her article "Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness" (2007). While herself a contemporary British scholar, like Gilroy, her work resonates with experiences connecting all racialized people and one could connect the goal of multiculturalism

across all Western nations and also the resistance to multiculturalism. In this article, Ahmed connects the affect of “happiness” to the ideal of “multiculturalism” and the way in which this actually can lead to opposite of both of these goals. More importantly, Ahmed questions happiness as a goal. She begins by using happiness as a kind of standard of the Western world; and in claiming a “crisis” of happiness as a need to return to certain values. To understand what is behind such a “crisis of happiness” she explains there “is the belief that happiness should be an effect of following social ideals, almost as if happiness is the reward for a certain loyalty” (Ahmed 2007). By using examples from media where a community is happy when its inhabitants are similar to one another, and “unhappy” when they are different and unable to overcome those differences, Ahmed’s theory demonstrates the need for everything, complex relationships between groups of people who have complex histories to be solved with immediacy to fulfill the desire for instant gratification. She writes:

The demand for happiness is what makes those histories disappear or projects them onto others, by seeing them as a form of melancholia (you hold onto something that is already gone) or even as a paranoid fantasy. These histories have not gone: we would be letting go of that which persists in the present, a letting go which would keep those histories present (Ahmed 2007).

The importance of history is once again reiterated in this quote, in which Ahmed criticizes the premise of “happiness” and presents the opposing resistance to “live in the past”. The idea of slavery as an event of the past fits into this idea, and the act of forgetting it is a luxury only awarded to non-racialized persons.

In the scenario described by Ahmed, it is clear that homogeneity is desired to create what is known as “happiness”. If part of the goal of multiculturalism is for these communities to live in “peace and harmony” it seems to be predicated on the idea that those who come from outside whichever the dominating culture is (e.g.. an immigrant to England) are expected to experience “double consciousness” in a way that does not disturb the overriding population. They are able to experience elements of their identity which do not cause conflict and therefore “unhappiness”. However, it seems intrinsic in the very idea of “double consciousness” that the fractured element, of not feeling fully one identity or the other, can never fully be “smoothed” out.

Ahmed’s example of the “demand for happiness” is relevant in other ways too—even ones pertaining to the United States. Du Bois utilizes the ideas of “fictions” in the same way to show an attempt to create a universal vision for white subjects. These fictions, as mentioned, are rooted in both capitalist and racist ideals, both not delivering on the promise of “equality” posed in the Declaration of Independence. The problem is not only that in citing “All men are created equal” originally clearly excluded certain groups, but then continuing to expect that after each milestone, whether the ending of slavery, or the end of Jim Crow laws, that this promise was somehow both finally starting at that moment and yet consistent all along.

Du Bois’ idea of double consciousness does more than recognize the tensions in such contradictions in ideology. Whitman’s figure of the (white) body as the soul and the freedom to conquer oneself become paramount to the American ideals found in the Declaration of Independence. The tensions between American-ness and Blackness that

places the two at odds at the level of *soul* implies that at the root of what it means to be American is rooted in antiblackness.

Chapter 2

2 Adapting Double Consciousness as Fragmented by Colonial Narratives Through Frantz Fanon

2.1 Introduction

To reiterate an idea from Chapter One, *The Souls Of Black Folk* is not easily definable as a genre, for Du Bois focuses on telling the narrative of many American figures, locations, and events always in relation to slavery and the quality of life for Black Americans. By doing so, the text's very existence allows this history—the story of Du Bois' life and many other Black writers—to formulate a kind of legacy in the same way that so many works of American white writers—such as Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—has become. *The Souls Of Black Folk* responds to the classic American idea of “Manifest Destiny” with a new idea that justice for black Americans is not just a civil right, but a spiritual fulfillment. However, because the United States was not the only country that took part in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, a global understanding of this history and culture was important to DuBois. Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) lived in a different geographical context and time period than Du Bois yet still utilized the idea of “double consciousness” in the analysis of his lived experience as a man from Martinique living in postwar France in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952). “Double consciousness” became integral to his study of colonial violence as a whole, not limited to a particular country or group. While Fanon's work is written about his unique experience, deeply French in many ways, he utilizes different disciplines and schools of thought from many cultures to explain his unique lived experience of being of African and European descent, applying their insights to broader ideas of blackness as constitutive of a general notion of the human condition.

I will be building upon Du Bois' idea of "two-ness" ("two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings"), taking the "two-ness" out of its original context of race and citizenship (Du Bois 9). In some ways, Du Bois' "two-ness", of feeling both American and Black, means that these two souls are based on concepts (i.e. citizenship and race) which have colonial ties, their meaning reflecting deeply encoded premises that are racist. Still, Du Bois' conception of double-consciousness is relevant as a tool with which to approach the experience of subsequent generations in the African diaspora. However, since Du Bois' time the world has only become, in many ways, more fragmented with the rise of global capitalism, which has had an enormous impact on racialized peoples, especially Black Americans. More examples of this impact will be discussed further in the chapter. However, the economic benefits to nations such as the United States from this globalization of capitalism was of course closely tied to the system of slavery. In this chapter, using Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* to approach broader geographical contexts and colonialism as a whole, I hope to explore the idea that the "two"-ness of double-consciousness does not necessarily have to mean a complete splitting of identity (an inert non-relation of the two souls). I present a fragmented version of double-consciousness which would pertain to only a certain element or certain elements of a person's identity. I derive this version of double-consciousness from Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, and relate it back to the American context through Richard's Wright 1940 novel *Native Son*. These texts reflect on the causes and operations of this partial double-consciousness living in not only the visible realm but in the intangible—and how these two are fundamentally related.

2.2 Fanon and The Violence of Colonial Identities

Frantz Fanon's work, similar to work the of Du Bois, draws upon different sources from a variety of historical and philosophical contexts. While situating Du Bois' work in relation to the accepted views of his time may help to demonstrate the root of why he posed things a certain way, Fanon's attempt to deal with his own unconscious views means one may use different frames of references. To help better organize a few of the ideas that are present in Fanon's work in relation to double consciousness, it helps to see a few kinds of dualism in the attitudes Fanon subtly describes. Firstly, there is a kind of split already discussed first discussed by Du Bois, one that differentiates between one's nationality and ethnicity. The other dualisms are less tangible and therefore less visible, but the work of Fanon demonstrates how they are all still as psychologically and socially isolating. One kind of fragmentation is that of a moral kind: described as "dark and light" by Fanon, a contradiction of being considered to be morally inferior (i.e. inherently violent) while simultaneously as being at the receiving end of various kinds of violence. Tied directly to this kind of moral consciousnesses leads into a focal split for Fanon's thought: the age-old dualism of subject versus object, at times referred to in different contexts as the "master versus slave" dialectic. Another may be by way of polarizing affect, both in having certain affects projected onto the subject (the "contempt and pity" brought up by Du Bois) and the experiencing of affects (such as the ones in *Native Son* discussed later on).

To begin bridging these various dualisms and their ultimate effect on double consciousness, the conversation of nationality is inevitable. Fanon, having and writing about preconceived ideas of Europe and America, already contributes to the analogy of

utilizing Black movements through these spaces as all part of the same system. While much of this chapter focuses on one of Fanon's early works, *Black Skins, White Masks* which was written in 1952, a later work of his, *The Wretched of the Earth* (written in 1961) is also one of his most widely read texts. The preface to this later work was written by Fanon's friend and mentor, Jean-Paul Sartre, whose notion of objectivity I will critique below. Sartre's preface jousts with particular white readers who assume Fanon's goal as seeking revenge for the injustice of racism (9). Sartre retorts, "Fanon has nothing in for you at all; he speaks often of you, never to you" (10). The "you" that is referred to signals a larger idea that Fanon builds throughout the book and finally in the conclusion. He writes that his idea of Europe is one that "undertook leadership of the World with ardour, cynicism, and violence" (311). Instead of seeing the United States as an opposition to European oppression and values, he argues the following. He poses the United States as a "former European colony" that decided to "catch up with Europe" and that it inevitably "succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster in which the taints, the sickness and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions" (313). For Fanon, the "newness" of the American identity consists of the negative traits of Europe chronically magnified. If this is true, then Fanon's conception of Europe and America can be used to deepen the connections of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, if Fanon's work addresses the effects of racialized violence on the consciousness of the one that experiences it, then it is not enough to see just his conception of the United States but include his conception of European anti-Black violence as well. In the chapter "The Black Man and Psychopathology" from *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon writes:

In the United States the Black man fights and is fought against. There are laws that gradually disappear from the constitution. There are other laws that prohibit certain forms of discrimination. And we are told that none of this is given free...For the Black Frenchman, the situation is unbearable. Unsure whether the white man considered him as consciousness in itself-for-itself, he is constantly preoccupied with detecting resistance, opposition and contestation. (154)

His comments here are not only in reference to political differences between the United States and France, as Fanon's book arrives at the dawn of the civil rights movement in the United States, as well as at a time when France was still holding many colonies at the precursor to the Algerian War of Independence in 1954. Besides the political and social difference between the two nations in this quote, they also become symbolic representations between subject-object relations. It is the way he seems to be describing various kinds of *splits* in a person's psyche—usually an embodied as a racialized person—that manifests as forms of double consciousness, that perhaps do not completely overpower one's identity, but alters at least some part of it under certain circumstances.

For a moment I will ponder Fanon's idea of what it means to be unsure of being considered as "consciousness in itself-for-itself" pertaining to the burden of the French Black man. I will borrow terminology from a classic philosopher who plays an important role in Black existentialist schools of thought (for reasons discussed in this chapter and Chapter 3), Søren Kierkegaard. He writes the following in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849):

The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self...Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short he is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self. (qtd. Peredoom & Guignon 78)

Kierkegaard's conception of man and his fundamental constitution as stated here is a paradox; and is in many ways humorously and purposefully convoluted. In the history of philosophy, the "spirit" is often considered the "free" part of the soul, which tradition Kierkegaard recognizes when he proclaims man is born to be "free". On the other hand, a person is bound to a large extent by their particulars: where they are born, what gender they are, their class positionality, religion and so forth. Somewhere between the struggle between the "finite" and "infinite" elements of a person is that person's true self. Feeding too much into one side or the other can cause a person to be in a state of "despair" (anxiety) which is the "sickness" itself. Borrowing this framework, I will look at various examples Fanon provides in which there appears to be a kind of disruption to a person's "relation to the self".

The first example of a thing which disrupts a person's self-relation is language, which is the focus of the first chapter of *Black Skins, White Masks*. Fanon begins the book on the topic of language which sets the tone for how important language is; not only in the establishment of a person's identity but also for its capacity to be weaponized as a tool for racial violence. He writes:

All colonized people—in other words people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave—position themselves in relation to the civilizing language. (2)

He goes on then to describe the frustrating phenomena of the constant scrutiny he faces, as a person originating French colony to the mainland, regarding how he speaks and what he says. For Fanon, it becomes apparent that colonized people (whether Black, Indigenous or otherwise people of colour) are never truly accepted, no matter how much or little they integrate – and they face this from not only people from the “civilizing” land but also from their place of origin, as they no longer fit there either. This experience, of course, is not specific to those from previously colonized nations but applicable for the experience of immigration in general. Language is thus used in this way as a measure to determine a person’s intelligence or status, further categorizing an individual into a certain social standing. If a displaced person loses some of their native tongue while learning a new language and is isolated from both then it can be stated that this conflict of languages is another form of double-consciousness.

Fanon alludes to an example of how many young men from Martinique sought to gain expertise on French literature or philosophy, in the “hope their blackness will be forgotten” (170). The creation of a French colony (Martinique) instilled the idea of racial superiority and cultural superiority, as an extension, which asserts the notion that “becoming more French” is the only way to rise within the social hierarchy. Yet these observations came only after Fanon had moved away from Martinique, upon joining the French Free forces in the war, to live in France. This relocation made the experience of the oppression of occupation in Martinique at the beginning of the war to the anti-black

racism in France pivotal in shaping his views. But before this moment, as suggested in the way Fanon describes life in Martinique and in tandem with Isaac Julien's 1996 documentary, *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*, people in Martinique largely did not relate to other people of African or Arab descent [36:00-36:32]. Fanon was one of the first people to articulate on these relations exposing the internalization of colonial attitude, turning his back in some ways on the country he had once fought for (France) to seek liberation for all nations that had been colonized [36:32-37:02].

Fanon dedicates a chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* to the matter of "The Black Man and Language", arguing about the entanglement of language and colonialism, and once again invoking the tension between subject and object relations, disguised as tensions between subjectivities. The Martinique subject views themselves in terms of their Frenchness and ability to adapt French culture, whereas when in France these markers of status are erased by skin colour. Upon relocating in France, Fanon finds himself constantly subject to slurs that demean him, but instead (or in addition to) fearing for his life in the face of these verbal assaults, Fanon articulates the constant fear of wondering if others see him as "consciousness in itself-for-itself" like themselves.

But the issue is not about convincing subjects that one kind of literature or language is superior, rather in positing that the idea of Frenchness becoming a moral issue rather than a culture one. What makes the use of this moral coding so powerful is not only the split it causes in Fanon, but also the feelings of guilt, shame, and fear that are invoked in him. Fanon writes in Chapter Six, "The Black Man and Psychopathology":

Moral consciousness implies a kind of split, a fracture of consciousness between a dark and light side. Moral standards require the black, the dark and the black man to be eliminated from this consciousness. A black man, therefore, is constantly struggling against his own image. (170)

Fanon uses strict dichotomy between “light” and “dark” to demonstrate how strict categories of what is acceptable determine how the Black man becomes overdetermined as a “symbol of sin”, which is nothing more than a scapegoat for white guilt (170-174). The way that this moral consciousness came to place the Black man as an image of the “dark side” in European imagery, and the various forms of this scapegoating takes shape (especially in light of modernity) is discussed further in Chapter 3. For now, I would like to focus on how this conception of weaponizing morality replaces the self-relation constitutive of the self in existentialist philosophy with a “non-relation” as outlined in Fanon’s critique. He scrutinizes how the transformation of the Black man into the “symbol of sin” in European consciousness causes a fetishistic fixation on that Black body—as that which is forbidden, and the different implications of this, i.e. sexual. On page 174, he continues to describe how for the Black man himself, he begins to see himself as belonging to this “dark” side as well, resulting in a kind of double consciousness—either wanting to be seen or not seen as “Black”. If one accepts their blackness as inherently evil, they seek to confirm it (174). More than this, in recognizing the absurdity of these two options, which are not truly options at all, the awareness of this type of double consciousness holds a great power. He seems to suggest that in rejecting these two paths deemed acceptable, one has no choice but to gain a certain deeper level of understanding of the “universal” (174). Alluding to the idea of the master and slave

dialectic rooted in Hegel's idealism, Fanon refers to the potential of this power, which has the ability to "shake the foundations of the world" (175). However, this comes at the radical cost of the "self-destruction" of the Black man, who seems to fall in a "black hole" (175). What is meant by Fanon in this idea becomes apparent in works of literature such as Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which I will discuss later in the chapter and again in Chapter Three. The trope is played out all too often in non-fiction, highlighted in recent incidents of police brutality towards black victims, and the BIPOC people who have sparked movements and protests against it. To put the conversations of racial injustices back on the table only comes at the cost of a life. Using such a form of double consciousness as a phenomenological model shows that how an individual views themselves is more than an issue of identity, more than the perceived feeling of being an "outsider". In Du Bois' conception of double consciousness, the conflict comes when one "ever feels his twoness" of being both American and Black (Du Bois 9). This definition sets the stage for the possibility of synthesis with Fanon's ideas about blackness and moral consciousness. If so much of what it means to be "American" is encoded in premises of antiblackness then one is always in opposition to him or herself. Du Bois asserts the point that it is not about feeling American in certain instances or feeling Black in others, but rather to engage with the experiences of feeling both tensions as a fact of lived reality.

Returning to the idea of colonial relations as a whole, Fanon draws on his experiences growing up in Martinique alongside those of his later experiences in Algeria during the French occupation. Similar to Du Bois' prioritization of the period after slavery, as in his critical analysis of Reconstruction, Fanon focuses on the period after independence. As a

psychiatrist, Fanon was able to work not only with victims of torture in Algeria during the war, but the French soldiers responsible for committing acts of violence towards local Algerians. Prior to this time, his birthplace, Martinique gained independence from France in 1946—the midpoint of his life and during the time of his work. His treatment of the psyches damaged variously by colonial violence was predicated upon the physicality of power struggle during the war, which created seemingly irreversible, lasting damage on the dispositions of those in the front lines. Here, one can begin to draw other links between other forms of colonialism and slavery besides physical violence that can be further used to understand Fanon's work. As Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe writes in his 2019 book *Necropolitics*, regarding the effects of colonialism, “colonial wars were wars of extraction and predation”. For Mbembe, the process of colonialism entails “entire peoples labor[ing] under the apprehension that the resources for continuing to assume their identities are spent” (2-4). Mbembe refers to the system of colonial rule and struggle for power as largely dependent on exploiting the land and human population already inhabiting it for resources of a certain kind. More than this, however, the exploitation of people for commodities is made possible by a re-alignment of identity. The group being exploited becomes complicit in the degradation of their land thus forcing the exploitation to become a part of their identity. Mbembe's conception of colonial violence alludes to not only the physical force of violence but methods that also change one's conception of self.

The psychological and physical violence Fanon saw and scrutinized in the Algerian war took place during the same time that residential schools were open and operating in their peak in Canada, across the Atlantic ocean—over four hundred years since Europeans first

set foot in Indigenous territory. Over half a century later, Indigenous scholars have articulated the way in which this history still is pervasive in contemporary Canadian identity. In *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* (2015), Emma Lowman and Adam J. Barker, seeks to disassociate the notion that nations like Canada or Australia became decolonized when they separated from England (25). Settler colonialism explicates the phenomenon of claiming power for local governing bodies at the expense of denying the sovereignty of Indigenous populations. Lowman and Barker say the following about settler colonialism:

We can say that when they move to new places, settlers carry their sovereignty with them and then after selecting a place to live, justify asserting sovereignty—their power of governance over that territory—through narratives of progress and superiority. (25)

The colonizer creates a “new” identity for themselves, based on the sovereignty they assert in their assumed dominant relation to the Indigenous population. The idea of superiority, which will be discussed shortly, whether speaking to a notion of superiority of race, religion, culture, or language, is not born purely from ignorance or hatred but is also a *necessity*—a premise of power that guarantees survival and a legacy of sovereignty. It should be also noted in this argument, that the idea of sovereignty in colonialism gets removed from any inherent “claim” or history with the land. The notion of sovereignty, as well as the premise that land can be claimed and exploited for instrumental use, is settler baggage wholly divorced from the ancestral ties and cultural traditions associated with the land before their arrival.

Lowman and Barker argue that in its final form settler colonialism “transcends” itself—in other words, it becomes a pervasive and integral presupposition on which its society is built, “naturalized, normalized, unquestioned and unchallenged” (26). This is maintained by conveying history in a way that emphasizes or downplays certain events to look favourable to the colonizer (26). The same kind of transcendence is attempted with Slavery as well; as elaborated upon in the widespread teaching of the Dunning school’s view on the period of Reconstruction mentioned in Chapter One. One could argue that in North America, this transcendence has exceeded itself; prime ministers make public apologies for infractions against Indigenous populations, many schools, universities and even churches utilize public land acknowledgment of tradition Indigenous lands and so forth. These are all passive ways of relieving settler guilt, all the while refusing to question the very roles these institutions have played in the subjugation of Indigenous populations (or take the questioning further, translating it into the action of dismantling and replacing those institutions). That does not mean that these practices are ill-intentioned; however they do aid the further continuation of the settler colonial legacy by being restricted to mere speech; that of a performance of reparation suited to satisfy settler but not Indigenous needs. The idea of settler colonialism is especially dangerous inasmuch as covert ways of racism prevail in the controlling of language. The social and economic devastation a nation like Algeria faced after gaining independence from France is not necessarily more or less destructive than settler colonialism as described by Lowman and Barker. However, the persistent attitudes necessary to perpetuate settler colonialism, which are allowed to fully develop and ripen into transcendent forms, the colonizer’s psyche.

In the American context, the idea of settler colonialism (and manifestations of colonialism) is complicated by the system of slavery in a way many other countries do not endure. Black slaves were forced to take part in the extraction and cultivation process of the land, all the while facing the same structure of dehumanization as Indigenous populations under liberal notions of “superiority and progress” that Lowman and Barker mention. The paradox of being an integral part of the new sovereignty of the land, yet that sovereignty and power belonging to someone else with no room to overlap, may be considered to be a major factor in explaining the “two soul-ness” element of double-consciousness, as opposed to the less fully split experience. While there was a war for “independence” in America, it was not between the local inhabitants and colonizers that framed the settlers as victims of oppression from the mainland. This allows for a split consciousness to occur where the oppressed and oppressors are both white and of European descent, and the oppression of Black and Indigenous populations in North America deliberately remains undetected. Now that the paradigm of defining oppression has been shifted, the “oppression” of white North Americans—while still holding sovereignty of the land in many, is focused on by a great margin, and has given rise to the new fascism of white identity politics. This plays into the identity of settlers as they formed the ideals of a “new” nation instead of returning to the mainland. Instead of recognizing the trauma of the colonized nation, the memory must constantly evolve as Lowman and Barker state to transcend and continue sovereignty—implying it is still present. It is possible that this literal presence pertains also to the legacy of slavery—which is important to arguments such as those by Afro-pessimists which I will be discussing in Chapter Three.

What Lowman and Barker call “narrative” pertains to the notion that a certain individual or collective is allowed to hold ideas that do not contradict their fundamental beliefs while benefitting from actions that contradict what they espouse. Already Fanon demonstrates the power of moral consciousness on one (“the Black man”) who has been made out to be a “symbol of sin”. Now, I turn to look more specifically at some of the factors that create this “narrative”. Explicit attempts to see the historical and cultural images of a certain group as inferior is not the only means of justifying oppression. As a doctor of psychiatry, Fanon often uses examples of his peers both in the past and present using to ruminate on this premise. As he writes in just one example: “In all seriousness they have been rinsing out their test tubes adjusting their scales and have begun research on how the wretched black man could whiten himself” (Fanon 91). The mid-century scientists Fanon were referring to were not trying to prove blackness was a “bodily curse” but they had already accepted it and were working off this premise (91). As noted by Raymond Williams in his 1983 edition of *Keywords: A Culture and Society*, the entry for the word “racial” contains the idea of races presupposed by the categories of as used originally in “classificatory biology” (Williams 249). It operated by differentiating groups within a certain species, and specifically the human species, in order to denote characteristics of certain groups defined as racial markers (Williams 249). Although there today there may be ethical codes against the kinds of experiments Fanon mentions, and the word “race” or “racial” has evolved in common usage, so as to perpetuate racist premises in a detrimental way. In his 2012 book *Black and Blue: The Origins of and Consequences of Medical Racism*, John Hoberman uses historical medical records to illuminate the racist perceptions of black patients in the United States from the early 20th

century onwards. An example of one of these perceptions is the widespread belief among doctors that that Black patient's illnesses were largely "self-inflicted" (Hoberman 21). He states that many of the negative connotations surrounding Black patients are actively held by doctors today, whether subconsciously or not. While he argues that this is part of a great inequality in service available between the quality of healthcare for Black Americans being much lower than that of white Americans, this is not the crux of his argument. He continues, that though these journals changed the racist tone of their writing, by acknowledging the discrepancies in medical care, most point to "sociological" factors as the cause, without much enthusiasm for solving the problem (23). Furthermore, the lack of healthcare is a compounded effect of poverty and a mistrust of the medical system, which are important factors in considering these issues. Hoberman's work goes further than stating what contemporary medical journals seem to be content with by describing the phenomenological reality of the medical community regards to healthcare inequality. He observes a kind of splitting of consciousness employed to keep the accepted paradigm of medicine—to borrow the words of Lowman and Barker—"naturalized, normalized, unquestioned and unchallenged."

The way that this status quo is maintained by the medical community, as described by Hoberman, is a microcosmic indication of how other kinds of bodies continue to operate under certain narratives. He points out a disconnect between, as mentioned, the medical community's attempt at acknowledgement and understanding of some of the issues that cause medical inequality. As Hoberman writes:

The medical literature's response to overwhelming evidence of racially biased (and potentially deadly) behaviors has thus combined two strategies. On the one

hand, there are the hundreds of peer-reviewed reports of racially differential diagnosis and treatment. At the same time, the presentation of these data employs a rhetoric of alibis, euphemism, and denial. The purpose of these rhetorical strategies is to demonstrate that, regardless of what the statistical evidence says about their behavior, American physicians are not “racists” who require reformation or public exposure. (41)

Hoberman uses this contrast of “strategies”, not in order to critique individuals doctors themselves, but rather to disclose the great lengths that medical institutions go to in order to, as he says, create “alibis”. One method of argument is to locate sociological factors as the sole reason for their outcomes, and another is to emphasize the “busyness” of doctors that force them to rely on impersonal stereotyping for their diagnoses (41-42). However, Hoberman makes the claim that the medical community willfully chooses to deny taking into account the medical history of racism so that it may concede to a kind of medical “agnosticism” (44). What Hoberman means by this term, is a refusal to take an unambiguous stance on the cause of certain medical discrepancies caused by racial bias. There have been acknowledgments of bias and a need to better understand the relationships between patients and doctors, but as Hoberman notes, this has mostly lead to a cyclical argument of “we need to understand more about what we don’t understand” (42). The kind of denial described by Hoberman is not limited to medicine and the points Hoberman makes about medicine, but certainly applicable to other branches of scientific and humanistic thought such as history, philosophy, anthropology, psychology and so forth. Hoberman’s thesis in this chapter is that all of these tactics for “denial” are in actuality about not wanting to take *responsibility* for the unresolved issues of the past.

His research discloses a fundamental inability on the part of the medical institution to face its colonial roots and colonial language. Furthermore, a capitalist society prioritizes the quantity of working time over the consideration that this pushes workers into a state of anxiety and apathy about their work. This creates a culture of efficiency (as opposed to effectiveness) associated with doctors facing time constraints and therefore the inability to address their own biases. This is not entirely the fault of the members of the medical community, but Hoberman argues that these time constraints are relished as hallmarks of medicine and part of the larger cultural understanding of what it means to be a doctor. As shown by Hoberman in this book, the condoned negligence used to decide which issues are worth the medical community's time and efforts and are not without consequence (which potentially mirrors the same habits of other institutions) directly resulting in the physical and mental harm of Black patients.

2.3 Discourse on the Projection of Morality as Racism

Now that the effects of having unchallenged attitudes in the institutional setting of contemporary medicine have been elaborated upon, it beckons us to consider the motivation behind these attitudes and why they came to be so necessary to maintaining the paradigm of Western science. One common thread in the underlying narrative in both colonialism itself and the specificities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and African diaspora is Fanon's idea of inferiority and superiority. The idea of superiority is referred to by Lowman and Barker also mentioned as a key idea in recycling the settler colonial narrative. In Jean-Paul Sartre's 1946 book *The Anti-Semite and the Jew*, the topic of hatred in the form of racism is looked at more broadly rather than in the particular scope of colonialism. Sartre's insights, which were important to Fanon, shed light on the

inferiority and superiority complex integral to these relations of racial animosity. He writes: “The anti-Semite has chosen hate because hate is a faith...He tries simply to project his intuitive certainty onto the plane of discourse” (20). It is interesting that Sartre uses Kierkegaard’s term, faith, to describe the experience of hatred. He mostly uses the term in the context of his ideology of “good” and “bad” faith, yet this application still constitutes the idea of putting one’s belief in something unfounded (intuition). He then goes on to describe the anti-Semite as having a certain kind of freedom or “right to play” (20). He claims that the racist or anti-Semite does not even necessarily fully believe in their hatred. Or, to some extent, Sartre claims that a part of the anti-Semite or racist person finds their hatred at least somewhat ridiculous, and when confronted may not even defend their point of view (20). Someone who can freely assert anti-Semitic claims reflects their privilege to amuse themselves with “eccentric” views. The colonizer, however, relies too heavily upon the resources of the colonized—whether it be their land, labour power, or commodities—to have the luxury of throwing discourse around for pure entertainment. The dissonance between the anti-Semite’s views and Jewish identity does not necessarily need to assert itself in such an obtuse manner for the “bad faith” of the position to be seen. Medical researchers see a racial bias, have access to the racist history of medicine to see results repeated throughout history patients which entail Black patients receiving worse treatment or dying more frequently from certain causes, yet they are institutionally compelled to claim ignorance about the cause. As Hoberman suggested, this refusal take a leap in concluding that responsibility on behalf of the medical community should be taken perpetuate a kind of “bad faith”.

Sartre may describe the person who is already well into believing they are superior and we have seen some of the ongoing historic and cultural messages that contribute to such beliefs. Yet still, his account of this complex only takes them as attitudes or feelings at face value, describing a scenario of the anti-Semite as a person of privilege, but also a person subject to their emotional whims. Additionally, anti-Semitism in this context that Sartre would have witnessed occurs internally in the country. Antiracism occurs in this context but also between nations. Fanon comments more on this relationship in Chapter 5 of *Black Skins, White Masks*, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”, suggesting that antiracism cannot be reduced to a kind “faith” to which person chooses to engage in. “The plane of discourse” to which the anti-Semite chooses to project onto implies a kind of neutral zone to which all kinds of perspectives exist. What Fanon implies is that the plane itself has shifted to a place where due to incredible violence, the language of articulating blackness and antiracism is hardly in the same realm of discourse. He discusses some of the horrors discovered as he read about colonialism in African nations (and uses Sartre’s analysis of the anti-Semite at times to do so). In reaction to Sartre he writes: " A feeling of inferiority? No a feeling of not existing. Sin is black as virtue is white. All those white men, fingering their guns, can’t be wrong” (118). In this quote, Fanon moves beyond the idea of being superior or inferior—which may be the easiest way to conceptualize racial issues. But in fact, this affiliation extends to the black subject not as feeling like an inferior subject at all, but an object. Once again the double consciousness to two forms of subjecthood now becomes a distinction divorced from the concept of subjectivity itself.

The colonizers (or those who benefit from such values) not only seek to maintain supremacy over the oppressed group, but rather, are compelled to create a new narrative erasing much of the oppressed group's existence. Determining cultural practices as barbaric, or rewriting scientific definitions of races to assert them as less human creates a new set of "facts"—and as we have seen previously, of morality. Fanon, as a psychiatrist, intentionally uses the analogy of "Sin" over any other negative adjective because of the commanding relationship many readers (mainly being Christian) have to the idea of Sin—a festering and deep-seated fear.

Thus, as Fanon implies here the colonizing group "can't be wrong", not only because they have the use of violence, but they claim to have the force of God on their side. The use of religion implies a kind of "bad faith" wherein white subjects may not even truly believe that their religion justifies racism. But in doing so they project their guilt and disavow their own "darkness" onto Black bodies. As Fanon reminds us: "A normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world" (122). This "abnormality" occurs in being subjected to these contradictory notions that were created specifically to push aside the inherent contradictions of being. In other words, when the default of whiteness is always used, no matter the country or time, blackness always becomes an anomaly. While Fanon uses his own experience to demonstrate his "otherness", often in very blatant ways, it is the ways that seem to transcend being obvious which appear to hurt the most.

2.4 Double Consciousness Through Affect in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

In *Black Skins, White Masks* Fanon makes reference to a character named Bigger Thomas, a fictional character from Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*. This novel, which sets its narrative in 1930s Chicago, would have been a new release just prior to the time Fanon wrote. Fanon is clearly moved by *Native Son* and the character of Bigger; he references him in such a personal way, as if he is a familiar person. As much as Bigger is a fictional character, he is also used by Fanon as a figure of *fate*. His tragic story bridges his character to a specific and particular to a time and place, but also in such a way that he becomes an immortalized archetypal. In the opening scene of the novel, Wright skillfully uses naturalism to achieve the goals of realism—a precedent that is kept throughout the novel. The opening scene of the book delves directly into the impoverished life and conditions of the Thomas family. Their living situation is a product of redlining (the systemic prevention of giving African Americans access to certain area of housing in cities)¹, but Wright does not explain this right away. Instead, he gives a vivid description of the daily lives of the Thomas family. A summary of the scene is best described by Kadeshia L. Matthews in “Violence and the Flight from Blackness in Richard Wright's *Native Son*”:

The opening scene of *Native Son* immediately impresses us with the cramped, improper domesticity of the Thomas family. Even were Bigger inclined to use this

¹ See: Wiley-Blackwell. “The United States: One Century of Redlining.” *Place, Exclusion, and Mortgage Markets*, 2011, pp. 77–102

space as in antebellum literature, it is not one likely to be productive of any stable or complete identity. Mother, sons, and daughter all sleep, dress, cook, and eat in the same tiny room. The intrusion of the rat points to the apartment's disrepair, as well as its unsanitary, dangerous condition. The narrowness of the Thomas's room reflects the narrowness of their lives. Wright portrays the Thomas women as defeated, wanting nothing more from life than what whites are willing to offer. Mrs. Thomas, with her constant talk of death, seems old before her time. Her religion pacifies rather than inspires her; it teaches her to endure injustice rather than challenge it and to wait for a better world after death. Bigger perceives his sister, Vera, as a younger, less religious version of their mother, and whereas he has dreamed of flying planes, her highest ambition seems to be work as a seamstress. Even Buddy, who is feminized in relation to Bigger, strikes his older brother as "soft and vague . . . aimless, lost . . . like a chubby puppy" (108). The vagueness Bigger identifies in his family suggests their lack of will or purpose, of identity even.

Through Matthew's summary, it is easy to picture the implications of the Thomas's family situation, how their financial situation bleakly reflects their mental states. Readers of *Native Son* are not brought to a period of the past, but are brought immediately to a present that transcends culture or year. The reader gains a glimmer of hope when Bigger is offered a job from a wealthy white man including living in his home; it is at least a promise of a better material condition than his current one. The reader quickly realizes something that Bigger seems to know and accept all along; the "opportunities" he receives will never materialize into anything but space for condemnation, an extreme that

is realized in the eventual accusation leveled against him of the rape and murder of his bosses' daughter, and of finally being sentenced to death at the end of the final chapter, which is bluntly called "Fate."

As much as Bigger is a fictional character, he is meant to represent any Black person living in a white supremacist society, a person whose first crime (or perhaps "original sin") was simply being Black. Though the story is much about Bigger, the reader actually feels distant to him—partially because Wright explicitly documents Bigger's stunted character development as a result of his predicament. The result is a splitting and trapping of his consciousness between two states, the first being a perpetual state of *ennui* at the mundanity of a life where one is not able to pursue to much of anything and the second being a perpetual state of dread contemplating the inevitable violence to come. Bigger expresses his *ennui* in the novel when he and his friend, Gus, see Air Force pilots flying planes above, feeling a desire do the same, but reiterating how it will never be a possibility for them. Regarding this realization: "For a moment Bigger contemplated all the "ifs" that Gus had mentioned. Then both boys broke hard into laughter, looking at each through squinted eyes" (22-23). The boys laugh not because their desires are funny, but rather they laugh because to even entertain such a thought of an impoverished Black person in America working as a pilot seems ridiculous. The only way to deal with the harshness of the reality is to have a sense of humour. In the same conversation, Bigger mentions in the same conversation he feels like "nothing ever happens" yet at the same time he also reveals (in one of the few times we do get a look at Bigger's thoughts and feelings) his strong feeling that something "awful" is going to happen to him (23-25). He is vague in stating this, but such ambiguity is precisely his reality, if the string of events

did not unfold the way they did in the book they could have unfolded in any number of ways with the same outcome as Bigger's demise.

The contrasting feelings of impending doom and perpetual boredom is reminiscent to the distinction that Walter Benjamin makes between two types of experience: *Erfahrung* (or long experience) and *Erlebnis* (or isolated/shock experience). *Erfahrung* is rooted in tradition, and something that connects the collective with the individual and enriches the individual while he or she is never removed from history². *Erlebnis* is an isolated experience, taking place in a certain specific time and place in history but not connecting to anything else outside of itself. In the modern world, says Benjamin, one continuously experiences a set of occurring “shocks”, each one further distancing themselves from each other. This is also the experience for racialized figures such as Fanon and Bigger Thomas. Fanon makes reference to several traumatizing personal anecdotes of being called racial slurs, such as the example he gives in the beginning of Chapter Five of *Black Skins, White Masks* being called the n-word, or encountering racist stereotypes such as the figure of *Y a bon Banania* mentioned throughout the text (Fanon 89). These events cause a constant state of traumatizing shock—disconnecting the individual from themselves and others, as they are kept in a state of high tensions and fear: an overdose of *Erlebnis*. In many ways these kinds of experience noted by Benjamin come out of taking up the work of poets, such as the 19th century French Charles Baudelaire to describe the newly industrialized world of life in cities, the vulgar shock experiences with growing

² See Benjamin's 1940 article “On the Theses of History” or 1939 article “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”

capitalism during this time period. Yet in order to adapt the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* as it pertains to the experience of Bigger Thomas, one must take into account the essential part of slavery that involved disconnecting Black slaves from their homeland, children from families so it is difficult if not impossible to have a sense of heritage or ancestry.

As Fanon notes, at the same time as being denied access to this history and cultural practices, access to a notion of identity is only given through a dominant white narrative which is the only allowable expression of this culture. For example, Fanon describes the feeling of feeling “responsible” not only for himself but for his “race” and his “ancestors”, along with “cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes above all, the grinning *Ya bon Banania*” (92). Essentially any of the negative narratives used to oppress his ancestors replaces any of the positive narratives one can usually form about their history, family, or culture. Although he is seeing himself as both “himself” alongside this racist lens, but is difficult to combat these negatives images without an ability to connect with one’s past for those forcibly removed from their heritage.

The ultimate result of these two contrasting sensations is most likely despair, yet Fanon alludes to *fear*. About *Native Son*, he writes:

It’s Bigger Thomas who is afraid but afraid of what? Of himself. We don’t yet know who is, but he knows that fear will haunt the world the world once the world finds out. (Fanon 118)

Not only does Fanon acknowledge that we never fully learn about who Bigger is (and he does not necessarily find out himself), but he is fully aware of the consequences his race has for him though Bigger himself does not carry this power. This is also reflected by Mbembe when he speaks of a person of colour's constant need to justify their existence: "As a result, he fears showing himself such as he really is, preferring disguise and dissimulation to authenticity and convinced shame has been brought upon his existence." (Mbembe 132). The ambiguity in the text makes it unknown whether the accusations against Bigger is true or not, but either way Bigger himself accepts that he is the murderer by the end.

When the reader finally does come across Fanon's reference to *Native Son* without reading the book they are likely to be confused for he writes with very little context: "In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. He acts to put an end to the tensions, he answers the world's expectations" (Fanon 118). But in this short sentence alone, Fanon already bridges two ideas important for understanding Bigger's fate (I believe, in a ironic way). Firstly, in reference Bigger Thomas acting in the end, he purposefully does not say exactly in what his action is, but in keeping with the ambiguity of the novel—he asserts that *it does not matter*. The murder could have been an accident or not, but Bigger was already "violent" before he was even given the choice. Fanon uses the idea of action here as a reference to his existentialist counterparts such as Sartre (and others like Kierkegaard) in which action is the primal expression of one's fundamental freedom. However, throughout the novel Bigger's ability to act is greatly restricted from lack of personal stimulation to a systemic lack of opportunities. In such a way (Fanon critiques existentialism's propensity to exclude embodied and stigmatized people. The way that

Bigger “acts” by accepting himself to be the murderer, and confirming his self-perception that he, as a Black man, is inherently violent, and that his fate is the only acceptable way Bigger could relate to white society.

The end of the novel is still dissatisfying, as the reader is forced to want Bigger *not* to accept his fate and to side with the lawyer, who tries to help him get off. Max urges Bigger to not give into what the world tells him he is, and tries to get him to admit the structures in place created by those with the power to determine his predicament (Wright 388-391). One gets the sense that Bigger is more aware of this than he leads on, but perhaps that route is too painful for him to pursue. Though Jewish himself, and the recipient of his fair share of racism, Max seems much more in tune with Bigger’s plight than the other characters, usually white, who seem to “sympathize” with black characters and try to “help” Bigger, all the while failing to their actions that add to the problem. While potentially well-intentioned whites try to take part in the “decolonization” process—whether it be public apologies, land acknowledgements, or even academics such as myself writing on this topic, Mbembe makes one thing clear:

Violence pre-existed the advent of decolonization, which consisted in setting in motion an animated body able to completely and unreservedly deal that which, being anterior and external to it, prevented it from arriving at its concept.

(Mbembe 6)

Bigger “becoming” violent is not the problem, as “violence” itself is inherent to the situation of colonialism and racism. The reader’s desire for Bigger to see himself in a non-violent way, whether coming from a well-intentioned place or not, is still part of the

larger problem—it is to demand or assert control over the way a person sees themselves while simultaneously benefitting from the same society that was built upon the premise of their invisibility. While pondering the freedom to which a character like Bigger has, one notes how other characters, such as Bigger's girlfriend, Bessie, are discarded of, unseen by the world and given no voice at all. While Max attempts to advocate for Bigger, a Black woman such as Bessie is allotted no form of justice at all, demonstrating the scale to which this oppression exists. While Bigger may have an appearance of choice in the novel, other characters do not have an appearance at all.

In the next chapter, I look at the history of modernity as building these premises, allowing the violence towards Black folk to be brought into the present. Then, I look at the movement of Afro-pessimism which takes up this inherent presence of violence, positioning Black folks inherently with this kind of fate.

Chapter 3

3 Double Consciousness in the Legacy of Modernity

In this final chapter, by once again taking a historic and theoretic approach, I discuss some factors in tracing the roots of ideas about Black consciousness. Positioning thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois in history and asking the question of what the significance of his or her legacy is, is more than a sociological query. One asks these questions recognizing that there is a fundamental issue with resolving problems with the current methodology that helped to create them. Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic* (1993), introduced in Chapter One, both directly and indirectly takes up Du Bois work in the context of "modernity" and why concepts of this time period still haunt the current discourse on race theory. The first chapter of this paper considered double consciousness as a product of Du Bois' legacy, a "gift" that ultimately holds the potential of hope. Yet in Chapter Two, focusing on Fanon and Wright's predications of double consciousness, the idea was raised that there exists a difficulty in adapting existing vernacular to "double consciousness", considering the great violence and projection of white guilt onto Black bodies. In this chapter, following this chronological movement, I compare concepts from the first two chapters as interpreted by Gilroy and the contemporary "Afro-Pessimist" movements. Finally I return to the figures of Du Bois and Richard Wright and the way their lives embodied their intellectual work. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate some of the implications these interpretations could have on double consciousness in the formation of a new metaphysics.

3.1 Modernity, Post Modernity and Paul Gilroy

In Chapter One, I already discussed Gilroy's idea of modernity, but here I look at why he chooses to relate this topic to the idea of "double consciousness". As a historian, Gilroy's work considers the "Black Atlantic" not only as a series of events, but also by using specific figures, and symbols to represent a wider network between certain communities and cultures. However, the creation of the idea of the Black Atlantic is not so much an organic tool to tell these stories and experiences. Rather, his work comes from a place of necessity to confront the violence of slavery which had been carefully separated from the period known as "modernity" and the particular ideas of this era. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the African diaspora, Gilroy uses the Black Atlantic to overcome the polarization of different African-derived cultures in achieving the common goal of liberation. For Gilroy, the entirety of the trans-Atlantic slave trade falls into the same period known as the "modern" period. This era consists of a wide window of many centuries, a period which has often been designated by white scholars as the "Enlightenment," and studied mainly in isolation from the history of slavery. Gilroy attempts "to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicit transnational and intercultural perspective" (Gilroy 15). To consider the meaning of this view one must consider what exactly links together the events that make up what is known as "the modern period" (made up of the early modern, which for Gilroy takes place roughly from 1500-1800, and the late modern, which he dates from 1750-1914). The major events associated with this period, like the American and French revolutions, in addition to periods of scientific and industrial change in both Europe (and

what was becoming) North America, are linked by the fact that they were part of one world, the European “West.” The “other world” (i.e. Africa and areas of African diaspora) was both non-existent and the object of obsession. This paradox that manifests itself in many ways becomes the central focus of this chapter.

Following Du Bois, Gilroy's retelling of this history and movement through time and space is not linear. One comes to understand how his approach to history is in many ways exclusively antiracist and anticolonial due to his prioritizing and organizing of comparisons of figures from different times or places. The result is that his work does not serve to fit itself in as a supplement to already existing historical narratives. Rather his work relates certain moments to one another to paint a picture of Black consciousness rooted in social, artistic and academic traditions. Gilroy's project, like Du Bois's, then becomes an affront to current methodologies of understanding history. It is not an attempt to look at the Black Atlantic as a ‘reaction’ to the racism of the past and present, with the racism being still the primary event in mainstream perspective. Rather, the events and people Gilroy discuss (even if in fact in opposition to the oppression) fundamentally are the primary event of that period.

Consider even the status quo. An example can be made even how students in Canada are taught about Canadian history. In the Ontario high school curriculum (updated 2015), the government attempts to include more Indigenous history, and more history about immigration. In the same breath, the curriculum focuses on students find the “big idea”—a vague overarching argument—from the topic studied (18). In their own words, even long after the “details” and much of the content about the lesson is forgotten by the student, they will remember the essence of the “big idea” (18). These ideas are usually

broad enough not to offend any particular group, but narrow enough so that it lacks any real meaning. Without considering the weight of these “details” students are forced into a singularity that does not recognize the potential differences in how perspectives were recorded, i.e. historically recording a larger proportion of white settler perspectives.

These problems are not necessarily limited to history, or any discipline, just like the issues of inequality in healthcare addressed in Chapter Two were not limited to medicine. Gilroy’s work exposes how academic disciplines such as English and (by extension) critical theory are relics of “modernity” out of step with many undeniable realities. These disciplines, especially as more and more English departments move towards rebranding themselves as “Cultural Studies”, remain very much rooted in the English tradition that poses postcolonial studies or race studies as a subgroup (Gilroy 4). In the very language of this discussion, Gilroy notes how the word “culture” itself is essentially being used interchangeably the way that “race” was used— in a historically racist scientific definition (5) Gilroy embraces these critiques, which creates a space to confront the subtleties of slavery, in part to address the disconnect between Black academia and mainstream culture, especially in his home in England. He notes that in England, polarization based on class or gender limits the effectiveness of a theoretical approach to antiracism (320). The problem of inclusivity and representation in academia seems closely related to this issue that Gilroy brings up; the lack of representation in certain discourse is a symptom of these larger disconnects based on markers like class. With this in mind, Gilroy does not only attempt to use his idea of the Black Atlantic in opposition to modernity or to contrast it. In some ways the concept is an attempt to formulate an adequate *response* to this period. As Gilroy writes,

Though largely ignored by recent debates over modernity and its discontents, these ideas about nationality, ethnicity, authenticity and cultural integrity are characteristically modern phenomena that have profound implications for cultural criticism and cultural history. They crystallized with the revolutionary transformations of the West at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and involved novel typologies and modes of identification. Any shift towards a postmodern condition, should not, however, mean that the conspicuous power of these modern subjectivities and the movements they articulated has been left behind. Their power has, if anything, grown, and their ubiquity as a means to make political sense of the world is currently unparalleled by the languages of class and socialism by which they once appeared to have been surpassed (2).

Gilroy here demonstrates an innate understanding of the importance of linking questions (in varying degrees of abstraction) about nationality, ethnicity and culture not only as notions in-themselves, but how they have been put into conversation over the past century.

Implicitly, Gilroy points to the subtleties of language in formulated ideas about the differences between “races” and how these ideas represent a mode of violence that was carried on past the time period itself. Closely related to the discussion of historic scientific racism in Chapter Two of this thesis, Gilroy notes the foundation of concepts such as “nationality” as part of this racist or colonial legacy¹. This foundational racism is reflected in how ideas of “culture” were weaponized against groups who considered “barbaric” or “backwards” in comparison to European culture. However, it is also

reflected in the ways that these ideas of “ethnicity” or “culture” then became closely related to another in a problematic way. To Gilroy, exclusively associating ethnicity and culture (already rooted with these colonial problems) “links the blacks of the West to one of their adoptive, parental cultures: the intellectual heritage of the West since the Enlightenment” (Gilroy 2). In Gilroy’s research, he noticed that no matter the political stance, an adherence to “cultural nationalism” when theorizing about “histories and experiences of “black” and “white” people” was commonly present. The problem of identifying oneself with the “parent” culture, i.e. the oppressor’s culture, and with their ethnic identity as defined by that specific culture once again creates disruptions in the narrative of racial discourse. Du Bois and Gilroy’s method of utilizing elements of this “intellectual heritage”, both in a (European and American sense) unilaterally with other elements (both in a traditionally African and diasporic sense) results in their work overcoming the limits of this cultural nationalism.

Gilroy then, in reference to a “postmodern condition” mentions a “shift”—the thought of which seems stills present today in both academia and more mainstream cultural outlets. The mention of a “postmodern condition” by Gilroy is likely alluding to Jean-François Lyotard’s 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition* (42). Lyotard’s idea of what “postmodern” means comes in contrast to his idea of what “modern” is. In his definition, the “modern” reflects the replacement of gaining knowledge of certain topics such as “meaning” and “spirit” with science (including philosophy during this time) (Lyotard xxiii). Similarly to Gilroy’s view, for Lyotard “modernity” is closely tied to the “Enlightenment period”, as mentioned, a time where intellectuals saw themselves as

working toward the perfection of humanity through rationalism.³ Lyotard argues that the *presence* of these kinds of goals (described as narratives) is what separates the modern from the postmodern (xxiv). Referencing Marx's theory of automation,⁴ wherein the development of machinery separates a worker from the physical process of their work, the development of computers and technology have an effect on the transition of knowledge (4). Lyotard, in his book, goes further into the relationship of knowledge to capitalism and effects of this change, such as the commodification of knowledge (4). One of the primary defining factors of postmodernism that Lyotard notes is a fundamental shift in language use (15). To elaborate, Lyotard poses that scientific pursuits are now not only searching for the answers to different questions than before, but rather the entirety of the conversation has changed so that the conversations do not coincide at all (15-17). The disconnect of this "postmodern" condition is made possible due to the fluidity of language, the ability for the same words to take on different meanings in different contexts. The nature of language to do so is then exploited by the unrelinquished logicism, which began during the time of the Enlightenment and the new methods of transferring and communicating (computers) (17). What knowledge and information has (and is) becoming for Lyotard is similar to Benjamin's idea of shock experience

³ Evidence of this claim can be found in the works of intellectuals during this time, such as in French nobleman Marquis de Condorcet's *Sketch of the Progress of the Human Mind*, written in 1765: "The superstitions of antiquity and the abasement of reason before the madness of supernatural religion disappeared from society just as they had disappeared from philosophy..." regarding the his time, during the Enlightenment indicating that both science and philosophy had abandoned religious or "supernatural" beliefs in turn for mathematical or logic based ideals. He also writes "We may then conclude that the perfectibility of humanity is indefinite" indicating his optimism for the future of humanity through science. Strayer, W. Robert., *Ways of the World, a Brief Global History with Sources: Since 1500*, 2nd Edition (Bedford/ St. Martins 2013) Vol.2, 756-757

⁴ See Karl Marx 1939 text *Grundrisse*

introduced in Chapter Two of this paper. As Lyotard writes: “The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (*Bildung*) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so” (4). The instant production of knowledge that one has immediate access to, through phones or computers, can be compared in the same way that an individual can experience a series of “shocks” that removes them from a sense of history and process.

Returning to Gilroy’s thoughts on these ideas of postmodernism from Lyotard (as well as others such as Frederic Jameson and Jürgen Habermas), if his conception of modernity is rooted in relation to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, then so is his conception of postmodernism (42). Yet, Gilroy warns that the reality of postmodernism is not as removed from the past as Lyotard suggests. Lyotard already points to the notion of the commodification of knowledge, such as to serve the interest of the state (as in the previously mentioned example of the Ontario school system’s history curriculum). However, the callousness of Lyotard’s suggestion that there are no longer overarching “narratives” cannot be fully considered when, as discussed earlier, much of the recognition of slavery was never made part of the “modern” era (Gilroy 42). To Gilroy, the trepidation over abstract entities (such as knowledge) becoming commodified when Black bodies had already been commodified shows an improper understanding of modernity on the part of Western intellectuals (44). As discussed in the case of settler colonialism, Lowman and Barker are that the continuation of settler colonial narratives will always be necessary in order for settler colonial societies to exist. Gilroy’s participation in the conversation of the “crisis of modernity” and interest in how Black scholars deal with this issue, while also calling the entire debate “extensive and unusual”

and “tied both to the fate of intellectual caste” seems, in some ways, contradictory (43). He notes how the entire discussion is better used to witness a kind of cognitive dissonance on the part of intellectuals (in modernity) and the role of intellectuals as a whole (43). Yet he continues in the discussion of modernity, rewritten with historical anecdotes and biographies of important Black figures and artists who contribute understanding to this time. For example, he suggests looking to figures such as Frederick Douglass’ narratives as an alternative or as supplementary material to Hegel’s master-slave-dialectic, providing details of Douglass’ life and thoughts on master-slave relations (60).

Gilroy is able to use these contrasting ideas about modernity because he wants to emphasize the kind of double consciousness emerging from this intellectual and cultural work, existing “inside and outside the conventions” (73). Gilroy’s idea of double consciousness recognizes Du Bois’ original reconciling with race and “American-ness”, but ultimately feels that his theory was meant to encompass more than that. He writes, about Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Double consciousness emerges from the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being, and seeing. The first is racially particularistic, the second nationalist in that it derives from the nation state in which the ex-slaves but not yet citizens find themselves rather than from their aspiration towards a nation state of their own. The third is diasporic or hemispheric, sometimes global and occasionally universalist.

This trio was woven into some unlikely but exquisite patterns in

Du Bois's thinking (127).

As alluded to in Chapter One, Du Bois' work did not just define "double consciousness" but embodied it. Gilroy identifies the typical notion of double consciousness: race and nationality. In mentioning a third kind—the "diasporic or hemispheric" he goes beyond including and emphasizing Du Bois' Pan-African vision. One critique Gilroy (among others) had made towards thinkers from the Enlightenment was that under the guise of universalist claims, such as notions of "egalitarianism" and "freedom", was truly a kind of particularity that only applied to a few intellectuals and privileged individuals of the time (59-60). Du Bois' double consciousness is presented in the opposite way as an inversion of this order, beginning with the particular, even personal, and moving outward. Gilroy's approach is not limited solely to this idea, but he embraces the "trio" of Du Bois' double consciousness into his discussion on modernity. Describing double consciousness here as "unhappy symbiosis" captures the discomfort of balancing these modes of "thinking, being, seeing", also implying that an element of double consciousness exists wherein these modes are not in sync. Even with these unfavourable elements, Gilroy's use of double consciousness as a tool against the singularity of modernity ultimately positions him in a "hopeful" light.

3.2 Despair and Resignation: Afro-Pessimism

In the next section, I look at the use of "despair" and resignation as tool in the creation of Black metaphysics. To do so I will approach the contemporary movement of Afro-pessimism, situating this movement into Du Bois' legacy. The purpose of this section is to compare Gilroy's approach of returning to modernity while dismantling notions of cultural nationalism to an approach (from Afro-pessimism) that constitutes a shift of

language to achieve some of the same goals. Both approaches build from foundations rooted in ideas from Du Bois and Fanon, among others. Afro-pessimism describes itself by some of its main contributors and founders, Patrice Douglass, Selamawit D. Terrefe, and Frank B. Wilderson as:

a lens of interpretations that accounts for civil society's dependence on antiblack violence—a regime of violence that positions black people as internal enemies of civil society, and cannot be analogized with the regimes of violence that disciplines the Marxist subaltern, the postcolonial subaltern, the colored but nonblack Western immigrant, the nonblack queer, or the nonblack woman. (par. 1)

While both Gilroy's work and Afro-pessimist writings address the continual violence of slavery that continues to exist in the present, Afro-Pessimists already begin with this premise and look at the present. There exists a sense of urgency in the tone of these writers, understandably, so that if the reader takes away nothing else from this passage, they take away that there is a violence, and it is happening now. Moreover, it is rare, in critical theory, to see figures from various complex works (the proletariat, the woman, the queer, the postcolonial subaltern) listed side by side callously, when typically each title is usually debated and heavily analyzed. Yet here, the writers group them together as to denote the differences between them. In resisting the "ruse of analogy" and distinguishing antiblack racism from these other forms of oppression, the authors in some ways mirror Fanon's notion (discussed in Chapter Two) that the Black subject actually is not a subject at all in the eyes of the World, but an object. Western cultural humanism

hinges on the presence of a shared “humanness” behind each person, regardless of their distinct experience of oppression (whether based on gender, sexual orientation, class, or race). Afro-pessimism dismisses this idea, not merely from a materialist or “experiential” perspective but rather from the “ontological” idea that Black people cannot be lumped into this definition of “human”. The reasons for the difference, according to the founders of Afro-pessimism, are that firstly the kind of violence inflicted is different. Secondly, they do believe that Black people possess “the inability to share in the same kind of trajectory of liberation as other populations” (par. 1). They argue that the positioning of all Black populations, regardless of country or culture is unique to the positioning of any other othered or embodied person that is addressed by critical theorists.

Gilroy’s work, while recognizing the violence that is so central to the Afro-pessimist analysis, still uses the idea of “successive displacements, migrations and journey’s forced and otherwise which have come to constitute those black cultures” as a point of connection between these communities versus the idea of violence alone (112). Using the present as a point of departure, Afro-pessimists have reconstituted (or claimed to have) an idea of “Being” that has arguable remained static through many periods of thought.

3.3 Conceptualizing Afro-Pessimists and Violence

Keeping in mind both of these critiques on modernity, this next section will conceptualize the idea of doubleness using the concept of “the anxiety of antagonism” created by the founders of Afro-pessimism.

As a contemporary movement, Afro-pessimism has even been discussed in mainstream publications such as *The New Yorker*, including the idea that Black populations live in a

perpetual state of “social death” (“The Argument of Afro-pessimism” by Vinson Cunningham (2020)). Afropessimists do not dwell on the individual differences between Black communities based on nationality. Afropessimist thinkers argue that such considerations are “inessential to a paradigmatic analysis” (par. 2). Gilroy would seem to agree with notion of not needing to conflate culture and nationality. Yet in rejecting these sociological categories, one notes Gilroy’s slower approach in painting an entire picture, moving from geographical locations to different moments in time. The Afropessimists write in a very different way, as stated in the Oxford Bibliographies entry on Afro-Pessimism, written by some of the founders and main contributors of the movement:

What is essential is neither the interpersonal nor institutional orientation toward blackness, but the fact that blackness is the essence of that which orients. Put differently, the coherence of reality (be it institutional or interpersonal coherence) is secured by anxiety over both the idea and the presence of blacks. The black, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon (Fanon 1967, cited under Afro-Pessimism and Psychoanalysis), is a stimulus to anxiety, and it is the anxiety of antagonism (Sexton 2016) represented and embodied by blackness that creates the condition of possibility for both the rigid one-drop rule and the catholic plethora of shades that are named in countries like Cuba and Brazil. (par. 2)

The ancient philosophical problem of what is essential is one which in many ways had been abandoned in the age of modernity by European philosophers. But for Afropessimist philosophers, the present lived reality of Black people demands that the problem of essence be taken up again. Gilroy’s work focused on the erasure of the African diaspora and trans-Atlantic slave trade from the conception of modernity in

history. In putting forward of the idea of Blackness being “a stimulus to anxiety, and...the anxiety of antagonism” to once again demonstrate that at the same time as being erased, Black bodies became an object to project this anxiety of whites. In Chapter Two, Fanon’s notion of Blackness being a “symbol of sin” from *Black Skins, White Masks* resonates with this kind of projection.

The concept of anxiety used by Fanon originates from his conceptions of psychoanalysis. Fanon’s body of work describes in great detail the kinds of subconscious effects that racism and colonization have on the psyche of an individual, some of which were discussed in Chapter Two. While Fanon’s work derived from his own practice and observations, Afro-pessimists in this context do not situate this idea with any particular time or place. This implies that even in the present, the status of being “a stimulus to anxiety” has not changed. In *Black Skin, White Masks* this restricting force is contrasted with the radical freedom of existentialism, as inspired by one of Fanon’s mentors, Jean-Paul Sartre. This pattern is found too in Wilderson’s definition placing the discussion of essence beside the idea of anxiety. As Wilderson and Douglass argue in “The Violence of Presence: metaphysics in a blackened world,” the juxtaposition of the philosophical and psychoanalytic problems of essence and anxiety is intentional:

We contend that black philosophy should continue to pursue this kind of juxtaposition: an irreverent clash between ensembles of questions dedicated to the status of the subject as a relational being and ensembles of questions dedicated to what are more often thought of as general and fundamental problems, such as those connected with reality, existence, reason, and mind; in the form, specifically, of a clash between questions concerning the always already

deracination of blackness and questions, for example, of metaphysics—rather than pursue a line of inquiry that assumes a stable and coherent philosophical vantage point from which a black metaphysics can be imagined. This is because, as we argue below, for blacks no such vantage point exists. Such a project could stand the assumptive logic of philosophy on its metaphysical and ethical head; just as a similarly blackened project has turned the assumptive logic of critical theory (specifically, its starting point, which assumes subjectivity) on its relational head. (117)

As discussed earlier in the context of modernity, Gilroy was let down by thinkers who conceptualized ideas about modernity and post modernity. Yet these thinkers had the privilege of a connection to their heritage to build on—a luxury not awarded to all. Even if certain philosophical movements became affected by historical events, such as wars or industrialization and was thus reflected in mainstream academic thought, slavery was not. The idea of a “vantage point”—especially having no vantage point, contrasts with Du Bois’ idea of a “second sight”. As alluded to in Chapter One, Du Bois’ double consciousness could potentially provide one with a more insightful ability to see the world. But if one is not given the vantage point to put it to use (i.e. opportunities, education) it could become a “dreadful objectivity”—Richard Wright’s definition of double consciousness, which implies a bleak fate (Gilroy 30).

In some ways Gilroy uses the example of various figures to create “vantage points”. In Chapter Four of *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy’s focus on Du Bois’ life itself rather than solely his work could be considered a representation of the project Wilderson and Douglass pursue. In Chapter One, I already presented the question of Du Bois’ legacy,

and his life in terms of his outsider status at the university. Gilroy recounts Du Bois' extensive travels without settling in one place for too long. His travels began after the first World War to Europe and spanned his lifetime until his death in Ghana at age 95—where he had in fact renounced his American citizenship altogether (117). Du Bois' movements across continents, and movements politically, serves not only as a historical reference, but demonstrates in many ways his personal testimony of struggling with identity throughout his life. Despite his changing stances on various issues throughout his work or moving to various countries, his life enriched his work through this twofold nature. Though he could have had a profitable career in the United States, his rejection of the status quo and the “American Dream”, in part contributed majorly to American culture.

When one reads Du Bois' definition of double consciousness, there is a sense of familiarity one feels, even if they do not themselves relate to that particular experience. On a macro level, the imagery of modernity is that of a whole, a singularity, and the image of post modernity is fragmentation; this is often projected on the idea of the self. One sees the idea in psychoanalysis the idea of conflicting parts of one's unconsciousness, and in Benjamin's idea of shock experience discussed in Chapter Two, for example. This point is made by Wilderson in the article “Grammar & Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom”. The article discusses the way in which gatherings of people with roots from the African diaspora, a conference in his specific case, often result in “a palpable structure of feeling, a shared sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture” (Wilderson 119). He specifically mentions the delicate issue of some Black artists preferring to be known

“simply as artists, not as African or black artists” (122). As a critical theorist, Wilderson is familiar with how theorists such as Marx and Freud and Lacan, all deal with the “partitioned” nature of our existence” (ibid). To Wilderson, though these ideas suggest that all artists, regardless of race gender, cannot be free of such “taints” (ibid). The subjects theorized by the examples used by Wilderson are faced with the “mystifications of the ruling class (Marx), the ego (Freud), or the Imaginary (Lacan)” but not with the unique violence of “enslavement” that African-derived people do (ibid). Thus, as for Wilderson, it is incredibly important that the idea of the self in this case cannot be conflated with identity or experience but rather *ontologically*. Gilroy begins this process by rooting the existential erasure of Blackness in modernity, and advocating for the centralization of Slavery to be at the basis conception of modernity. Double consciousness is both a way to know the self that is both ontological and based in experience. In one way, Du Bois describes double consciousness as a way of a “feeling” and how one relates to the self. In another, double consciousness situates this mode of being in the particular history of the African diaspora and Slavery, as part of a particular process. Therefore, in looking more in depth at Wilderson’s ideas in Afro-pessimism stemming from the violence inflicted toward African-derived groups in modernity, double consciousness could be used to bridge the dissonance between the ontological and existential language to rewrite these narratives.

Wilderson and Douglass also allude to the ability of the new metaphysics to turn some of the premises of both philosophy and critical theory on its “head”. In the case of critical theory as stated: “specifically, its starting point, which assumes subjectivity”. They are alluding not to the use of subjectivity itself but rather the use of subjectivities as

interpretation: all subjectivities being equally true but simply different lenses of perspective. In the entry on Afro-pessimism (2018), the authors mention their indebtedness to black feminist writers: not only, to their credit, for their privileging of “position (or paradigm) over performance”, but also for recognizing the clear difference between the plight of white feminists and feminists of colour. The cross-section between racism and sexism, or class may now be considered to be “covered” under ideas such as intersectionality; however such terms may not be an influential enough conception to prevent the issues of white female subjects being prioritized. Thus, Afro-pessimists have created a shift in language, removing the equation of subjectivity altogether.

Fanon articulates this kind of subject/object split in various ways, and in this articulation there is an always present and reoccurring idea of violence. For Afro-pessimists, the paradigmatic nature of anti-Black violence is part of the “jump” separating Blackness from other subjectivities who have experienced oppression or violence. The idea of violence is elaborated on further in “The Violence of Presence: metaphysics in a blackened world” by Douglass and Wilderson. In this article, they claim the work that of Elaine Scarry, an American academic, in her 1985 book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* “advanced” the idea of the subject in critical theory. In Wilderson and Douglass’ conception of Scarry’s theory, the victim of “torture” or the person who pain has been inflicted on is at risk of losing their “metaphysical presence”, destroying if not their essence, then their ability to come to know themselves (118). However, Douglass and Wilderson contrast Scarry’s idea with the work of contemporary poet and scholar John Murillo:

John Murillo describes the psychic life of black people as no life at all. (14) In other words, for Murillo, neither torture nor the havoc wreaked by war qualifies as an event that affects the metaphysical plentitude of black life because blackness is constituted by an injunction against metaphysics, against, that is, black people's attempts to clarify the fundamental notions by which people understand the world, for example, existence, objects and their properties, space and time, cause and effect, and above all possibility. (118)

The idea presented by Murillo confirms the Afro-Pessimist usage of the term “a priori” to position Blackness—as a “slave” (118). Despite the literal physical violence that targets Black populations in addition to other kinds of systemic violence, Murillo “argues that the fragmenting process the black psyche undergoes is beyond “the event horizon,” unlike Scarry's subject whose event horizon is the episode(s) of torture. For Murillo, the event horizon is not a narrative moment, or a moment that can be narrated, but being itself” (121). Note that in the analogy of the event horizon, rather than there existing an “event” of violence, the violence becomes the point of no return to lose oneself—but this is still a definitive point. Returning to the idea of violence, Scarry claims her victim loses the ability to “know herself as a relational being”, due to the pain and torture inflicted, which Wilderson and Douglass agree with. However, even this statement alone is partially contradictory. Depending on the reasons for torture (i.e. the victim’s beliefs or convictions)—it may actually strengthen their relationality to the reason. In this case—the necessary element to their being, the body, is being destroyed on account of something that is a “relation to the self” and for this reason their humanness or “being” is still intact. In the case of the necessary element of one’s being destroyed on the basis of

another necessary element to their being, this is different. It is especially different when the one who is being targeted is not privy to a certain time or reason. When the violence continues for hundreds of years, there is no “event horizon”, it simply manifests in different ways. Thus Douglass and Wilderson do not identify with the torture victim from Scarry’s account. The respective forms of violence cannot be made to relate analogically.

In the rejection of subjectivity and identification with Scarry’s victim one is left with the idea of, in some ways, resignation to a kind of despair. Afro-pessimism may be a contemporary movement but even long before Fanon, “pessimism” played an important role in the history of Black consciousness. Discussed earlier in this chapter, Gilroy compared the narrative of Frederick Douglass to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic.

According to Gilroy, in Hegel’s allegory, the slave “prefers his master’s version of reality to death” (63). To Douglass, however, the (actual) slave would prefer death rather than continuing the “inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends” (63). The idea of this death reflects the idea of the “social death”, Murillo’s description of “having no life at all” and Fanon’s “feeling of not existing”: all of which allude to a kind of resignation. As discussed in chapter Two of this paper, in *Black Skins, White Masks* Fanon speaks of (what I had called a kind of double consciousness) the power, yet possibility of self-destruction in acknowledgement of society’s views, especially associating Blackness with a kind of “darkness” (Fanon 174). There is sense of a similar kind of notion in Afro-pessimism: on the one hand the destructiveness of a “social death”. On the other hand, Afro-pessimists do believe that in accepting the premises of such as lens, there exists the power to create a new metaphysics and philosophical traditions.

3.4 Noted Critiques of Afro-Pessimism

There are many fair critiques of the controversial Afro-pessimist movement, and as a contemporary movement, discourse is constantly evolving. In “Afro-Blue: The Death of Afro-Pessimism” by Greg Thomas, using ideas from Gloria Emeagwali, he critiques the movement and main contributors on some of the following points:

- a. Ignoring or misreading many historical events
 - b. Misreading of certain texts and authors
 - c. Selectively reading certain texts (i.e. Only *Black Skins, White Masks* of Fanon’s work), and also reading many white scholars over Black scholars who have contributed to the topic in the past, yet remarketing the movement as wholly “new”
 - d. Being highly American-centric (resulting in “throwing” away Pan-Africanism and discussions of Africa altogether)
 - e. Playing into a view of Africa or Africans that already is incredibly bleak and negative
 - f. The use of “pessimism” in a nihilist way—not in a productive sense, but rather in a hopeless way
 - g. Generically referring to complex ideas (i.e. feminism and Marxism) and in a sense “throwing them out” when many important Black theorists and activists have used and continue to use these ideas in antiracist contexts
- and finally,
- h. Differentiation of violence and suffering of Black people compared to that of other colonized subalterns, in many ways even differentiating Black-

colonialization in Africa or South America from the specific system of slavery in the United States

While all of these critiques could be applied to my own paper, I agree with many of Thomas' evaluations. The "trendiness" of Afro-pessimism is suspicious in the sense that, given the racist roots of Western academia, a movement that uses the language of Afro-pessimism, (especially referring to Black people as "slaves" and not "human") could play in to white fetishism of violence against Black bodies, although meant to make a point about the current systemic racism towards Black folks. Taking on such a language with proper care could be a challenge for many universities who already struggle to prioritize race and Africana studies as well as having diverse faculty. The ways in which students are taught about race—even if done so in a "progressive manner" reinforces a narrative of the status quo—even if not that is not the professor's or institution's intention. This was one point made earlier addressed by Gilroy, as he noted the roots of ideas about nationality and race as problematic. To elaborate, consider one of the most widely read novels in academic institutions, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad. The students (and professors) may read and discuss how the characters construct Africa as the "blank space on the map" or, as Chinua Achebe writes in his criticism, as "a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity" (Achebe 6). Achebe has a difficult task in critiquing the beloved book, especially when proponents of Conrad's work argue that the book demonstrates the inhumanity of Europeans (in their cruelty in the book) more than that of Africans. Yet, as Achebe argues, Conrad did not invent the view of Africa or Africans as portrayed in the book, he simply used his talent to exploit the already unchallenged image of the continent: "reducing Africa to the role of props for

the break-up of one petty European mind” (Achebe 6). Critiques like Achebe’s are then taken out of the fictional context and taught to dismantle the colonial attitudes in the book. Yet subliminally, “the blank space on the map” idea still lingers—and so does the human nature of holding onto something, even long after our mind tells us to change.

From *Heart of Darkness*, to *Gone with the Wind*, to *Django Unchained*, some of the most popular media consumed at large—whether for critical, “educational” or entertainment purposes, contains the romanticism and fetishism of violence towards Black bodies. This is not to say that these histories should not be taught, but given the widespread learning through colonial perspectives and popularity of consuming these images of violence provides evidence for Afro-pessimism’s claims of society’s obsession with the consumption of violence towards Black people. In utilizing certain language that is reflective of this violent image, Afro-pessimism could be appropriated by the Western psyche if not approached cautiously.

3.5 Double Consciousness and Afro-Pessimism

Thomas and Emeagwali also critique Afro-pessimism for generalizing certain movements and theories and pushing certain ideas “aside”, so to speak. Thomas is right in his concern that the thinkers of this group could partly be too disconnected from society to throw away notions that many groups who have been subjugated still find useful. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement and its founders have clear roots in LGBTQ and feminist movements as well as advocating for socialist ideals that could be considered Marxist. They are still able to prioritize Black issues while keeping

relational ties towards these other marginalized subjectivities.⁵ That being said, work on Afro-pessimism (“Afro pessimism” ((unhyphenated))) continue to branch from the main doctrine in certain ways, addressing some of the critiques already addressed. In “Afro pessimism,” Lewis R. Gordon, Annie Menzel, George Shulman and Jasmine Syedullah begin by differentiating their “Afro pessimism” from the hyphenated “Afro-pessimism” of Wilderson and Douglass:

What Baldwin and Cullors make clear is that pessimism is most powerful as an unrelenting political process of coming back to life, beginning to feel one another’s humanity. What my students who are taking up the work of Afro-pessimism are in most need of new ways to put their pessimism to work, to come together and collectively counteract the mind-numbing soul-crushing isolation centuries of antiblack racism have waged on our humanity. We need not fear falling short. The more we “fail,” the stronger we rise to try again armed with the alchemy of despair. What we need are stories and speeches, and spaces that moves us from abjection toward that fertile ground of self-transformation one can only find in the witness of another. (113)

An entire premise of what is proposed by Wilderson and contemporaries is still present in the notion of “Afro pessimism” (unhyphenated): the presence of violence from Slavery is present. A difference between Afro pessimism and Afro-pessimism lies in the way that both movements are being used. Douglass and Wilderson radicalize the notion of

⁵ From the manifesto on blacklivesmatter.com: <https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe/>

pessimism in order to, in some ways, shock the reader into recognizing the dire need for political and social change. In doing so, they forgo the possibility of personal healing in favour of revolutionizing thought. In Scarry's description, the victim of violence is able to heal after going through various stages. To be more precise in the article "The Violence of Presence: metaphysics in a blackened world", three such stages are described:

a narrative progression from equilibrium to disequilibrium. And the first of two stages in the narrative progression holds forth the promise of a third stage: equilibrium restored; a closure stage--healing, or what we might call metaphysical renewal: the reinstatement of objects and their properties, space and time, cause and effect (121).

This description seems similar to understandings of trauma—despite the kinds or variations it is mainly a one-dimensional trajectory that leads to a place of healing. Douglass and Wilderson argue that a Black person does not go through these stages in terms of individual "experience". In "Afro pessimism" however, pessimism is used as a method of "self-transformation". In a sense, this is revolutionary by simply allowing the students to be "pessimistic" about the "soul-crushing isolation centuries of antiblack racism have waged". In Chapter One of the thesis, Sarah Ahmed's work "Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness" was taken up as an example of the way in which "happiness" and "multiculturalism" have become value systems enforced in capitalist societies. Ultimately these value systems attempt to force communities to experience their history and form an identity in a way that does not disturb the rest of society. "Pessimism", however, is not a value system that can be enforced. There is not a

goal that is necessarily achieved by despair but rather the possibility of what can organically arise, especially in a collective setting as suggested in “Afro pessimism”.

The authors of “Afro pessimism” describe themselves and their students as “armed with the alchemy of despair”. While keeping the same foundation as Wilderson and Douglass of an inherent presence of violence, the writing here reflects a closer connection to Du Bois. To describe the despair of the legacy of slavery as an “alchemy” is reflective of Du Bois using the term “Seventh Son” in his description of double consciousness: they both use metaphors of mythical elements (Du Bois 9). Both metaphors could take on two possible meanings. In the context we have been using thus far, the use of the idea of a magic or the supernatural implies the individual possessing a special ability, such as insight. In many cultures the goal of the “science” of alchemy was to turn metal into gold or to create an elixir of immortality. The idea of the “unrelenting political process of coming back to life, beginning to feel one another’s humanity” uses the language of this supernatural transformation. In light of the “social death”, a “coming back to life”, something Wilderson and Douglass claim cannot happen so long as the white supremacist paradigm of Humanism persists, it is possible the “alchemy of despair” is a way to (jokingly) refute their argument by miraculously overcoming this “impossibility”. However, there could too be a notion of cynicism in the use of these metaphors. The goals of alchemy were always out of reach no matter how many times they were pursued. The goals of antiracism similarly have yet to be reached and the authors may be noting that despite the progress made in self-transformation, systemic political change is necessary.

Double consciousness too can be read as a kind of despair, despite holding the divergent potential meaning as a “gift”. Thus far, I have mainly conflated the experience of double consciousness to a singular person—the alienation of that person, the objectification, to quote Gilroy their existence “inside and outside conventions” (Gilroy 73). Du Bois poses double consciousness in terms of a singular body in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “two warring ideals in one dark body” (9). Of course Du Bois is not literally referring to one singular body, or even necessarily a sole Black body, but analogizing (to borrow from Gilroy) a “diasporic or hemispheric, sometimes global and occasionally universalist” experience (Gilroy 127). Yet for a collective experience as adapted by thinkers such as Gilroy, Du Bois still emphasizes that it is the individual’s “dogged strength alone [that] keeps it from being torn asunder”, (the “it” referring to the body) which implies double consciousness is very much a solitary situation. (Du Bois 9). The solitude and collective elements of double consciousness are already expressed in various forms of expression by Black artists and thinkers. The article “Afro Pessimism” claims that a transformation can occur only in “the witness of another”. If this is so, more space could be created in the academic world (in the proper framework without falling into concerns previously discussed) that allow students to not only engage—but be armed with despair, pessimism and double consciousness, as is already being done by the writers of “Afro Pessimism”.

The idea of resignation was brought up earlier in regards to Murillo’s notion of a Black individual having “no life at all” and Fanon’s notion of “not existing”. It is also taken up in “Afro Pessimism” from Gordan, Menzal, Shulman and Syedulla in regards to Kierkegaard:

In existential terms, then, many ancestors of the African diaspora embodied what Søren Kierkegaard calls an existential paradox. All the evidence around them suggested failure and the futility of hope. They first had to make a movement of infinite resignation – that is, resigning themselves to their situation. Yet they must simultaneously act against that situation. Kierkegaard called this seemingly contradictory phenomenon “faith,” but that concept relates more to a relationship with a transcendent, absolute being, which could only be established by a “leap,” as there are no mediations or bridge. (109-110)

It is interesting that Kierkegaard also theorized the idea of a kind of “pessimism” in resignation. The contradiction of resigning oneself to the situation but also acting against it is similar to the way to the way Fanon expresses the contradiction of being considered morally inferior but also at the receiving end of violence (Fanon 174). As Fanon’s scenario ends in a kind of destruction, alluding to the idea that before the “leap” can be made structural political changes must be made. Fanon’s use of the sad fate of Bigger Thomas from *Native Son* can be used as an example of a “leap” without a bridge (Fanon 118). He implies in this scenario, the only action possible is the one that “answers the world’s expectations” (ibid). In other words, Bigger has the illusion of action, or the illusion of free will.

3.6 Richard Wright and Double Consciousness

In Chapter Two, I discussed Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in regards to the character of Bigger Thomas and the manifestation of double consciousness in affect and in Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks*. Certainly some of the book’s topics seem that they were meant to be read in an Afro-pessimistic light, such as the question of subjectivity and the role of

violence. I argue that Bigger does not “become” violent as the violence had already been present, and I believe Afro-pessimists would agree. Yet the subjectivity of Bigger demands a bigger question be asked of the implications of Afro-pessimism, and by default, of double consciousness. I already discussed the limitations to Bigger’s “freedom” in chapter Two, which seemed aligned with the idea of the “social death”. Now, using the figure of Richard Wright himself I will look further at how existentialism influenced him and his ideas on “freedom”—determining where double consciousness and freedom intersect.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy recounts Wright’s life, in a similar manner to the way he recounts Du Bois’ life. Like Du Bois, after achieving immense success in the United States after the publishing of his book, Wright traveled extensively, both to Europe and Africa. Also like Du Bois, Wright notes that his travels had a massive impact on his point of view, claiming, for example, that “[the] break from the U.S. was more than a geographical change. It was a break with my former attitudes” (Qtd in Gilroy 165). Describing how he was always occupied with thinking about the “problem” of Western society and the relation of Black people (and other people of colour) to it, Wright refers to the idea of double consciousness as a “dreadful objectivity” (he referred to it as “double vision” as well) (ibid). The realism of *Native Son* certainly depicts this dreadful objectivity with unadorned clarity.

Reading further into Wright’s life however, the ambiguity of his beliefs and extent of his influences are often overlooked. Wright was politically active as a Marxist while also being a sophisticated critic of Marxism. He explored a wide variety of European philosophers throughout his life and travels (159). In relation to modernity, Gilroy writes

that: “For Wright the decisive break in western consciousness which modernity identifies was defined by the collapse of a religious understanding of the world” (160). This definition of modernity does not directly relate the time period of modernity to Slavery as is done by Gilroy, however, it is notable that Wright looked back on understanding this time period.

One important figure that also influenced Wright was Kierkegaard. Gilroy retells, not something written by Wright on Kierkegaard, but rather a personal experience which potentially says more than any analysis. He recalls on page 159 a story where a man named C.L.R. James went to visit Wright and his family in France. James saw that Wright was reading many books by Kierkegaard, and claimed that everything he read in Kierkegaard he had already learned from experience (159). Gilroy goes on to explain:

James suggests that Wright’s apparently intuitive foreknowledge of the issues raised by Kierkegaard was not intuitive at all. It was an elementary product of his historical experiences as a black growing up in the United States between the wars: “What [Dick] was telling me was that he was a black man in the United States and that gave him an insight into what today is the universal opinion and attitude of the *modern* personality (emphasis added). (159)

Wright grew up during a time of great change in America; for himself personally, his childhood was defined by constantly moving across the South. It was here Wright was constantly facing obstacles and racism. In the late 1920s, he joined the “Great Migration” and moved to Chicago, joining many others who moved to mid-Western cities for better economic opportunities during this time. Moving to a big city may be what is referred to

as giving him an “insight...of the *modern* personality”. Kierkegaard’s idea of the “modern” stems from the loss of individuality and a move towards crowds and “sameness” (Kierkegaard 61). As mentioned, Wright was an active Marxist and Chicago was where he worked with a white communist group, serving likely his inspiration for the characters of Mary Dalton and Jan in *Native Son*. The idea of “sameness” comes out in Wright’s description of the city in *Native Son* and may be inspired by Wright’s time there. For Bigger, the city is not a place of opportunity and excitement, he walks around seeing the city described by Wright as cold, grey walls, the same white faces on build boards, “mechanical” (Wright 14-15). Wright, whether intentionally or not took a “leap of faith” in a Kierkegaardian sense. While he struggled with his own image of West, he decided to act by moving move abroad.

In his writings on double consciousness, Wright’s “black subject is internally divided by cultured affiliation, citizenship, and the demands of national and racial identity” (161). To Gilroy, this demonstrates a difference from Du Bois’ original idea because Wright focuses more on “unconscious aspects” rather than then Du Bois’ idea of “two warring souls in one black body” (161). That being said, inspired by Nietzsche, Gilroy believes that Wright’s conception of “double consciousness” or “double vision” (without considering it purely hindrance or advantage) was similar to Du Bois’ in the idea of “perspectival ways of knowing” (161). Furthermore, Wright also used the idea of doubling or doubleness to describe a “splitting process” (162). However in both his personal journey to know himself along with his challenges to reconcile his views he came to see black consciousness in neither a necessarily “pessimistic” or “optimistic” way:

In Wright's mature position, [black people are] no longer just America's metaphor but as a central symbol in the psychological, cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole. (159)

Though highlighting the specific position in this quote of blackness, he is inclusive-- he connects the United States with the broader network of nations with roots this history. Like Afro-pessimists, Du Bois, Gilroy, and Fanon, though taking different routes, each take on different modes of thought that recentralizes Black folks into a grand narrative. The controversy and discussion about Afro-pessimism (and Afro pessimism) will surely evolve in the upcoming years. The reader may agree or not agree with the situating of subjectivities (or lack of) and use of language in this movement, or feel it is not their position to comment. Gilroy showed—carefully—how understanding of modernity and post modernity is largely based on the cognitive dissonance of the erasure of Black culture and history, and most importantly Black lives. The pain and injustice of this history is still very much present. So, the irreverence, urgency and abrasiveness built into the tone of Afro-pessimism, while not taken well by some, is understandable. Relating this movement to figures such as Wright and Du Bois is important to maintain historical foundations rooted fully in the history of the system of slavery and racial dynamics in the America, but also a wider global perspective. The spirit and poetry from these authors can help guide the academic community (and wider society) as it interrogates its own systemic racism. It is also important, however, to relate Du Bois' double consciousness to the Afro-pessimist movement (or other movements for that matter) not only as a tool. The gift of “double consciousness” that Du Bois passed on contests the postmodern tenet that that grand narratives can no longer exist.

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