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# The New White Moderate: Bearing Witness to the Differend of Race

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# **The New White Moderate: Bearing Witness to the Differend of Race**

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Ethan T. Ashley



I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.

-Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

## **Introduction:**

While the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were written nearly 60 years ago, his address to the white moderate holds true today. The white moderate persists today, perpetuating a history of racialized difference that transcends generations. We cannot underestimate the role that the white moderate plays in today's world and the role that he may play in striving towards justice. This analysis is aimed at beginning to understand what lies at the root of this condition and in what ways we may begin to change it and help others to do the same. Where does one begin? How does one begin? What tools are there to work with? Generations of writers, philosophers, psychologists, and academics, serve as evidence of how whiteness bleeds into thought, constructing the social and cultural contexts in which it appears. Yet, what preserves these contexts? What preserves a social context that privileges white skin? These contexts are preserved by a systemic ignorance of difference between white subjects and subjects of color, particularly black subjects. For this reason, it is imperative that we first understand what this difference is before we can even hope to learn how to recognize it, bear witness to it, and ultimately bring consciousness to the unconscious behaviors that contribute to its persistence. For this reason, this investigation is aimed first and foremost at articulating an underlying dynamic of social interactions between black and white subjects that has stoked fires of injustice throughout generations.

This investigation will begin by drawing upon the work of Frantz Fanon in his text *Black Skin, White Masks*. Born in the 1925 on the island of Martinique, then a colony of France,



Fanon's first work *Black Skin, White Masks* provides an account of the lived experience of a black subject launched into a world dominated by whiteness. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon advances an understanding of racial difference that is constituted by underlying mechanisms of language and embodiment. Consequently, in order to further examine the processes contributing to this difference between races, we must adopt a framework that allows for both philosophers of language and phenomenologists to engage in dialogue and discourse. While these respective categories of philosophical inquiry are often divided, I will argue that a dialogue between the two is essential to exploring how Fanon understands racial difference. In particular, I will draw from the works of Jean-François Lyotard in the philosophy of language and the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in phenomenology. In his text *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Lyotard provides an understanding of difference constituted purely by discursive language. For Lyotard, incommensurable difference between subjects is born from a conflict between phrases and what he calls "phrase universes." On the other hand, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty presents a theory of embodiment from which any and all human interaction takes place. Consequently, difference for Merleau-Ponty is constituted through perception of the body and one's own embodiment. While both Lyotard and Merleau-Ponty present understandings of difference through subjectivity that stem from differing points of agency, language and the body, respectively, I will argue that both are necessarily in play in Fanon's understanding of racial difference. Moreover, by placing both understandings of difference in dialogue with one another, we can begin to clarify racialized difference and move towards a stronger understanding of the context in which the white moderate appears. We will then move towards an application of this framework of racial difference propagated through

discourse and embodiment to issues of race and racism in the United States through the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me*. Ultimately, Coates' text draws an implicit connection between conflicts of race propagated through both discourse and embodiment and the normalization of violence against black bodies in the United States. Through this analysis, we may hope to move towards an understanding of how the acts of listening, recognizing, and bringing oneself to an increased consciousness of how the words they use and their unconscious perception of Others perpetuates a social context that normalizes violence on black bodies. In doing so, we may begin to take the first steps towards confronting the condition of the white moderate that the Dr. King identifies.



## Chapter 1: Black Existence

### 1. Fanon on Black Existence:

We must begin where Fanon begins: by examining the existence of a black subject in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon begins by declaring that “the black is not a man”<sup>1</sup> but rather “the black is a black man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated.”<sup>2</sup> In this moment, Fanon announces an entirely different understanding of existence or “being-in-the-world” that applies to the case of the black subject as opposed to that of the white subject. The world in which the black man finds himself is not one that he has created but rather one that has been created *for him*. As the black subject enters a white world, he begins to realize that this world has already determined categories of his existence. The black subject is confronted with a preconceived notion of his identity that he has played no part in constructing and from which he is tasked with shaping his own existence. Yet, in order to do so, Fanon understands that the black subject must first be “extricated” from this situation. This effort of extrication is linked to Fanon’s realization of two important facts: that “white men consider themselves superior to black men” and that “black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect.”<sup>3</sup> The act of extrication is not exclusive to black subjects but equally applies to white subjects. Extrication from a sentiment of superiority toward black subjects becomes an objective

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto-Press, 2008. P. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, P. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

for the white man in Fanon's view. Yet, in order for the white subject to begin to extricate himself from his ingrained superiority, he must first come to understand the situation of the black subject.

Ultimately, the task that Fanon lays out in his introduction is recognizing how one's own existence is different from another's. For the black subject who enters the white world, he or she becomes immediately aware of their own existence as different than the white subject's by way of their skin color. On the contrary, the white subject remains unaware of his existence through his skin color because the society he inhabits privileges and normalizes white skin. If this moment of extrication that Fanon envisions applies to both white and black subjects, we may see that both play a role in perpetuating racialized difference. Fanon's text illuminates the lived experience of the black subject entering the white world. By extricating oneself from these preconceived categories of existence, the black subject may begin to grasp "a zone of nonbeing," as Fanon continues, "an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity."<sup>4</sup> Yet within this zone of non-being, Fanon identifies a space in which "an authentic upheaval can be born" for the black subject.<sup>5</sup> By entering this zone of non-being, the black subject may begin to formulate an authentic existence that is independent of the predetermined existence created for him by white subjects. In this way, Fanon introduces a new understanding of black existence.

Although Fanon uses the vocabulary of Sartrean existentialism, he provides a counterexample to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy as presented in his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Fanon does so not in an attempt to assimilate the existence of the black subject into that of the existential subject, the white subject, but rather as a means of highlighting the

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<sup>4</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. P. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. P. 3.

differences between existence as a black and existence as a white. In this way, Fanon separates the lived experience of the black subject from that of the white subject in order to move “toward a new humanism.”<sup>6</sup> This new humanism operates in contrast to the humanism advanced by Sartre’s existentialism. In order to move toward this new humanism, Fanon sees that we must first accept that there are “two camps... the white and the black.”<sup>7</sup> Fanon’s division here between “the white” and “the black” is important to note, for both camps retain their respective subjectivity but remain divided. Here, Fanon is not talking about race and racial difference as an element that is external to individuals but rather internal and within the boundaries of an individual’s subjectivity. Racial difference is not derived outside of the black or white subject but rather from the case of their interactions with one-another. The white subject is “sealed in his whiteness” while the black subject remains “sealed in his blackness.”<sup>8</sup> Subjects who are sealed in their respective whiteness or blackness and perceive their own race and the race of others begin to come to an understanding of racial difference naturally. Yet, in a world that privileges the white race, self-reflection of one’s race is seldom accomplished by white subjects. Such is the case for Sartre’s understanding of existence.

Sartrean existentialism reveals that one’s existence precedes one’s essence.<sup>9</sup> This entails that all humans are projects capable of choosing for themselves what they will become and thereby constantly defining and redefining their own unique essence. This fundamental relationship between one’s *existence* and one’s *essence* is what grounds the concepts that form the foundation of Sartrean existentialism including responsibility, bad faith, anguish, nausea, and

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<sup>6</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. P.1

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P.2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P.3

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Yale University Press, 2007. P. 20.

facticity. As man recognizes that he may choose for himself what he will be, he becomes totally responsible for what he is and what he becomes: “If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.”<sup>10</sup> Existentialism affords man with the formative opportunity to become aware of himself and his ability to choose and define his essence. In doing so, it places man in a role of radical responsibility and freedom to choose. Yet, Sartre fails to recognize that this form of complete and total responsibility for oneself is a privilege exclusive to white subjects.

If we juxtapose Sartrean existentialism with Fanon’s understanding of the lived-experience of the black subject, we see a reversal of Sartre’s existential condition. The black subject finds himself in a world filled with white subjects who have already decided what he is and what he may become; a world from which he must be extricated. For the black subject who enters into a world dominated by white subjects, his essence is pre-defined; it *precedes* existence. The black subject that Fanon examines is one who is forced to adopt a predetermined essence in order to exist and to be seen in a world dominated by whites: “Yes, the black man is supposed to be a good nigger; once this has been laid down, the rest follows of itself. To make him talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an *appearance* for which he is not responsible.”<sup>11</sup> For Fanon, the black subject is not only denied the opportunity to choose his own essence but rather that essence has already been defined, created, and fixed for him by the white world. The black subject is faced

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<sup>10</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, P. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, P. 22

with two options: aspiring to make himself white or to adhering to a preconceived of black essence developed over centuries of racialized oppression at the hands of white subjects. Either choice divests the black subject of becoming truly responsible for himself in the white world as Sartre would envision. In fact, as Fanon demonstrates in a later chapter entitled “The Fact of Blackness,” the black subject is faced with becoming responsible for an entirely different set of elements:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’”.<sup>12</sup>

While these characteristics that factor into the colonial identity of black subjects play an important role in the négritude movement, they are nonetheless created and perpetuated by white occidental society. Fanon thus exposes how Sartre’s understanding of existential responsibility and freedom does not apply to the case of the black subject but rather remains exclusive to white subjects. Instead of being responsible for himself and free to become what he will become, Fanon is confronted first with a responsibility for an identity derived through a unique colonial image of the black subject. This predetermination manifests itself through the recurring images that Fanon invokes of “tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.” Sartrean existentialism ultimately fails to adequately account for these quotidian realities of blackness that circumscribe freedom for blacks.

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<sup>12</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, P. 85-6.



## 2. Existence as a Black Subject:

Fanon's use of the existential lexicon in *Black Skin, White Masks* operates not as a way of assimilating the existence of the black subject into Sartrean existentialism but rather one of distinguishing the existence of the black subject as different from that of the existential white subject. For example, Fanon employs the term "nausea," which plays an essential role in Sartre's work. For Sartre, the existential subject may experience a sense of nausea as he begins to realize his body for *himself*. Sartre identifies this sentiment of nausea in his text *Being and Nothingness* as he describes "a dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Fanon uses "nausea" to describe the moment of realizing that his existence is for someone other than himself. Fanon relates this understanding of being to Sartre's vision of the three-fold being, namely *being-for-itself*, *being-in-itself*, and *being-for-others*. As Fanon describes: "I existed in triplicate; I was occupying space. I moved towards the other... And the evanescent other, hostile, yet not opaque, transparent, absent, disappeared. Nausea."<sup>14</sup> Yet in this moment, which takes place as Fanon sees himself being seen by the gaze of white subjects, a different understanding of "nausea" is expressed for the black subject as his body is revealed not to his own consciousness but rather to that of the Other's; the white's. The term "nausea" for Fanon indicates something different than that of Sartrean existentialism. More specifically, it indicates a confrontation with the limits of his freedom to choose whom he chooses to be. Nausea ascribes a stereotype, and essence to Fanon's existence

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<sup>13</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1999. P. 338.

<sup>14</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, P. 84.

instead of allowing him to do so himself. The same difference of can be applied to the existential notion of anguish.

Existentialism is equally founded upon a sentiment of anguish. As Sartre understands, humans experience anguish when faced with the extent of their responsibility to choose. “When a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.”<sup>15</sup> Man is thus constituted by anguish as he becomes aware of his “complete and profound responsibility” to choose. Our ability to choose, as Sartre envisions, is unlimited. Anguish becomes a formative experience associated with a subject’s recognition or *prise de conscience* of himself and his radical freedom to choose not only for themselves but for all of mankind. Yet, when placed next to Fanon’s understanding of black existence, we can begin to see how existential anguish fails to characterize the black subject.

As Fanon shows us, the black subject is divested of the means of even reaching such a point of anguish in face of radical freedom to choose. For the black subject, as Fanon describes, there is only one choice and one destiny and it has already been determined by the white world. Sartrean anguish cannot therefore be applied to the case of the black subject who is finds himself immediately responsible for his “body,” “race,” and “ancestors,” for these responsibilities are not derived internally from the black subject but rather externally through a history of oppression at the hands of white subjects. Black existence comes with a different set of responsibilities that

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<sup>15</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, P. 25.

place a limit on the freedom of the black subject. Fanon's analysis is not the assimilation of the lived black experience into existentialism but rather a unique departure from it.

Robert Bernasconi's clarifies this departure by demonstrating the fundamental difference that lies behind both Sartre and Fanon's work: the facticity of their respective races. While Fanon "endorses the Sartrean framework of facticity and transcendence,"<sup>16</sup> it is important to recognize that this framework is entirely different for the black subject. As Bernasconi clarifies: "The situation is such that the facticity of race presents itself differently to blacks than to whites. This means that the application to black experience of an ontology based on the white experience of the body proved fallacious."<sup>17</sup> Sartre's existentialism extends from a reference point of his own lived experience, the experience of a white body. Its application to the case of the lived experience in a black body is ultimately "fallacious" as Bernasconi highlights. While existentialism may purport to articulate fundamental conditions of human existence, it would be naive to believe that these conditions remain the same for all humans regardless of race, gender, or sexuality. As a result, we can begin to isolate a fundamental shortcoming of Sartre's, namely his inability to account for his own whiteness in his doctrine of existentialism. Sartre's existentialism is blind to this fact. Despite being a supporter of the *négritude* movement and the anti-colonial struggle, he does not address the fact that his doctrine of existentialism accounts for a purely white existence. This same blindness to which Fanon responds in *Black Skin, White Masks* comes to the foreground in Sartre's "Black Orpheus." In this text, Jean-Paul Sartre

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<sup>16</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. "On Needing Not to Know and Forgetting What One Never Knew: The Epistemology of Ignorance in Fanon's Critique of Sartre." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 231-39. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. P. 236.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

explicitly discusses the issue of race and racialized difference, particularly in the case of the colonised black subject. However, Sartre does so by addressing an exclusively white audience. The controversy that this piece of writing initiates between Sartre and Fanon both clarifies this fundamental shortcoming of Sartre and invites a critical discussion of whiteness.

### **3. The Blindness of Sartre's Existentialism:**

Sartre's "Black Orpheus" was published in 1948 as an introduction to an anthology of African and West-Indian poets edited by Leopold Sédar-Senghor. It remains one of the only pieces of writing in which Sartre addresses the subject of race directly. Yet, for Sartre, existentialism need not concern itself with differences of race and ethnicity but rather overcomes them by articulating a fundamental condition of human existence in which all humans, regardless of color, find themselves. He fails to recognize, however, that this vision of human existence is inextricably white. Returning to Bernasconi, if "the facticity of race presents itself differently to blacks than to whites," it is clear that Sartre's whiteness is not factoring *explicitly* into his existentialism but nonetheless *implicitly* frames it. As Fanon shows us, black subjects cannot simply neglect their race and focus on their primordial condition as humans because they are launched into an environment that has a history of denying them of the very condition of their humanity. White subjects, on the other hand, are not born into such a condition. Nonetheless, Sartre remains unaware of the ways in which his philosophy is built upon this blindness to the facticity of his whiteness. As Sartre portrays the condition of the black subject nearly mirroring Fanon's later introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, he fails to recognize the inherent contradictions that this description poses to his existentialism:

The black man is a victim of it [oppression] *because he is a black man* and insofar as he is a colonized native or a deported African. And since he is oppressed within the confines of his race and because of it, he must first of all become conscious of his race. He must oblige those who have vainly tried throughout the centuries to reduce him to the status of a beast, to recognize that he is a man.<sup>18</sup>

As Sartre illustrates the black subject “oppressed within the confines of his race,” he fails to recognize that this oppression is precisely what constitutes an existence as a black subject that is altogether different than that of the white subject’s. How could one expect a subject who must first and foremost become “conscious of his race” in order to “oblige those who have vainly tried throughout the centuries to reduce him to the status of a beast” to instantly become aware of his radical liberty to choose his own essence? This dilemma remains unanswered by Sartre’s existentialism for it does not account for differences of race but purports a means of moving *past* or rather *through* racial difference. Instead of accounting for racial difference, existentialism aims at *overcoming* it. In this way, while Sartre attempts to address the situation of the black subject in his “Black Orpheus,” he does so at the expense of reaffirming the same framework that perpetuates racialized difference.

Sartre begins by making an address to his white readers as he writes: “If we [white subjects] want to crack open this finitude which imprisons us, we can no longer rely on the privileges of our [white] race, or our color, or our technics: we will not be able to become a part of the totality from which those black eyes exile us, unless we tear off our white tights in order to try simply to be men.”<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that Sartre self-identifies here as a white subject, reinvoking his white subjectivity and the gaze that it entails. The image that Sartre constructs of

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<sup>18</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, and John MacCombie. "Black Orpheus." *The Massachusetts Review* 6, no. 1 (1964). P.18.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, "Black Orpheus." P.15.

being able to “tear off [one’s] white tights” and strip away one’s whiteness is inherently sealed in a veil of whiteness. To posit that one can, in fact, strip away the boundaries of one’s race requires a privilege only known to white subjects, namely the privilege and normalization of white skin. For the white subject, consciousness of one’s race *can* be turned on and off at will. More precisely, the white subject is not once defined by his race. The white subject’s identity as a “white” is only an afterthought. In contrast, Fanon’s text demonstrates how the black subject cannot simply “tear off his black tights,” for the world he inhabits necessitates a self-awareness of his skin color in order to be seen as a subject in the world. In this sense, the black subject retains a certain subjectivity in the world world through the facticity of their skin color and the predetermined identity it entails. In order to exist within this white world, the black subject has been forced to embrace the facticity of their race. The possibility of stripping this away is thus unimaginable. However, Sartre continues to insist upon the notion of a “totality” among men in which barriers of race and embodiment are absolved. Such a totality remains nothing but an ideal for both authors. While a raceless society functions into the thought of both Fanon and Sartre, its implications are very different for the white subject than for the black subject. For Fanon, race will continue to remain a component of society and communities for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, this same ignorance that allows Sartre to posit a “totality” devoid of barriers of race persists in the background of his “Black Orpheus” and more broadly his existentialism.

As Sartre continues to probe the situation of the black subject in his “Black Orpheus,” he makes a fundamental mistake of comparing the *négritude* movement with that of a “Universal History,”<sup>20</sup> namely that of a Marxist dialectic of human history towards communism. Through

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<sup>20</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, and John MacCombie. "Black Orpheus." P. 47.

this comparison and the conflict it provokes between Fanon and Sartre, we can observe how Sartre's work begins to uncover the underlying implications of his whiteness:

But there is something even more important in it: the negro himself, we have said, creates a kind of anti-racist racism. He wishes in no way to dominate the world: he desires the abolition of all kinds of ethnic privileges; he asserts his solidarity with the oppressed of every color. After that, the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of negritude "passes," as Hegel says, into that which one has of the proletariat: objective, positive and precise.<sup>21</sup>

In this instance, Sartre reduces the negritude movement by demonstrating how it functions as merely a step in the progression towards the proletariat. For Sartre, *négritude* is simply a step in a "dialectical progression" towards a larger "synthesis or realization of the human being in a raceless society."<sup>22</sup> This moment demonstrates the greatest affront that Sartre delivers to future generations of black subjects by relativizing the *négritude* movement and the struggle of the black subject into a larger historical progression. Sartre uses his opportunity to introduce an anthology of black poets to instead demonstrate how the "subjective, existential, ethnic notion of negritude" that their words represent is nothing more than a passage towards that of the "proletariat: objective, positive, and precise." Fanon's response to Sartre exposes the damaging impacts of this passage:

When I read that passage I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance. I said to my friends, "The Generation of younger black poets has just suffered a blow that can never be forgiven." Help had been sought from a friend of the colored peoples, and that friend had found no better response than to point out the relativity of what they were doing.<sup>23</sup>

The feeling that Fanon expresses of being "robbed of [his] last chance" in this moment is particularly unique. Throughout the chapter entitled "The Fact of Blackness," Fanon engages in a

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<sup>21</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, and John MacCombie. "Black Orpheus." P. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, P. 102.

project of attempting to find himself. By analyzing the words of Césaire, Senghor, and other black writers engaged in the *négritude* movement, Fanon attempts to locate his essence within the predominantly white world of the French metropole. Yet, at the moment that he felt that he had successfully reclaimed his essence through *négritude*, “it was snatched away from [him].”<sup>24</sup> As a result, the “last chance” that Fanon describes in this passage was his last chance to locate himself and his essence in the world. Sartre is unable to recognize the impact that his reduction of *négritude* has on Fanon and black subjects everywhere who are also engaging in the process of self-location through the *négritude* movement. Simultaneously, Fanon’s response to Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” appears to operate at a deeply personal level as if Sartre, a contemporary of Fanon’s, had in some way betrayed him. In a way, Sartre had done wrong by Fanon by countering his “reason with ‘real reason’”<sup>25</sup>; by attempting to reconcile the voices of the black subject into the larger project of existentialism and Marxism. The preconditions that permit Sartre to attempt one such reconciliation call upon further analysis.

“Black Orpheus” demonstrates that Sartre is unable to recognize the boundaries of his own whiteness and how they affect his thought and work. Sartre remains, as Fanon relates, inextricably “sealed in his whiteness.” By comparing the colonized black subject to the lower class white worker, Sartre understands class struggle and issues of race as intrinsically linked and in dialogue with one-another. Yet, in making this reduction, Sartre ultimately *silences* the voices of the black poets he aims to introduce by rendering the subjective, existential, and ethnic notion that their words cultivate inauthentic. Sartre remains unaware of the “blow” that he has just delivered to “the generation of young black poets.” While Sartre attempts to probe the question

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<sup>24</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, P. 101.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



of racialized difference in this moment, he is only able to do so through a lens that remains entrenched in his own whiteness.

Sartre's blindness to the facticity of his own whiteness bleeds into his existentialism. Fanon targets Sartre's existential project in his response to his "Black Orpheus" as he argues poignantly that "without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned. Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man."<sup>26</sup> Fanon's opposition to Sartre's analysis in "Black Orpheus" demonstrates how the parameters of temporality which characterizes the white existential subject also fail to apply to the black subject. Fanon unroots an underlying ignorance of Sartre and his existentialism, namely that it is a philosophical doctrine created by and for white men exclusively. For this reason, the "suffering" of the black subject is indeed different than that of the white existential subject. Sartre's blindness in his "Black Orpheus," which exposes his ignorance of this fundamental difference between subjects, pulls the carpet out from under the feet of Fanon.

#### **4. Sartre's White Ignorance:**

Jane Hiddleston argues that Sartre's "Black Orpheus" does, in fact, offer important insight into the *négritude* movement. Her reading of Sartre uncovers his intention to aid the *négritude* movement by placing it under the philosophical microscope of authenticity and bad faith. By recognizing "the ambivalence of 'Black Orpheus'" as "a crucial part of its critical

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<sup>26</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, P.106.

strategy,”<sup>27</sup> Hiddleston openly acknowledging how Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” can be read with “both veneration and critique of the *négritude* movement.”<sup>28</sup> Both angles clarify the way Fanon reads Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” and what elements provoke his sharp reaction to this piece of writing. While Sartre recognizes the importance of reclaiming an authentic black identity to the *négritude* movement, Hiddleston shows how Sartre does not hold the *négritude* movement to have done so adequately. For Sartre, “*négritude*’s ‘authenticity’, then, is in fact an invention that serves as a riposte to colonial constructions of black identity but cannot represent an origin or an essence.”<sup>29</sup> Yet, as Fanon shows us, existence as a black subject is entirely different than that of the white. The black subject is not the same existential subject that Sartre understands. While Sartre may find *négritude*’s “use of African rhythms as opposed to European, and its insertion of terms from indigenous languages” as inauthentic and even a “riposte to colonial constructions of black identity,” he fails to acknowledge that he is not in a position to determine what *is* and what *is not* authentic black identity.

Sartre’s attempt to aid and critique the *négritude* movement in “Black Orpheus” is based upon the concepts that ground his ontology and his existentialism, two philosophical frameworks grounded in his own whiteness. The *négritude* movement has chosen to reclaim elements of colonial identity as their own. The black subject who finds himself in the white world has been forced to adhere to a predetermined identity in order to simply exist as a subject. *Négritude* is a movement away from this process by reclaiming certain elements of African identity by black subjects for *themselves* rather than for others, namely whites. The origins of these elements in

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<sup>27</sup> Hiddleston, Jane. "Dialectic or Dissemination? Anti-colonial Critique in Sartre and Derrida." *Sartre Studies International* 12, no. 1 (2006): 33-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23511222>. P. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Hiddleston, Jane. "Dialectic or Dissemination." P. 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 38.

colonialism or otherwise does not matter. More importantly, Fanon demonstrates that the black subject has never been provided with the occasion to create his own unique identity. This act of reclamation is the first step towards carving out one such occasion. Yet, Sartre fails to recognize that classifying elements of black identity such as “African rhythms” and “indigenous languages” as inauthentic handicaps the *négritude* movement. Additionally, these elements of black identity are particularly complicated in the case of Fanon because he was not African but rather West-Indian. Moreover, Fanon’s native language was French. Regardless of these facts, Fanon was still associated these elements of black identity derived from colonial Africa when he moved to France and attempted to reclaim them as his own through the *négritude* movement. These factors further alienate Fanon from Sartre’s reduction of *négritude* to the Marxist dialectical progression towards communism, placing him in a double bind. On one hand, by not reclaiming these elements, Fanon finds himself forced to create new ones in a world that denies him the very possibility of doing so, posing an equal if not greater risk to authentic identity. On the other hand, in reclaiming these elements, Sartre asserts here that they are innately inauthentic or in “bad faith” and a threat to the advancement of an authentic black identity and the *négritude* movement at large:

A reading of ‘Orphée noir’ that takes account of Sartrean concepts of the disordered freedom and contingency of the *pour-soi* would stress that he is attempting to prevent *négritude* from slipping into bad faith, into a category that would betray the very creativity and invention it promotes.<sup>30</sup>

Again, Hiddleston demonstrates Sartre’s critique is derived from concepts that ground his own philosophy, one that is “sealed in whiteness.” While this is fallacious in its own right, what is more important and more interesting is a discussion of what exactly allows Sartre to insist upon a

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<sup>30</sup> Hiddleston, Jane. "Dialectic or Dissemination." P. 49,

critique of *négritude* based on his own philosophical doctrine. Instead of listening to the theoretical framework advanced by the *négritude* movement and its members he decides to superimpose his own even though he was never asked to. Sartre is wholly unaware of the damaging effects that such a critique poses to the voices of the black poets published in this anthology. In reducing the *négritude* movement and transitively the voices and lived experiences of the black poets he is supposedly introducing, Sartre unwittingly re-invokes his own white gaze and the superiority of all white subjects with whom he identifies. This is apparent from the first lines of “Black Orpheus”:

When you removed the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut, what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praises? Did you think that when they raised themselves up again, you would read adoration in the eyes of these heads that our fathers had forced to bend down to the very ground? Here are black men standing, looking at us, and I hope that you --- like me --- will feel the shock of being seen.<sup>31</sup>

Sartre not only addresses a strictly white audience in these first lines but openly acknowledges a history of white superiority that has prevailed over the voices of black subjects. He equally acknowledges that whites are not seen in the same way that blacks are. In other words, white subjects never experience the feeling of being seen by the Other. Yet, instead of calling upon his white readers to listen to the words of the black poets in this anthology, he uses this opportunity to advance his own thoughts about the *négritude* movement. While Hiddleston clarifies the non-malicious intentions of Sartre’s “Black Orpheus,” she fails to confront the preconditions that make Sartre’s critique of *négritude* controversial, namely his ignorance of his whiteness.

While Hiddleston uncovers an important reading of Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” that operates “not as a rejection of the open-ended potentiality of *négritude*, but precisely as a

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<sup>31</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, and John MacCombie. "Black Orpheus." P. 13.

warning that the movement must not at any stage become closed, completed or, indeed, too clearly defined”<sup>32</sup> it does not matter if Sartre is correct or incorrect about the négritude movement. What matters is the fact that he felt as if he was in a position to write such a critique in the first place. While Sartre sees himself as an aid to the négritude movement, he does not account for the possibility that his thoughts and consciousness are both sealed within his whiteness. For this reason, Fanon’s critique is indeed warranted for he demonstrates Sartre’s failure to first listen to the voices of the black poets rather than critiquing them through the lens of his own philosophical doctrine. Simply put, Sartre fails to recognize that existence as a black subject is altogether different than existentialism as Lewis Gordon clarifies in his text *What Fanon Said*.

Gordon’s reading of “Black Orpheus” addresses how Sartre reduces the négritude movement to that of Marxism. Contrary to Hiddleston, Lewis Gordon confronts how Sartre’s critique ultimately advises the black subject to accept his condition; a “condition as that of the cripple,” referencing Fanon’s own metaphor.<sup>33</sup> Gordon begins his analysis of “Black Orpheus” by examining the way in which Sartre universalizes the condition of the black subject. As Gordon writes: “From the negative moment that Négritude manifested—descended—the nègre could then ‘ascend’ to a universal, revolutionary consciousness, which, Sartre argues, was the (objective) ‘universal’ struggle of the proletariat, in a word, Marxism.”<sup>34</sup> In this act, Sartre’s “blow” is administered, for Sartre is unable to recognize that by drawing the comparison between the négritude movement and Marxism, he effectively universalizes or reduces négritude

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<sup>32</sup> Hiddleston, Jane. "Dialectic or Dissemination." P. 43.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon, Lewis R. *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015. P. 57.

<sup>34</sup> Gordon, Lewis R. *What Fanon Said*. P. 57.

into a larger, predominantly white movement. In reducing the case of the black subject in this way, Sartre reminds Fanon that his “effort was only a term in the dialectic.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, as Gordon demonstrates, “what Sartre didn’t understand was that he was in effect counseling the death of blackness through eventual absorption into the light of whiteness.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, Gordon’s analysis is directed towards uncovering what Sartre didn’t understand in making his critique of *négritude* rather than its overall objective. Sartre’s unawareness of what his critique entails and what his the facticity of his own whiteness affords him invites a discussion of whiteness.

Gordon’s analysis opens the door to a discussion of critical whiteness by highlighting Sartre’s failure to “understand” the death sentence he is administering to the *négritude* movement. While Hiddleston’s analysis of Sartre presents a reading of “Black Orpheus” that uncovers his intentions to support the *négritude* movement, this reading cannot overcome the damage it inflicts on black identity. As Gordon illustrates: “Fanon ultimately compares Sartre’s counsel to be at best that of a man who advises the *nègre* to accept his condition as that of the cripple.”<sup>37</sup> Gordon is referring to a passage in *Black Skin, White Masks* in which Fanon describes an interaction with a Pacific war veteran who advises another black man to “resign [himself] to [his] color the way I got used to my stump; we’re both victims.”<sup>38</sup> As Gordon argues, Fanon’s reaction to Sartre’s critique here is not only warranted but necessary for “how could one accept such absence when the correlate of the missing limb, the phantom element that haunts the body, is one’s humanity?”<sup>39</sup> Gordon draws an important link between the black subject’s “color,” or

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<sup>35</sup> Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. P. 101.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon. *What Fanon Said*. P. 57.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* P. 58.

<sup>38</sup> Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. P. 107.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon. *What Fanon Said*. P. 58.

rather that “phantom element [which] haunts the body” and his “humanity.” In drawing the comparison between the *négritude* movement and Marxism, Sartre is asking the black subject to accept an incomplete humanity. While both Hiddleston and Gordon help clarify Sartre’s blindness to the facticity of his own whiteness, his ignorance to the superiority that his whiteness affords remains to be discussed.

Robert Bernasconi identifies Sartre’s primary shortcoming in his “Black Orpheus,” namely a sense of superiority that accompanies ignorance of the facticity of his whiteness. As Bernasconi describes: “[Sartre] had forgotten his own ignorance and he had forgotten too that pervasive sense of ignorance that often accompanies action.”<sup>40</sup> Simply put, Sartre “claimed he had more knowledge than they did, even though they [the black poets] knew the situation, as he did not, from the inside.”<sup>41</sup> In “claiming that he had more knowledge than [the black poets] did,” Sartre reaffirms the stark veil of whiteness that even he cannot overcome by failing to listen to the black poets instead of speaking for them. This represents an important mechanism that continues to actively perpetuate the condition of the white superiority. While Sartre may have believed that he could help the situation of the black subject as a white subject, he does not recognize unaware of the superiority that this desire to “help” implies. As Bernasconi highlights, “Fanon was more concerned with the way Sartre said what he said, the position he occupied, and the fact that he, a white man, was the one saying it... Sartre was not altogether wrong, but he was wrong to say it as he said it because he was white.”<sup>42</sup> While Sartre’s perspective on *négritude* may indeed have value and significant importance to the longevity of the movement itself, any

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<sup>40</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. "On Needing Not to Know and Forgetting What One Never Knew." P. 232.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 236.

piece of writing he conducts automatically “reinscribes his white gaze.” In reducing the anthology of black poetry that he was supposed to be introducing, Sartre’s critique is operating equally on two levels: on one level, his philosophical critique carries implications for the *négritude* movement that place it in a double bind and ultimately administer its “death sentence” as Gordon understands. On another level, his critique is a reinscription of whiteness that both operates on its own level, altering the nature of any philosophical critique he may make. Therefore, it is impossible to approach Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” critically and ignore the effect that Sartre’s whiteness has on his writing and its reception by Fanon.

Sartre’s “Black Orpheus” affirms an insurmountable reality of whiteness that operates in the foreground of Dr. King’s understanding of the white moderate, leading him to inaction rather than action; silence rather than voice; order rather than justice. Sartre’s work aims at achieving action, voice, and justice. Yet, it categorically reinscribes a white gaze that overcomes any philosophical or theoretical value it offers to *négritude*. We are then left with the question of what, if anything, Sartre should have written in his “Black Orpheus.” By deciding not to speak out, the white moderate feels as if he is mitigating any risk his white gaze might pose to the advancement of black identity. Yet, Dr. King shows us that this trend only results in injustice and a “negative peace.” We are then confronted with the dilemma of what can be done? What type of action by the white moderate helps the situation of the black subject while not reinscribing white superiority? Is there any such action? While Sartre’s mistake here is multi-faceted, it begins with his inability to reflect on his own whiteness and what it entails. What should Sartre have done instead of proceeding with his reduction of *négritude*? The answer, can be explored through Ralph Ellison’s critique of Hannah Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock” published in 1957.



Bernasconi discusses Ellison's critique, which functions as a foil to the conflict between Fanon and Sartre, as he writes:

What makes this example so telling is that Hannah Arendt, who had suffered persecution as a Jew and who had to negotiate the trials of being a woman in academia... was not able to recognize the need to listen to African Americans before pontificating to them on how they should conduct their struggle and what their order of priorities should be.<sup>43</sup>

Sartre equally does not "recognize the need to listen" to the voices of the African poets he is introducing in "Black Orpheus." This comparison uncovers the depths of whiteness that engulf the words of Arendt and Sartre. Even Arendt's identity as a Jewish woman is unable overcome the veil of whiteness that engenders her "pontification" on the tragedy at Little Rock. In this moment, the boundaries of whiteness and blackness appear to be deeper than gender or religion. Consequently, it becomes the obligation of whites not to decrease the depth of this boundary but learn how to operate within it in such a way that combats any sense of superiority. In order to do so, one must become aware of conditions that normalize habits and behaviors which perpetuate superiority.

Two of the primary mechanisms that perpetuate the normalization of superiority between white and black subjects are language and discourse. Tension between subjects is fostered by the language each subject employs. Whether consciously or subconsciously, language and discourse generate a unique conflict between black and white subjects. Perception of the other naturally alters the way in which we speak to them. This conflict is therefore not only discursive but equally embodied. Consequently, a tension propagated both through language, discourse, and bodily perception becomes the focal point of our analysis of the preconditions that give rise to

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<sup>43</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. "On Needing Not to Know and Forgetting What One Never Knew." P. 238.

white superiority and white ignorance. We will begin by exploring Frantz Fanon's articulation of the relationship between the black subject and language.

## Chapter 2: The Differend of Race

### 1. On Discourse and Language:

Fanon's understanding of racialized difference in *Black Skin White Masks* begins, interestingly, with an investigation of the relationship between the black subject and language. In particular, Fanon focuses on the case of the black subject from the Antilles mastering the French language. One of the ways in which the black subject from the Antilles attempts to gain access to the white world, as Fanon understands, is through mastery of a language predominantly used by white subjects: "The problem that we confront in this chapter is this: The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter — that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language... A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language."<sup>44</sup> It would follow that if the black subject from the Antilles can come into possession of the French language, he or she should therefore possess the world represented or rather "implied" by that language — one that is white. Fanon thus identifies a relationship that exists between language and existence, "for it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other."<sup>45</sup> The thought process here is that through language, the black subject may begin to exist in a way that allows him to engage with other subjects who possess the same language. Equally, the French language would permit the black subject from the Antilles to interact with and engage in discourse with other white subjects from the metropole. Yet, as Fanon illustrates, this objective is merely an illusion.

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<sup>44</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. P. 9.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* P.8.

In reality, the French language is not a means of accessing the white world but rather a mechanism that preserves the black subject's inequality within it. The black subject from the Antilles must always confront a "problem of language"<sup>46</sup> when entering the white world of the French metropole. Regardless of the position that the black subject living in the French metropole occupies, he or she remains a victim to a discourse built around race and racism. Fanon is disillusioned with such a belief in the power of language for he himself has been subjected to racial oppression despite his own education in France and mastery of the French language:

Negroes are savages, brutes, illiterates. But in my own case I knew that these statements were false. There was a myth of the Negro that had to be destroyed at all costs. The time had long since passed when a Negro priest was an occasion for wonder. We had physicians, professors, statesmen. Yes, but something out of the ordinary still clung to such cases. "We have a Senegalese history teacher. He is quite bright. . . . Our doctor is colored. He is very gentle."<sup>47</sup>

These fragments of dialogue Fanon used quite deliberately reflect everyday discourse from white subjects in France. They expose more than merely racialized microaggressions but rather evidence of a fundamental conflict that extends from language and skin color. The "Senegalese history teacher" or the "colored doctor," with whom Fanon surely identifies, remain unable to access the white world despite their mastery of the French language and their position in society. An inherent gap persists between white subjects and black subjects and the worlds they inhabit. Language is thus unable to overcome the "fact of blackness" that Fanon describes. Perception of the body and skin color persists. It becomes clear that language for Fanon is indeed a "living language," as Lewis Gordon understands, in which "flesh and such language are, in other words,

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<sup>46</sup> Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. P. 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* P. 88.

symbiotic.”<sup>48</sup> Language thus engages in a symbiotic relationship with the flesh it inhabits. If language and the body are engaged in such a symbiotic relationship, this raises doubts about the stark divide between philosophical traditions of phenomenology and later philosophies of language. For Fanon, it appears that one such divide does not exist in the case of race. Language and the body are too closely intertwined in the lived-experience of the black subject, and by invoking such a divide, one only obscures the problem of racial difference. The work of Jean-François Lyotard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty helps demonstrate how discourse and embodiment interact to preserve fundamental inequality between black and white subjects.

## **2. The Differend:**

For Lyotard, the differend is first and foremost “a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments.”<sup>49</sup> Hierarchical difference is at the heart of this “conflict” which takes place between two subjects attempting to engage in a discourse with one-another. If we begin to understand the differend as a gap or rather a chasm of incommensurability between these subjects and the phrases they produce, we may isolate the root of this linguistic differend that takes place between subjects of different races. More precisely, the differend takes place between the phrases that each subject produces. One subject will judge another subject’s phrase differently than he or she has intended. This is a result of conflicting “rules of judgment,”<sup>50</sup> as Lyotard understands, governing the phrases of each subject. The “rules of judgement” that Lyotard understands are

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<sup>48</sup> Gordon, *What Fanon Said*. P.25.

<sup>49</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Minnesota University Press, 1989, Preface, P. XI

<sup>50</sup> Lyotard. *The Differend*. P. XI

contingent upon the “rules of genres of discourse”<sup>51</sup> which prescribe responses or “linking”<sup>52</sup> of phrases between subjects. This process of linking phrases, as Lyotard understands, *must* take place even if the genres of discourse are incommensurable. Among the genres of discourse that Lyotard includes are art, politics, law, and ethics which each provide a unique set of “rules for linking together heterogeneous phrases.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, the genres and regimens of phrases do not always prescribe phrases that link onto each other. When this happens, a conflict is generated in discourse between subjects. This is often indicated by a resort to silence by one of the parties. Embodied difference such as gender and race can alter the rules of judgement in discourse as Fanon shows us. Regardless of his position in society or the language that he employs, Fanon describes how he must still confront perceptions of “negroes [as] savages, brutes, illiterates” when engaging in dialogue with white subjects. While Lyotard’s differend appears to relate exclusively to language and discourse between subjects, his later work applies the mechanisms of the differend to understanding how the forces at work on the body effect discourse. In particular, Lyotard presents a discussion of gender, or sexual difference, in his text *The Inhuman*.

In *The Inhuman*, published five years after *The Differend*, Lyotard discusses the presence of an “irremediable differend of gender”<sup>54</sup> that extends the application of the differend to the site of the body. He first begins by investigating a fundamental question that frames his discussion of postmodernism: “How to make thought without a body possible.”<sup>55</sup> This leads him to a discussion of the body or the “hardware” of human thought while language remains the

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<sup>51</sup> Lyotard. *The Differend*. P. XI..

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. P. XII.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996. P. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Lyotard. *The Inhuman*. P. 13.

“sophisticated software.”<sup>56</sup> As Cecile Lindsay confronts the notion that “Lyotard’s recent work [on language] has, so to speak, turned its back on the body,” she argues that “the body *does* figure in an important, if cooler, way in these discussions, and its role of contesting organicism, identity, and the subject remains constant.”<sup>57</sup> According to Lindsay, the body and bodily differences are very much present in the background of Lyotard’s work on language, including the differend. In this way, “the same characteristics” of the linguistic differend such as “heterogeneity, multiplicity, and incommensurability” apply to his discussion of the gendered body.<sup>58</sup> It is important to clarify that the differend of gender that Lyotard develops is not simply referring to a difference of gender but rather an incommensurability that ensues from the thought and language stemming from the gendered body. As Lyotard explains: “thought is inseparable from the phenomenological body: although gendered body is separate from thought, and launches thought.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, the differend of the gender that Lyotard explores is catalysed from the way that the gendered body “launches” thought and language. This understanding of a differend stemming from the body opens up an entirely new application of the framework of the Lyotardian differend to understanding thought and language launched from the racialized body.

If there exists a differend of gender, a differend of race must surely be present as well.

Toward the conclusion of the first chapter, Lyotard engages in a discussion of the operations of the differend of gender:

Finally, the human body has a gender. It’s an accepted proposition that sexual difference is a paradigm of an incompleteness of not just bodies, but minds too. Of course there’s masculinity in women as well as femininity in men. Otherwise how would one gender

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<sup>56</sup> Lyotard. *The Inhuman*. P. 13.

<sup>57</sup> Lindsay, Cecile. "Lyotard and the Postmodern Body." *L'Esprit Créateur* 31, no. 1 (1991). P. 41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26286636>.

<sup>58</sup> Lindsay. “Lyotard and the Postmodern Body.” P. 44.

<sup>59</sup> Lyotard. *The Inhuman*. P. 23.

even have an idea of the other or have an emotion that comes from what's lacking? It's lacking because it's present deep inside, in the body, and the mind.<sup>60</sup>

Lyotard presents a fundamental difference in human thought derived from gender differences. In particular, the “paradigm of an incompleteness” that Lyotard alludes to illustrates how one’s mind recognizes a notion of completeness in bodies, altering the language that one employs. This paradigm can be connected to our comprehension of Fanon’s discussion of language in *Black Skin, White Masks*. More specifically, this paradigm of incompleteness helps clarify how Fanon understands the case of the “the black man [who] wants to be white.”<sup>61</sup> In this instance, Fanon demonstrates the same paradigm of incompleteness operating on a basis of race rather than gender. For the black subject who “wants to be white,” the white subject represents a certain sense of completeness. Equally, this paradigm is also present in the case of the white subject for he or she realizes that they are not black but rather white and therefore “complete.” Fanon’s analysis indicates that one such paradigm is an everyday confrontation for the black subject who finds himself in the white metropole. However, this paradigm presents itself differently to white subjects. While the black subject who is thrown into a white world retains “an idea of the other [the white]” from which the “emotion that comes from what is lacking [namely, whiteness]” extends, the white subject does not experience a sense of “what is lacking” for the social context in which he is situated privileges white skin as “complete.” In this way, we can begin to see evidence of a fundamental conflict in thought between white and black bodies that invites a discussion of the differend operating not only through differences of gender but equally, if not more importantly, through differences of race.

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<sup>60</sup> Lyotard. *The Inhuman*. P. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. P. 3.



Applying Lyotard's differend to the case of the black and white subjects engaging in discourse clarifies the operations that perpetuate racialized difference. Genres and rules of judgement guiding discourse are inextricably affected by a subject's race. Race therefore forms its own differend just as gender does. The black subject believes that, through mastery of the French language, he may come closer to a sense of completeness by effectively increasing his degree of whiteness. Yet, as the black subject from the colonies arrives in the metropole and realizes that even mastery of the French language does not allow him to navigate the white world as expected, discourse breaks down not only for the black subject but also for the white subject. Both are unable to communicate with one another on an equal level for both are simultaneously perceiving each other's body, gender, and skin color. This act of perception subconsciously alters the rules of judgement of the Other's phrases. Even if the black subject is capable of "express[ing] himself properly" and effectively "putting on the white world."<sup>62</sup> the French language remains incapable of overcoming the white subject's perception of the black subject. Meanwhile, discourse has already been altered by the black subject who believes that he may be able to engage in dialogue with the white subjects of the metropole simply by way of the French language. While the black subject may believe their phrases are being judged by the white subject equally due to the black subject's mastery of French, this is not the case. Here, we begin to see an inherent difference in power, derived through the differend of race, with the white subject above the black subject. This hierarchical imbalance of power between black and white subjects at the point of discourse begins to perpetuate racialized difference. The black subject begins to realize that he or she does not fully "possess the world expressed and implied by that

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<sup>62</sup> Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. P. 23.

language.” Language proves itself as a means of maintaining the superiority of the white subject. Just as the gendered body launches thought, so does the racialized body. Yet both the thought launched by the racialized body and the universes that it creates through phrases are categorically unequal.

### **3. The Phrase Universe:**

The project described by Fanon is nothing less than the attempt of the black subject to create and take part in a universe implied by the French language. For Lyotard, subjects and subjectivity are generated through the phrase. This desire to access the universe of the white subject generates, however, a discourse that is fundamentally unequal. By examining the construction of the “phrase universe”<sup>63</sup> as Lyotard illustrates, we may further clarify this how this inequality takes root. The construction of the phrase universe is revealed first and foremost through the advent of silence. In the differend, as humans are forced to confront the “unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases, cannot yet be,”<sup>64</sup> one of the parties is forced to turn toward silence:

This is when human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom [silence]), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, P. 13

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Silence is not passive in this instance, but rather an active negative phrase that allows the subject who is wronged, in this case the black subject, to “recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds that which they can presently phrase.” In other words, silence allows the black subject to negate one (or more) of four constituent parts of the phrase universe. For Lyotard, a phrase is composed of four parts: “the addressee [that to which the phrase is sent], the referent [that to which the phrase refers], the sense [the meaning of the phrase], the addressor [that from which the phrase comes].”<sup>66</sup> Through silence, we can identify the constituent parts of the phrase universe and begin to demonstrate the role it plays in generating subjectivity in the world.

The phrase universe is equally the source of subjectivity in the world. If subjectivity is derived through the phrase universe, inequalities stemming from phrases naturally create two unequal subjects. For Lyotard, the subject is situated within the phrase universe as “the addressor.”<sup>67</sup> The subject who utters the phrase is not, however, the agent of the universe but is rather situated within the universe itself. The phrase universe thus endows the addresser with subjectivity. While we may be accustomed to understanding the subject as the addressor, the one delivering the phrase into the world, Lyotard reverses this structure by demonstrating how the subject is instead situated *within* and *constituted by* the phrase universe. In this way, Lyotard understands that “humans are not the masters of language; they do not use language primarily to communicate or to express themselves. Instead, what we call their ‘identity’ is assigned to them in the situation constructed by the various universes that different phrases present.”<sup>68</sup> Being and subjectivity are therefore posterior to and derived from the construction of phrase universes. Fred

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<sup>66</sup> Lyotard. *The Differend*. P.13

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>68</sup> Lindsay, Cecile. “Lyotard and the Postmodern Body.” P. 41-2.

Evans clarifies Lyotard's position: "We can only 'be' as the instance of a phrase; our identity as subjects, like the identity of our referents and our addressees, is determined entirely within the genre of discourse that governs that phrase, establishing us as philosophers, soldiers, clerks."<sup>69</sup>

This mirrors how Fanon understands that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" for at the moment that one utters a phrase, he or she constructs a phrase universe in which they are situated. Yet, when the genres of discourse and the phrase regimens governing the creation of those phrases are situated within a social context of inequality between races, this presents a problem to both black and white subjectivity. Effectively, this process of generating subjectivity through the creation of phrase universes only perpetuates inequality between black and white subjects. If black and white subjects are constituted by the phrases they produce, the inherent inequalities that persist in the phrases they produce generate inherent inequalities between subjects. Even as the black subject calls upon the universe represented by the French language, an incommensurability between subjects persists between himself and the white subject. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* clarifies what lies behind this incommensurability and the inequality it perpetuates in discourse, namely perception of the body.

#### **4. The Body Schema:**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduces another site of agency for humans' "being-in-the-world" that takes root at the body rather than language. By understanding this notion of the body schema, we can further clarify the differend of race that takes place between

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<sup>69</sup> Evans, Fred. "Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard, and the Basis of Political Judgement." P. 260

black and white subjects beyond Lyotard's focus on discursive interaction. Merleau-Ponty describes the notion of the body schema:

Every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body, just as every perception of my body is made explicit in the language of external perception. If, then, as we have seen to be the case, the body is not a transparent object, and is not presented to us in virtue of the law of its constitution, as the circle is to the geometer, if it is an expressive unity which we can learn to know only by actively taking it up, this structure will be passed on to the sensible world. The theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception.<sup>70</sup>

The body schema can therefore be understood as that site where one's bodily agency begins to interact with the world. In the same way that humans remain unconscious of their being throughout the construction of phrases and phrase universes, Merleau-Ponty similarly understands humans as unconscious of this field of perception that exists at the body for it is constituted by unreflective moments of "being-in-the-world." For example, when a builder constructs a bookcase with a hammer, the hammer becomes an extension of the builder's arm. The builder is equally unreflective of his body or the interaction that his body has with the hammer and the world. The body schema is what engenders this state of unreflective interaction with the world: "The body schema is the crux or reference point that establishes a stable perceptual background against which I perceive and respond to changes and movements in my environment, and thereby opens me onto a world of other selves"<sup>71</sup> The body schema thus operates as the perceptive field through which one interacts with the world and others.

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<sup>70</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 2002. P. 239

<sup>71</sup> Carman, Taylor. "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty." *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 27, No.2, 1999. P.220.

This is quite different than the linguistic field as advanced by Lyotard. While Lyotard presents a form of subjectivity that is created through the phrase universe, Merleau-Ponty understands subjectivity through embodiment. Through our bodies, we may begin to interact with others rather than through language. According to Jeremy Weate's interpretation, the body schema is that which "lies between the body and the world, ... [and] engenders communication between the one and the other."<sup>72</sup> The body schema is that from which all communication between subjects arises. Furthermore, as Weate continues, "this communication, which Merleau-Ponty elsewhere describes as 'more ancient than thought,' is the moment where the body and the world order each other according to a 'perpetual contribution' of reciprocal transfer."<sup>73</sup> A constant process of ordering and reordering takes place between the body and the world. While it appears that Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard's theories of agency and subjectivity in the world run in stark opposition to one another, they are both in play for black and white subjects.

Language and bodily perception are operating simultaneously in the perpetuation of the racialized difference. As the black subject attempts to engage in discourse with the white subject through the French language, he becomes aware that the white subject is perceiving both his use of the French language and his body simultaneously. It is therefore impossible to adequately account for discourse between black and white subjects without accounting for the obvious, namely perception of the Other's skin color. While the white subject perceives the black subject's skin, the black subject is equally perceiving the white subject and his skin in comparison to his own. This perception inextricably alters discourse. In Fanon's account of the

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<sup>72</sup> Weate, Jeremy. "Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology." In *Race*, edited by Robert Bernasconi, 169-83. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000. P. 171.

<sup>73</sup> Weate. "Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology." P. 171.

lived black experience, both points of agency—language and the body—are operating simultaneously, making it impossible to investigate one while ignoring the other.

Fanon illustrates this dynamic between the body and discourse during an interaction that takes place on a metro with a white woman holding her toddler who, upon seeing Fanon, cries out: “Look, a Negro... Mommy, Look at the Negro! I’m frightened.”<sup>74</sup> In this pivotal moment for Fanon, realizes that his body is being perceived by the toddler. Fanon employs Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body schema but alters it to the case of the black subject. Just as the sentiments that characterize Sartre’s white existential subject fail to apply to Fanon’s understanding of the black subject, the same can be said for Merleau-Ponty’s body schema. For Fanon, the body schema of the black subject collapses when facing the white subject, “yielding to a racial epidermal schema.”<sup>75</sup> The body schema crumbles before Fanon’s eyes as he realizes that perception of his black body is forcing the toddler to react out of fear. In this moment, Fanon realizes that he is beginning to move towards the other and effectively exist for the other rather than for himself. He is both hyper-visible to the toddler while totally invisible as a subject. While Fanon uses Merleau-Ponty’s framework to describe a shift in the bodily perception of the black subject, there is simultaneously a linguistic element that calls for further investigation here. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the child’s phrase, “Look, a Negro” is what engenders this moment of reflection for Fanon. Equally, the toddler’s mother reaffirms the boundaries between her and Fanon as she replies to Fanon by saying: “Pay no attention, sir, [the toddler] doesn’t know that you are as civilized as we are...”<sup>76</sup> In this instance, difference in embodiment is

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<sup>74</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. P. 84.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. P. 85

clarified by the mother's comment. Both language and bodily perception are operating simultaneously in this moment. Yet the result is the same: Fanon's black skin entails a history of racialized oppression from which he cannot escape.

For this reason, Fanon also advances the notion of a "historico-racial" schema operating in the case of the black subject. Both the historico-racial and the racial-epidermal schemas in this moment are reified by the phrase universe constructed by the toddler and then affirmed by his mother. Fanon's body becomes a vessel that carries and communicates its own meaning. The fear expressed by the toddler and the condescending words of the mother are both signs of the meaning that Fanon's black body communicates. It is important to note that Fanon remains silent throughout this interaction on the train. No phrase that he could construct in this moment is capable of presenting the extent of the space of incommensurability that exists between him and the woman on the train. In the Lyotardian sense, both his racial-epidermal and his historico-racial schema appear to Fanon as new "idioms" that, in the moment on the metro, exceed the extent of what can be phrased presently. A breakdown occurs in this moment and operates both through bodily perception and through language. Through this breakdown of the body schema and phrase universes, we can place the differend of race in dialogue with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in order to arrive at a better understanding of the pre-conditions that perpetuate racialized difference; the same pre-conditions that the white moderate must confront.

While Lyotard and Merleau-Ponty appear to represent a disjunction between language and the body characterized by their respective philosophical traditions, their notions of the phrase universe and the body schema construct a dialogue of racialized difference that is both discursive and embodied. Lyotard's conception of the phrase universe presents a mode of



“being-in-the-world” that is inextricably discursive. A phrase universe composed of addressee, referent, sense, and addressor provides humans with a means of interacting in the world and with others. The phrase universe becomes the site at which “being-in-the-world” takes place for Lyotard, as Heidegger understands that term. Being and agency cannot, therefore, precede the phrase universe for they are created both in and by it. Yet, as Fanon shows us, the black subject is unable to create the phrase universe through his possession of the French language that is capable of overcoming blackness. This indicates that the body schema is equally at work here, interfering with the white subject’s ability to interact with the black subject through his phrase universe regardless of the black subject’s mastery of the French language. The only thing that stands in the way of this is the perception of the black subject’s body and skin color. Although the black subject may speak French perfectly, may assimilate himself into the white world of the French metropole, his body schema has already been reduced to a racial-epidermal schema by the white subject. The only way in which the black subject may become aware of this collapse of his body schema is by engaging in discourse with the white subject. This is precisely what takes place on the metro as the toddler yells out “Look, a Negro!” The link between the phrases employed by the toddler and his mother to express their perception of Fanon’s black body and the collapse of his body schema into his racial-epidermal and historico-racial schemas is impossible to ignore. The white subject, in this instance, becomes the agent of one such collapse. This situation that helps further clarifies the conflict between Sartre and Fanon surrounding Sartre’s “Black Orpheus.”

Sartre’s reduction of the *négritude* movement alters the rules of judgment of the reader, divesting the black poets of the opportunity to express themselves and engage in the reclamation

of an authentic black identity. In doing so, this critique of the *négritude* movement operates in such a way as to render the future generation of black poets aware of their own racial-epidermal and historico-racial schemas. Regardless of the authenticity that their work aspires to construct for the *négritude* movement, Sartre assures that their work be judged merely as a step in a larger dialectical progression towards Marxism. In this act, Sartre effectively reminds readers and the black poets themselves that they are ultimately existing for the Other, for history, for a predominantly white proletariat, and not for themselves. This act deprives the poets of their ability to move towards an authentic black identity. With the rules of judgement altered, the poets begin to realize that their words, which appear in the French language, remain incapable of overcoming the facticity of their blackness. While this conflict may appear to be simple and easily avoided, it is much more complex for it is derived through the unconscious habits that constitute the actions of white subjects. Sartre is unconscious that his words participate in the reduction of the work of the black poets, depriving them and future generations of black poets of their body schema and introducing them to their racial-epidermal and historico-racial schemas. In effect, their words fail to construct a subjectivity that allows them to interact with a white audience for Sartre has altered the rules of judgement. Sartre's work thus exposes the differend of race. What I hope to isolate through this investigation of the work of Lyotard and Merleau-Ponty is a framework of the daily lived processes that constitute racialized difference between white and black subjects that is both discursive and embodied. Both language and perception of one and the other's body function hand in hand in a such a way as to reify racialized difference. These mechanisms, however, cannot be ignored in the context of racism and racially charged violence that persists in the United States today.



## Chapter 3: The Differend of Race in America

### 1. Coates on the Body and Discourse:

American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me* structures his text as a letter to his son about growing up and living in a world that permits and perpetuates violence against black bodies. Through this work, Coates uncovers a unique and important understanding of race and racism in the United States. Coates' text was published in 2015 after a series of attacks inflicted on black bodies in the United States including the killings of Trayvon Martin in 2012, and both Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014. These killings were carried out by police and law enforcement agents in New York, Missouri, and Florida. It is no surprise that Coates centers his analysis of race and racism directly on the black body. Acts of racism, specifically acts of violence on the black body by whites, is what creates and defines race according to Coates. Race does not precede racism but is rather created by it. For this reason, Coates directs the majority of his attention towards a critical discussion of what it means to inhabit a black body in the United States under constant fear for his life. The black body is indeed the central focus to Coates' text and the focal point for his theory of race and racism as Jill Gordon argues that Coates "provides an anti-idealist argument that violence against the Black body is the cause of, not merely the effect of, various racial ideations."<sup>77</sup> And yet, contrary to Gordon's argument, discourse and language factor significantly if not primarily into this account of race and racialized difference.

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<sup>77</sup> Gordon, Jill. "Black Bodies Matter: A Reading of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*." *Graduate Philosophy Journal*. Vol. 38, No.1, 2017. P. 199.

Coates begins *Between the World and Me* by describing an interview he conducted in which a presumably white interviewer asks him to describe “what it meant to lose [his] body.”<sup>78</sup> Gordon is correct to advance a reading of Coates’ work as “in its entirety, a reply to that interviewer’s question.”<sup>79</sup> Yet, her reading fails to recognize that the question of this interviewer ultimately calls upon Coates to engage in a discourse of race and racism. As Coates continues, he describes: “A satellite closed the miles between us, but no machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak.”<sup>80</sup> In this instance, Coates identifies a chasm or “gap” of incommensurability that exists between the worlds inhabited by the black subject and the white subject respectively. This gap is similar to the one Fanon identifies between himself and his white counterparts in recognizing that he was the one who must become “responsible at the same time for [his] body, for [his] race, for [his] ancestors.”<sup>81</sup> The world that both Fanon and Coates have been summoned to speak for remains entirely separate from the one inhabited by the white subject. Just as Fanon does, Coates recognizes that he has been called upon to present something which, in the Lyotardian sense, exceeds “that which can be presently phrased.” In other words, Coates has been called upon to testify to what has been done to his body, his race, and his ancestors; he has been called upon to bear witness to the space that exists between these two worlds; to bear witness to the differend of race. This becomes increasingly evident as the conversation with the interviewer proceeds.

Throughout the interview, we observe the same ignorance that provokes Fanon’s response to Sartre’s “Black Orpheus.” Coates goes on to describe how “the host read these words

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<sup>78</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2015. P. 5.

<sup>79</sup> Gordon, Jill. “Black Bodies Matter.” P.1.

<sup>80</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. P. 5.

<sup>81</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, P. 85-6.

for the audience, and when she finished she turned to the subject of my body, although she did not mention it specifically. But by now I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body without realizing the nature of their request.”<sup>82</sup> In this moment, the same act that Sartre commits in “Black Orpheus,” of failing to recognize the nature and implication of his words, unfolds in front of Coates. The interviewer had equally forgotten the facticity of her own whiteness and what it entails. In Sartre’s case, reducing the négritude movement to a simple step in the dialectical progression of Marxism generates a gap that, as Robert Bernasconi understands, reinscribes his white gaze and introduces the future generation of black poets to their racial-epidermal schema. Sartre’s ignorance of his responsibility to listen to the words of the black poets instead of reducing them only reifies the same gap between his world and the one inhabited by black subjects that Coates identifies. In Coates’ case, the interviewer equally had “forgotten [her] own ignorance” of this gap between worlds that reinscribes her white gaze upon Coates. Thus, in order to launch his discussion of the black body in *Between the World and Me*, Coates begins at the same fundamental conflict derived through discourse.

Coates chooses this interview to frame his discussion of a history of violence inflicted on black bodies in the United States, and indeed, we can read *Between the World and Me* as a response to the interviewer, one that Coates was not able to produce at the time of the interview itself. He adamantly rejects the project of abstract phrasing and over-conceptualization as a means of understanding racial difference, exclaiming that “all our phrasing -- race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy -- serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that is dislodges brains, blacks airways, rips muscle,

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<sup>82</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. P. 5-6.

extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.”<sup>83</sup> Although Coates attempts to move away from language, discourse, and abstract phrasing and toward the black body, it is impossible to ignore the fact that discourse underlies his analysis every step of the way. In fact, we may read *Between The World and Me* as a three-part dialogue between Coates and his son, Coates and the interviewer, and Coates and the reader. Together, these dialogues bear witness to the gap between black and white worlds. Coates’ text invites a discussion of the role that this gap plays in perpetuating violence against black bodies in the United States. This gap must be understood as the differend of race.

The differend of race is indeed operating in the background of Coates’ analysis, engendering a mode of argumentation that normalizes violence against black bodies. While the differend that Fanon’s work uncovers is derived and remains primarily within his daily lived experience and his encounters with white subjects and not through examination of racialized violence, Coates’ text expands this understanding to show how the same differend, of discourse and embodiment, is operating behind acts of violence on black bodies in the United States. Coates demonstrates a connection between this gap between worlds preserved by the differend and violence on black bodies. In this case, the differend manifests itself most clearly through discourse that takes place in the courtroom, in particular in trials concerning the use of police force against black bodies. What takes place in the courtroom is not the “violence” itself but something greater: the normalization of violence against black bodies and the assurance that it will continue to persist in American society. Such cases generate a conflict between the genres of discourse governing law and race.

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<sup>83</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. P. 10.

## 2. The Differend in Court:

Court cases surrounding the use of police force against black bodies expose the destructive effects of the differend of race on black identity. As noted, Coates' text operates partly as a response to a series of attacks by police officers on black bodies. Coates approaches a discussion of the injustice of the American justice system by recounting his son's reaction to the result of the trial against Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. He picks up the dialogue with his son as he writes:

That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free... It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed... I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.<sup>84</sup>

In this moment, Coates highlights his son's sense of hope that Wilson would be brought to justice in court. Yet, this sense of hope in the American justice system is undermined and effectively destroyed by the dropping of charges against Wilson. This moment exposes how the differend operates within the courtroom of the United States, engendering a conflict not only between discourses governing race and law, but more importantly between those governing black and white bodies.

In *The Differend*, Lyotard uses the courtroom to explore the case of the Holocaust denial argument made by Robert Faurisson against the existence of gas chambers at Auschwitz. Faurisson advances an argument that only accepts the testimony of a survivor of the gas chambers as proof that they (the gas chambers) were *not* used to carry out the Final Solution. The conclusion of Faurisson's argument is that "since the only witnesses are the victims, and since

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<sup>84</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. P. 11-12.



there are no victims but dead ones, no place can be identified as a gas chamber.”<sup>85</sup> This conclusion places a new and impossible responsibility on the plaintiff whom Lyotard envisions as an Auschwitz survivor: to produce adequate proof of the existence of a gas chamber. Yet, Faurisson will not accept the testimony of any such a survivor because they were not a victim of the gas chamber. The responsibility that now falls upon the survivor renders them the “victim.” A victim, in this sense, is the person to whom a “wrong” is done. A “wrong,” as Lyotard defines it, is “a damage accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage.”<sup>86</sup> In this case, the survivor has suffered a damage in being called upon to prove the existence of something while being deprived of the means of doing so. This deprivation is the result of a shift in the rules of judgment by Faurisson. This conflict therefore qualifies as a differend, or “the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.”<sup>87</sup> A gap or chasm of incommensurability ensues as the plaintiff realizes that no existing phrase adequately presents the wrong that has been done by Faurisson’s argument. The plaintiff, who now becomes the victim, as Lyotard understands, is thus forced to turn toward silence. Ultimately, Faurisson’s argument places him in a supervisor position *above* the survivor, generating a dynamic of superiority within discourse.

This dynamic of superiority produced by Faurisson’s argument can be likened to the situation that takes place in the courtroom during trials pertaining to violence against black bodies. Faurisson’s argument produces a discourse in which he is the superior party. He dictates the rules of judgement and does not leave any space for those of the survivor. The same dynamic

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<sup>85</sup> Lyotard. *The Differend*. P. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. P. 9.

of superiority takes place in the courtroom between black subject and white subjects. As Fanon shows us, the rules of judgement are dictated by the white subject whether consciously or unconsciously. The testimony of the black subject must adhere to the rules of judgment set by the white subject or turn toward silence. Yet, the rules of judgment governing the law do not account for a history of violence against black bodies born from racial fear, prejudice, and hatred. The courtroom provides an ideal situation in which this mode of argumentation may be exploited as victims of racialized violence are called upon to testify not only to the crime that has been committed but equally to a long-standing history that extends back to the beating of Rodney King and lynch mobs in the South. In effect, they are summoned in the courtroom to testify to the distance between their world and the world of the white subject; a space of incommensurability that exceeds the extent of that which can be phrased presently; a differend of race. The differend of race manifests itself in the courtroom, perpetuating a discourse that normalizes violence against black bodies.

The structure of the argument that takes place in this courtroom is similar to that of Faurisson's, rendering the plaintiff (the black subject and/or their lawyer) incapable of presenting the wrong that they have suffered at the hands of the defendant (the police officer(s)). Oftentimes, an argument for "self-protection" or "fear for one's life" is advanced by the police officer. This argument alters the rules of judgment for any testimony of the plaintiff. If the actions taken by the police officer(s) were carried out as self-protection, the genre of discourse governing the actions of a police officer is completely different from that which governs the testimony of the the black subject. As a result, the rules of judgment for any testimony offered by the plaintiff are altered because they are testifying against the actions of a law enforcement agent

whose actions are endowed with the protection of the law. Yet, the genre of discourse that pertains to the law does not afford the black subject an adequate opportunity to present the damage that they have incurred, a damage based on race and racial fear. Thus the dilemma faced by the black subject is that they are called upon to testify on behalf of something that cannot adequately be presented in the prescribed genre of discourse governing the court of law. This ignores the facticity of race differences. More specifically, they are called upon to appeal to a history of racialized violence that falls beyond the boundaries of most white judges and juries. The specifics of these cases of police violence amplify the difference of race.

In nearly all modern cases of police violence on black bodies, videos, phone calls to dispatchers, and audio testimony are employed as proof of the injustice that has taken place. Yet, despite these pieces of clear evidence, the plaintiff or witnesses are called upon to produce further proof of the injustice. Regardless of clear video evidence of Rodney King being beaten by police officers or the chokehold administered on Eric Garner, the plaintiff remains tasked with presenting the injustice that has taken place. On one hand, the plaintiff is called upon to provide proof that a crime has been committed (e.g. the use of excessive force) and on the other hand to testify to the same gap between worlds that Coates describes. If the former becomes impossible, given the extent of the protections provided to police officers, then the latter becomes the objective of the testimony. The black subject, however, is forced to confront the reality that this gap between worlds does not fall within the competence of the white subjects (judges and juries) to whom he is testifying. Thus, it becomes impossible to present any other form of proof other than that which is made abundantly clear by videos and phone calls. This conflict that occurs in the courtroom results in a decision that fails to do justice to the victim.

Yet, dropping charges against the defendant in this case does more than an injustice to the black subject, but obliterates the body schema of all black subjects, making them acutely aware of their racial-epidermal schema.

By dropping charges against Wilson and other law enforcement officers, the court normalizes violence against black bodies in America, depriving the black subject of their body schema and introducing them to their racial-epidermal and historico-racial schemas. If we return to Coates' address to his son, we can observe how this collapse takes place. As Coates explains to his son what his parents tried to explain to him, namely that "this is [his] country, that this is [his] world, that this is [his] body, and [he] must find some way to live within the all of it," we see how Coates clarifies his son's racial-epidermal schema. The visceral experience that Coates' son undergoes as he becomes aware of the dropping of charges, evidenced by his display of emotion, can be placed in conjunction with the one that Fanon experiences on the train. As Fanon moves towards the other, realizing that his body has been revealed to the other's consciousness rather than to his own, he experiences a feeling of nausea. This nausea is now accompanied by fear, as Coates' son realizes that not only is his body existing for another but it may be destroyed if the other wishes it to be. Not only may it be destroyed, but no justice will be served. Thus, we may trace this collapse of the body schema of the black subject back to a fundamental conflict between genres of discourse governing the law and a history of systemic race and racism in the United States.

Ultimately, the differend of race that persists behind court proceedings, in the media, and in daily interactions between white and black subjects produces a discourse that both introduces the black subject to their racial-epidermal schema and normalizes violence against black bodies.

In this sense, Coates' text builds upon the differend of race demonstrated in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Coates shows how the mechanisms of discourse that perpetuate racial difference in our everyday lives and bleed into courtrooms, newsreels, and political discourse of the United States in order to normalize violence against black bodies. Thus, bearing witness to this inextricable connection between the daily discourse we engage in and the perpetuation of violence against black bodies becomes an essential consideration of the white moderate.



## Conclusion:

Perhaps asking ourselves, 'What can the white moderate do?' is the wrong question. This project began as an analysis and articulation of the underlying conditions of the white moderate in the hopes of finding a way to change them. However, this analysis does not concern what the white moderate 'can do' to combat his condition but rather what might *provoke* him? What pushes the white moderate to confront the facticity of his own whiteness? What obliges him to confront his own complicity in a discourse that normalizes violence against black bodies? These questions effectively shift a certain sense of agency *away* from the white subject and *toward* the black subject. The social context that unwittingly provides the white subject the agency to think that he can "do" anything to remedy this condition is the context that preserves his social dominance, perpetuating a differend of race. This same social context also inspires the sense of agency that led Sartre to write his critique of *négritude* in his "Black Orpheus," allowing him to feel as if he were in any position to come to the aid of the the black subjects instead of listening to them. Indeed, this investigation arose in this context: thinking that one could "do" anything to change the condition of the white moderate, to absolve oneself from the limitations and the history inscribed by one's whiteness. Yet, as we have shown, one cannot simply strip away one's whiteness. Just as the black subject is forced to learn how to live within the boundaries of their blackness, so too must the white subject learn how to live within the boundaries of his whiteness consciously. This process includes understanding what one's whiteness entails. Ultimately, this project calls upon the white subject to recognize that the very desire to "do" something is born within a social context that perpetuates their superiority.

Within this social context, there are two forms of agency operating simultaneously: that of the white subject who finds himself in a position of socially imposed superiority over the black subject and that of the black subject or, in this case, the black writer whose testimony both bears witness to the differend of race and incites one to action and understanding. Between these two subjects lies the differend of race that generates and preserves an inequality of discourse. This inequality is equally derived through the feeling of one's own agency. The white subject who feels his agency or rather his *potency* to act and effect the world in this case preserves an inequality of discourse. The task of reducing this inequality can only be accomplished if the white subject, in the superior cultural position, comes to acknowledge the social context in which his agency originates and opts not to act but rather to *listen* to the testimony of the black subject. The words of Fanon, Dr. King, Césaire, Coates and generations of black subjects whose testimonies bear witness to the differend of race and its implications on the black body become a the lens through which the white moderate may begin to confront his whiteness. In this sense, the white moderate also bears witness to the differend of race by confronting the chasm that exists between himself and the world of the black subject. I argue that this *shift* or rather this *return* of agency to the black subject is what we this analysis serves to demonstrate. This initial provocation, this turn toward the words of Fanon or Coates, returns a sense of agency to the Other and works to combat superiority of discourse. This step becomes to first toward the extrication that Fanon prescribes for the white man. Such provocation cannot take place if the agency remains in the hands of the white moderate, for this only reinscribes the differend of race rather than bearing witness to it.



This analysis engages in a project of provocation. While this analysis may ultimately fail to provoke its readers, particularly its white ones, to turn their attention towards the differend of race and simultaneously towards the facticity of their own whiteness, it is my hope that they may search to do so elsewhere. In order to be provoked in this way, to see one's own whiteness, one must first understand what their whiteness does. Both Fanon's and Coates' texts demonstrate how blackness has a history of violence attached to it. The black body has never been safe nor secure in the white world for this world is propagated on the normalization of violence against black bodies. Just as black bodies have a history of violence inscribed on them, white bodies have a history of carrying out that violence. There is a semiotic aspect to this phenomenon too, for the black body is "coded" and "read" by the white subject as violent. The white moderate "who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice" remains so insofar as he is unable to recognize his own complicity in this act of perception and the history that his own skin color perpetuates. So what is it that calls him to recognize his own complicity in this history? Whether the white subject recognizes it or not, his skin equally has a history ascribed to it, and it is one that has participated in the perpetuation of racialized difference for centuries. This history, this past, one that has permitted the white man to ignore the differend of race and operate within its paradigm of superiority is what Dr. King calls our attention to. It is a history that the white moderate must become responsible for in the same way that the black subject has been forced to become responsible for his "body, race, and ancestors." Yet, even this awareness may fail to provoke the white moderate to confront the facticity of his own whiteness. So what does?

Ultimately, there is no single author, event, or image that will provoke the white moderate to begin to ask himself about the fact of his own whiteness. We cannot realistically attempt to quantify the source or moment at which this desire to confront the differend of race comes from, but we can indeed explore this question of provocation and the impact it has. The question of what, if anything, compels white people to confront their own whiteness and what it entails requires a nearly Cartesian descent into doubt that few people are able to make. The ability to question the ways in which one's behaviors, one's language, and one's identity are merely the product of a systemic inequality of race is a daunting task. Yet, in order for whites to be extricated from their superiority, I argue that it is incumbent upon all white subjects to participate in this process. While Fanon and generations of black writers and theorists have upheld their side of Fanon's plan for extrication, the same cannot be said on the side of the white subject. Lots of work has been done to examine the roots of white superiority without ever questioning the nature of the agency that allows one to think that they have the power to promote this type of change. Instead of adopting an approach to these questions that perpetuate white agency, one must shift agency to recognize and listen to the voices of the black subject. This may become, perhaps, the first step towards provocation: listening.

The new white moderate is therefore the one that listens and, in so doing, engages in a process of bearing witness to the differend of race. While Jean-François Lyotard provides no clear route to overcoming the differend other than that of "bearing witness,"<sup>88</sup> perhaps this is the place to start. Bearing witness can take many forms. Yet listening, reflecting, and bringing

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<sup>88</sup> Lyotard. *The Differend*. P.XIII

oneself to a greater consciousness of how we perceive others and construct our phrases around them is a first step towards the extrication that Fanon envisions.



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