

THEORIZING RACE AND RACISM IN AN AGE OF DISCIPLINARY DECADENCE *

Lewis R. Gordon

Since I was born on the island of Jamaica, some of the etiquette from my countrymen and women have compelled me to begin this talk with the words "Good Morning." I would like in addition to thank the organizers of these proceedings, particularly the administrator Ms. Grace Franklin, for their effort.

Congratulations, Faculty, Students, Staff, and the Caribbean community, for the founding of the Cultural Studies Program and your wisdom in putting together this conference. In truth, both offer the possibility of rethinking *culture* in academic terms. I say academic terms because of the obvious fact that the University of the West Indies is an academic institution, and it is refreshing these days to see academic institutions remember that they are such, especially around questions of culture.

There are some pitfalls in the study of culture that it would be well advised for the program at the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill to avoid. One of them is the tendency to function as Third and Second World informants for First World audiences. Although imperial realities demand such a relationship, it doesn't follow that we should render ourselves custodians of its continued abuses, as emerged in First World cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s. By First World cultural studies, I mean the type of work that came out of Britain during that period and its North American variations. The genealogy of such work emerges from a set of scholars whose allegiance divides according to the work of the early and the later Stuart Hall. Works built on Hall's earlier writings tend to be of the Gramscian and neo-Marxist kind. Those drawn from later developments focus on poststructuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Frankfurt School critical theory. Where there is unanimity is on an admirable set of rejections—for example, of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism.

Yet, however well intentioned, there are some abuses worth examining. First, there is, particularly among the Brits, a seemingly vehement antiblack sentiment. Simply put, in spite of their claims to the contrary, their writings suggest that these scholars do not seem to like black people – or at least dark-skinned black people. At first, this attack emerges through a class analysis. The error here is the failure to appreciate what Oliver Cox called the proletarianization of blacks.¹ Think, for instance, of Fanon's quip in Black Skin, White Masks:

One day St. Peter saw three men arrive at the gate of heaven: a white man, a mulatto, and a Negro.

"What do you want most?" he asked the white man.

"Money."

"And you?" He asked the mulatto.

¹See Oliver Cromwell Cox, Race: a Study in Social Dynamics. 50th Anniversary Edition of Caste, Class, and Race, Preface by Cornel West (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). For recent discussion of the proletarianization of blacks, see Joe R. Feagin, Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations (New York: Routledge, 2000).

"Fame."

St. Peter turned then to the Negro, who said with a wide smile: "I'm just carrying these gentlemen's bags."²

One could easily add the gender dimension to labor along with this point. The existence of middle-classed black men and women don't negate the modern history that has not only linked blacks to labor, but also to *slave labor*. The distinction between labor and slave labor is located at the point of entitlement. Slave labor is denied *any* entitlement whatsoever, and as such, it makes any effort toward recompense appear as crossing sacred borderlines. The slave and slave descendants who seek more for their labor—in fact, seek *anything* for their labor—encounters a world that treats him or her as a transgressor.³ Thus, calling, say, the Irish "the blacks of Europe" in the European context fails to address the fact that there were blacks in Europe and in Ireland who turn out to be the blacks in North America, South America, Asia, and Australia, and those blacks carry the weight of a history of being expected to carry bags for the whites and the many shades beyond which black represent the nether regions.

One might wonder why I call such research antiblack cultural studies. One simply need look at some of the more influential texts. It would seem that blacks are the most virulent sites of the evils of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. The white world could sleep better at night with this redistribution of modern political evil. Nearly every black revolutionary, freedom fighter, and Pan-Africanist receives a bashing for not sharing this community of scholars' cultural centrism or 1980s and 1990s brand of postmodern ethics. Thus, Anthony Appiah attacks Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. Du Bois as racists; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. attacks Frantz Fanon as a Caribbean-hating *evolué* who really considered himself white; and Paul Gilroy attacks Martin Delany as sexist for referring to Africa as the 'Fatherland.'⁴ The most recent of Gilroy's attacks on at least New World blacks, for

²Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Charles Lamm Markman (New York: Grove, 1967) 49.

³Studies abound. For examples in the Caribbean situation, see Elsa V. Goveia, Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century (New Haven: Yale UP, 1965), Historiography of the British West Indies (Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1980), and The West Indian Slave Laws of the 18th Century (Barbados: Caribbean University Press); Joan Dayan, Haiti, History, and the Gods (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1998); Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: a Student Reader, revised and expanded edition, ed. Verene A. Shepherd and Hilary Beckles (Kingston, JA: Ian Randle; Oxford: James Currey; Princeton, NJ: M. Weiner, 2000); and, of course, C. L. R. James, The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution, 2nd Edition, revised (New York: Vintage, 1989). In the North American context, see Rogers M. Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997), Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom (1850–1925) (New York: Vintage, 1976), Angela Y. Davis, Women, Race, and Class (New York: Vintage, 1983), and Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

⁴See Anthony Appiah, In My Father's House (New York: OUP, 1992); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Critical Fanonism," Critical Inquiry 17 (1991):457–478; Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

instance, is the thesis that we are both inspiration and the continued legacy of fascism.⁵ Kobena Mercer writes of black Americans as though they are more homophobic than any other group of men.⁶ And we find scholars like Cornel West and Michael Eric Dyson buying into such rhetoric with additional, exotic racial riffs such as 'black sexuality' while constantly warning us against the dangers of 'essentialism.'⁷

This is not to say that we should not criticize our ancestors. After all, some of them *did hold* racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist positions. The problem is that the criticisms of them are often posed in the midst of a failure to point out that although black people are the majority population in the Caribbean, the overwhelming representation of Caribbean reality has been from the perspectives of whites, Asians, and lighter-mixed peoples from the region. (Think of the Dominicans who continue to insist on being mixtures of white and Native Caribbeans or 'Indians.') Caribbean cultural studies should reflect the reality of the Caribbean, and that reality is a ceolized or mixed reality, true, but it is also a reality in which there have been, and continue to be, antiblack currents that have left the African dimension in need of much study. This does not mean that the African aspects must be isolated out of their connections with other dimensions of the Caribbean. It simply means that they need to be appreciated dimensions of that reality.

The second problem with First World cultural studies approaches is the ironic fact that they are reactionary to the Caribbean through the occlusion of Caribbean intellectuals. After all, Blyden and Fanon were Caribbean intellectuals. They were part of a legacy of thinkers who have offered some of the most groundbreaking interpretations of culture. What this should tell us is that the Caribbean, whose rich legacy includes writers ranging from C. L. R. James through to Sylvia Wynter and Wilson Harris, need not take a subordinate role on questions of cultural *thought*.

There are other problems with First World cultural studies that go beyond their antiblack limitations. For example, there is the problem of methodological reductionism, to which I will return below. Such reductionism is marked by a set of clichés. These clichés include often callous use of the expressions 'social constructivism,' 'essentialism,' and 'neurosis.'

⁵See Paul Gilroy, Against Race (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000). For criticism of Gilroy's text, see Hortense Spillers, "Über Against Race," Black Renaissance 3.2 (2001): 59–68.

⁶Kobena Mercer, Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies (New York: Routledge, 1994). A curious feature of the charge of homophobia is that black women are nearly never accused of this offense, although there is ample literature by black women against lesbian activities (see, e.g., Cheryl J. Sanders, "Sexual Orientation and Human Rights Discourse in the African-American Churches," Sexual Orientation and Religion, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Saul Olyan [Oxford: OUP, 1998] 178–184). It is simply easier to find black women who are not against gay *men*; such men aren't perceived as trying to sleep with them.

⁸See Cornel West, Race Matters (Boston: Beacon, 1993) and Michael Eric Dyson, Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996). For a critical engagement with Cornel West both on his analysis of culture and his read on African American canonical thinkers and present-day giants, see Cornel West: a Critical Reader, ed. by George Yancy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001).

Social constructivism is often appealed to as the conclusion of an argument instead of its beginning. Knowing that something is socially constructed only informs us that society or the social world has something to do with it, but it doesn't tell us about its meaning, how it is lived, or the impediments toward its transformation. The same with essentialism. The charge of essentialism is often hurled against any identity or totalizing claim without the distinction between a claim to an essence and a claim to an essential consequence of or prescription from an essence. Saying something is essentially *x* or *y* doesn't entail an ideology of essence. One needn't be committed to the view that something 'must' continue being *x* or *y*. And finally, the psychoanalytical offense. The attitude here can be summarized in the expression, 'Everyone is neurotic.' If everyone were neurotic, neurosis would lose all meaning. The problem with this view is that it renders neurosis normative. To be without neurosis becomes a form of abnormality.

So the question is raised, what would be a better route to take on cultural studies? I have already hinted at one path in Caribbean cultural studies—namely, that we should take advantage of the rich though imperfect history of Caribbean thinkers. I also pointed out that it should not be an antiblack Caribbean studies. Black reality isn't faring well into the third millennium. To understand the situation, we could go back to W. E. B. Du Bois's much criticized speech, "The Conservation of the Races," which he presented in front of the Negro Academy in 1897.⁸ Beyond its many famous insights ranging from the observation of twoness and double consciousness to the sloppiness of race discourses is its peculiar policy query. It can be summarized thus: What should the world look like at the end of the twentieth century? After having seen what European conquest and colonization have done to the indigenous people of North America, Du Bois was in fact imploring his fellow black intellectuals to take seriously what the European nations were doing to Africa. If the American project were effected in Africa, then the indigenous population faced the possibility of being reduced, as in the case of the indigenous Americans, to 4 percent of their original numbers. Du Bois and his fellow Pan-Africanists, in spite of their arrogance, and at times racism (many considered indigenous Africans 'savages'), managed to fight an important war against genocide. Nevertheless, we live the mixed assessment of their efforts. The African continent is now the habitat of only 8 percent of the human species.

The question of blacks' relation, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to the rest of the human species brings the human question to the fore. Cultural studies is a branch of human studies, and as such, it stands on the philosophical anthropological foundations available. Part of cultural studies should not, then, be a reactive but active one of presenting a critical anthropology or a new critical human studies through which the very notion of culture can both be situated and play a vital role.

The rest of this discussion will take place in three parts: first, an exploration of the problem of reductionistic experience; second, an advancement and critique of disciplinary decadence and race; and third, an outline of theoretical themes offered by what I call a teleological suspension of western thought.

⁸W. E. B. Du Bois, "On the Conservation of the Races," African Philosophy: an Anthology, ed. Emmanuel Chuckwudi Eze (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 169–274.

Part I: Experience

Cultural studies is a branch of human studies that involves theoretical and empirical work. A mediation of both is experience. Experience is something uniquely offered by the member of cultural groups under study. Acting under the dictates of standpoint epistemological approaches to cultural studies leads the cultural theorist to take the position of limited knowledge of any group of which he or she is not a member. This leads to two approaches. The first is the undesirable approach: use informants (members of the group) and acknowledge limitations as an outsider. The second, often desirable approach: Be the informant and the theorist by studying one's own group. On both counts, experience is a key factor.

Experience is, however, a sacred cow. Everyone, for instance, has had the experience of trying to figure out his or her experience. When this emerges, the self becomes untrustworthy. One seeks a trusted confidant for assistance. What this tells us is that the figuring out of experience brings something to experience that goes beyond the self as the source of legitimation. The interpretation of experience is not, that is, a private affair. It is part of the complex world of communication and sociality. This dimension of experience raises some problems of its own. First, it is very important what both the one who experiences and those who interpret the experience draw on for the development of their interpretation. If the one who experiences plays no role in the interpretation of the experience, then a form of epistemic colonization emerges where there is dependence on the interpretations from another's or others' experience as *the* universal condition of interpreting experience.⁹ The more concrete manifestation of this is familiar to many black intellectuals. In most academic institutions, including, unfortunately, many regions dominated by people of color, the following formula holds: colored folks offer experience that white folks interpret. In other words, formulating theory is a white affair. We see this from even colored theorists who prefer to examine the world of color through Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, or Michel Foucault instead of C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, or Wilson Harris.

This is not to say that experience should be rejected from the theoretical work of people of color. The impetus behind such an appeal is the terrible history of the human sciences, in which European theorists acted as though people of color had no inner or subjective life. To appeal to colored experience was also an effort at asserting the reality of one's inner life. This is why Du Bois wrote of 'souls' and 'consciousness' and Fanon of 'lived-experience.'¹⁰

The task, then, is to avoid *reductionistic* experience — that is, to reduce people of color *only* to experience. There is, by the way, an ironic, performative contradiction to such efforts beyond the reality of epistemic colonization: to lock oneself at the level of experience is a theoretical move *beyond* experience. In effect, then, the abrogation of theory to whites is a form of *bad* theory. This form of bad appeal leads to a peculiarly

⁹For more discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000) chapter 2.

¹⁰See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, intro. Nathan Hare and intro. Alvin Poussaint, revised and updated bibliography (New York: New American Library, 1982) and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, chapter 5.

existential failure—the appreciation of people of ourselves as *thinking* beings. Such a lack of appreciation blinds us to a precious dimension of the human condition. No one incapable of thinking can be expected to be taken seriously as a human being.

Part II: Disciplinary Decadence, Race, and Racism

Any Caribbean cultural studies that doesn't address the history of race and racism in the Caribbean would be severely limited. It's not that every instance must address these issues, but the overall project must have such an encounter as part of its program. All discussions of race and racism rest on their discussant's conception of human studies. Human studies has been, and in many instances continues to be, dominated by two kinds of disciplinary fallacies. The first is methodological with two dimensions of its own. The first dimension was pointed out by W. E. B. Du Bois a century ago. It is the social scientific tendency to make colored people into problems themselves instead of studying them as people who face problems. The second dimension emerges in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he declares: "It is good form to introduce a work in psychology with a statement of its methodological point of view. I shall be derelict. I leave methods to the botanists and the mathematicians. There is a point at which methods devour themselves."¹¹ What Fanon means here is that it is easier to study what doesn't think and cannot return the look and study *you*. It is like looking at a pointing finger instead of that at which the finger points. As signifying beings, the action by human beings always points beyond the human. The human being is always involved in future-oriented activity that always tests the scope of law-like generalizations.¹² This is why human studies at best derives principles and is an interpretive affair. The best 'laws' of human nature we could find are simply those that we share with animals but which are, by virtue of speech and culture, we have already gone beyond. As Fanon put it:

The only possibility of regaining one's balance is to face the whole problem, for all these discoveries, all these inquiries lead only in one direction: to make man admit that he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and that he must put an end to the narcissism on which he relies in order to imagine that he is different from the other "animals."

This amounts to nothing more nor less than *man's surrender*.¹³

The second disciplinary fallacy is what I call *disciplinary decadence*.¹⁴ This phenomenon is the error of disciplinary reductionism. It involves ontologizing one's discipline — literally, collapsing 'the world' into one's disciplinary perspective. Many of scholars have witnessed its various incarnations: literary scholars who attack social scientists for not being literary;

¹¹*Black Skin, White Masks* 12.

¹²For discussion, see, e.g., *Existencia Africana* chapter 4, and Peter Caws, *Ethics from Experience* (Boston: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1996). Some earlier efforts include *The Philosophy of Science* and *Science and the Theory of Value* (New York: Random House, 1967). See also his recent *Yorick's World: Science and the Knowing Subject* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993).

¹³*Black Skin, White Masks* 22.

¹⁴See Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: an Essay in Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995) chapter 5.

social scientists who attack literary scholars for no being social scientific; natural scientists who reject the humanities lack of 'scientific rigor'; historians who reject everyone else for not being historical; and philosophers who reject everyone for not being philosophical — and especially historians for being historical. The specifics according to disciplines takes on a variety of 'isms.'

In race theory, for instance, there is *biologism*, where the biologist presumes the meaning of concepts to be embedded in the organism without an account of the social processes that make those meanings normative. There is *psychologism*, which presumes, for example, that race and racism are dimensions of an individual perspective. There is social psychology, true, but in the end, psychologism is about the dispositions or cognitive states of individuals. Thus, a radical relativism is difficult to avoid in psychologistic appeals. Worse, a form of metaphysical nominalism emerges in which institutions and language structures become fictional. Here, sociology could serve as a corrective, except in cases where it collapses into *sociologism*, which presumes (1) either the quantitative or demographic character of race and racism or (2) the reduction of all race and racist phenomena to the social world. Here, there is a failure to address the natural *and* psychological dimensions of the human condition: We are simply not only social beings. The *literary textualist* approach commits the fallacy of presuming that the answers to race questions are intratextual and intertextual. In effect, it's as if the answers are already there and we need only decode them. In the cases where the texts are literally published or unpublished written manuscripts, there are so-called 'race theorists,' for example, who think that specializing in race theory is a matter of simply figuring out a particular race theorist's position on race. It collapses theoretical work simply into at best the function of an interpretive critic. And finally, though not exhaustively, there is *historicism*, which treats race as a function of the historical determination of social forces. Here, we have a mixture of sociologism and textualism, for in the end, the answers are embedded in forces that simply have to be tabulated or decoded. There are other philosophical problems with this approach. For one thing, there are clear *trans*-historical dimensions of human differentiation, which even an appeal to the 'epoch' cannot ignore. In the U.S., for instance, there is a debate about the moral turpitude of the 'founding fathers,' a group of white propertied individuals who, in effect, hijacked the ideals of the American Revolution. In their defense, some scholars have argued that we should not judge people of the past by values of the present.¹⁵ The reply, however, is that such critics want to eat their cake and have it too. For, how radically different are values over a period of ten generations of people in the same country? Don't both the eighteenth century bourgeoisie and 'we' share the same valuative epoch? Isn't in calling us members of 'western civilization' a way of articulating that shared value? Since the argument requires shared values, and since such critics already take the position that western civilization is 'our' value base, there is something contradictory at work in their objection. If the response requires a greater gap in time, how great should it be? A thousand? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand years? Finally, there is nearly no historic moment in which there is unanimity over values. There are always dissenters; in the U.S. case, there were blacks, indigenous people, white

¹⁵See, e.g., Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: a New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990) and John McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, 2nd Edition (New York: Free Press, 2001).

women, and many others who protested as their revolution was literally soled out under their feet.¹⁶

A viable response to disciplinary decadence is what I call *teleological suspensions of disciplinarity*. The concept of teleological suspension first emerged in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard as a critique of Hegel's system.¹⁷ Hegel had advanced his system of the dialectical unfolding of Absolute knowledge, of the domestication of all reality by the historically marching force of Reason understood as an isomorphism between rationality and reality.¹⁸ Such an unfolding culminates in a theology or systematizing of God. Kierkegaard's objections were on many levels. He located morality, rules, systems, at the level of what he called "the universal," but he pointed out that faith transcends the universal. In other words, God cannot be domesticated by universal categories, even of morality, but is instead the teleological foundations of them. In other words, God is 'right' even when God goes beyond the universal. A paradox thus emerges. The individual of faith suspends the universal in the spirit of God, a teleological pursuit, which requires the emergence of an ethics, religious ethics, which is itself always subject to its own suspension by virtue of its teleological source of valuation.¹⁹ I have argued elsewhere that this approach need not be limited to discussions of ethics. It can serve as a metatheoretical assessment of theory and disciplinarity as well.²⁰ In philosophy, for instance, professionalism has created a near deontological conception of philosophical work as the quest for intrasystemic consistency.²¹ Most 'great' philosophers, however, emerged from either the periphery of the discipline or through a commitment to questions that, in their time, appeared beyond the scope of the discipline itself. In effect, then, 'great' philosophy emerged from thinkers who were not worried about whether they were philosophers. Such suspension could be performed in many other disciplines; it involves taking the risk of suspending the ontological priority of one's field or discipline for the sake of a greater purpose or cause. For black peoples in the modern world, this cause or purpose has often taken two forms: survival and freedom.

¹⁶See the following two excellent studies, Rogers Smith, Our Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in American History (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999) and Joe Feagin, Racist America.

¹⁷See Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling" and "Repetition," trans., ed., and intro. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).

¹⁸It's in most of Hegel's writings, but see especially his Science of Logic, trans. A. V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1989).

¹⁹For discussion of there not being the elimination of ethics but its paradoxically ethical suspension, see Calvin O. Schrag, "Note on Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," Philosophical Papers: Betwixt and Between (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994) 27–32.

²⁰See Lewis R. Gordon, "Introduction: the Call in Africana Religion and Philosophy," Listening: a Journal of Religion and Culture 36.1 (2001): 3–13.

²¹See also John McCumber, Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2001) for an account of the political dynamics of such professionalization.

The concerns of survival and freedom stimulated two correlative, philosophical concerns of being and liberation. The former pertains to questions of who or what we are, of identity and its ontological dimensions. The latter emerges through the historical reality of colonialism and racism. Beyond the question of the meaning of liberation, the struggle against colonialism and racism is primarily a matter of the relation of theory to practice. The identity question, however, takes concrete form in the social identities of race and ethnicity. The Caribbean has a rich intellectual history in the study of these two tropes in modern thought. Its tradition includes such thinkers as Haiti's Joseph-Ant  nor Firmin, who offered perhaps the most sophisticated, nineteenth-century philosophies of human science and philosophical anthropology in addition to a response to Comte de Gobineau's racist treatises.²² There is St. Thomas's Edward Blyden, whose work on race and the relation of theory to practice, marked by his argument on the flexibility of theology versus religion, contributed greatly to our understanding of the limits of secularization. Cuba's Jos   Mart   offered one of the earliest New World critiques of Americanization and the conceptions of race that accompanies it. There are Martinique's Aim   C  saire and Frantz Fanon, the former coining N  gritude and poetic, anticolonial discourses grounded in black consciousness, the latter offering an original philosophical and social critique of western rationality, white normativity, and modern imperial politics the result of which are major groundings for postcolonial thought.

From Trinidad, there is the work of C. L. R. James, whose creative challenges to orthodox Marxism brought new insights into struggles for liberation. There is Sylvia Wynter, who adopted C  saire's semiotic concerns and Fanon's sociogenic ones to present a poststructural view of race at the dual levels of identity and liberation. Many of these thinkers, and many more, are engaged by Paget Henry in his groundbreaking *Caliban's Reason* through his organizing motifs of 'poeticism' and 'historicism.'²³ The reality of identity and liberation concerns is a symbiotic one; liberation cannot be forged without knowing *who* is the subject of liberation, and the notion of a *who* or a *what* outside of teleological or purposeful dimensions brings back the question of liberation or that the realization of which something or someone ought to become. In Henry's work, the poetist tends to favor the identity concerns, concerns of cultural activities constitutive of the Caribbean 'self,' whereas the historicists tend to be interested in changing the social conditions of Caribbean peoples. The two ultimately converge, however, in that historical change produces new peoples, new 'selves,' and the poetic understanding of the self can be linked to an ever-evolving identity the consequence of which requires liberation. There are, in other word, historic poetists and poetic historicists in the development of Caribbean thought.

Today, such matters of identity and liberation are complicated by two extremes that dominate academic theoretical reflection: neopositivism and postmodern hermeneuticism. In philosophical terms, neopositivism, as in earlier instances of positivism, aims for a form exactness, as in the exact sciences, that renders 'meaning' and 'interpretation' suspect. Postmodern hermeneutics has the advantage of looking at the world of interpretation, but

²²Joseph-Ant  nor Firmin, Equality of Human Races: a Nineteenth Century Haitian Scholar's Response to European Racialism, trans. Asselin Charles, ed. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (New York: Garland, 1999).

²³Paget Henry, Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2000).

it does so at the expense of truth and objectivity. In many ways, both converge in that they collapse into obsession over methodology at the expense of truth. The neopositivist believes that all truth beyond what is gained by the methods of the exact sciences is trivial and therefore inconsequentially dropped. The postmodern hermeneuticist takes the position that truth can never meet tests of permanence and exactitude, which means that it should be subordinated to processes of interpretation. A question that is raised in response to both, however, is that of the dynamism of truth. Why can't truth be dynamic?

The neopositivist and postmodern hermeneutical limitations play themselves out in contemporary race theory (perhaps the most recurring focus of the identity question). These limitations are guided by several clichés in cultural studies of which I earlier spoke. In race theory, they are advanced against race by the antirace wing as follows. Natural scientists reject race; therefore, so should the rest of us. This position is held by such theorists as K. Anthony Appiah and Naomi Zack. Natural science is treated as the proper ontology with which to deal with reality, and all that is not grounded in such is often referred to, by these theorists, as 'fictions.' These theorists also argue that the best way to get rid of racism is to get rid of race. Paul Gilroy's recent work brings him in this camp. And then there is a third wing: The concept of race lacks rigor when dealing with racial mixture. There are several camps here.²⁴ Some, like Naomi Zack, argue that 'mixed race' is a nonracial category, literally 'racelessness.' Others, especially those in Latin-American cultural studies, argue, through such notions as *mestizo* identity, that mixtures are *unique* racial categories.

In response to the claim of the scientific invalidity of race, we may wonder why the natural sciences should be treated as the final arbiter of everything. Wouldn't that be a case of disciplinary decadence? Why couldn't the following argument hold: Race proves the limitations of the natural sciences, if by natural sciences are meant such disciplines as physics, chemistry, and biology. There are many things that cannot be explained in terms of these disciplines. Take, for example, the concept of 'meaning.' Or, for that matter, these disciplines themselves—the concepts of 'physics,' 'chemistry,' and 'biology.' There are many concepts the treatment of which exemplifies the limitations of science. The German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers and the Japanese philosopher Nishitani have shown, in agreement with Edward Blyden, for instance, the *Religion* is a limit not only for science, but also for philosophy.²⁵

The argument against race on the basis of the natural sciences suffers further from the fallacy of authority. Why are natural scientists more authoritative than other areas of inquiry, especially when it is not the case that scientists are in agreement on this matter. There are scientists who believe in races, and not all of them are nutty eugenicists. One encounters race in typical consultations with physicians worldwide, and in the field of obstetrics, pediatrics, and hematology, failure to take race seriously can have severe

²⁴All of these emerge in Naomi Zack, ed., American Mixed Race: the Culture of Microdiversity (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995). Another recent effort is Rethinking Mixed Race, ed. David Parker and Miri Song (London: Pluto, 2001).

²⁵See Karl Jaspers, Philosophy of Existence, trans. and intro. Richard E. Grabay (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1971) and Ketsji Nishitani, Religion and Nothingness, trans. Jan Van Bragt, foreword by Winston L. King (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1982). For Edward Blyden, see his African Life and Customs (London: C. M. Phillips, 1908).

consequences. In such cases, there is a familiar Anglo-Caribbean expression known as *breeding*. In truth, the term 'race,' whose etymology extends to the Italian *raza*, was originally used in the early modern (circa sixteenth century CE) to refer to the reproduction of selected traits in plants and animals. Today, science, namely, genetics, is in fact showing that we are all variations of a small group of dark-skinned peoples from the Southeastern region of Africa, in spite of popular artistic efforts to present these people as very hairy and very dirty white people. Put differently, everyone of us on the earth today is simply a variation of what we now call 'black people.' If we look at race as regarding the selection of traits to be carried on — selection, in the case of human beings, mediated by culture — then it should be clear that what much of humanity has been aiming for is to split off into different *species* of hominids, or new species of people. This is a biological aim that is socially mediated.

The aim for a separate species of hominids raises a question that challenges the argument that advances the rejection of race as the basis of rejecting racism. There are existential and material responses. The existential response is that one could be committed to antiracism while believing in race. In other words, even if different species of hominids were to emerge, we would still face similar existential, ethical, and political questions of how to act on such difference. This was *in fact* the reality of people in Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century, since they *believed* in such difference. For them, a black and a white might as well have been a donkey and a horse, the combination of which would be a sterile mule from which we acquired the term 'mulatto.' In many ways, every fertile mulatto challenges racial ideology.²⁶ The term 'mulatto' alludes to another process of race and racism: naming. The argument that racism depends on race raises the question of whether a phenomenon must have a 'name' or a 'conceptual' apparatus for its existence. That there are many instances of us responding to things whose names we do not know or that stands outside of our understanding or range of familiar objects is the counter argument to required-naming provided we reject linguistic idealism. By linguistic idealism, I mean the view that nothing can exist without a name. I doubt, in the end, that most neopositivists and postmodern hermeneuticists would like to maintain this position. There is, however, an insight raised by the question of naming if we ground it in the process of language as a communicated reality. Communication, at least at the level of *human communication*, requires social and cultural dimensions. These dimensions, as Frantz Fanon has argued in *Black Skin, White Masks*, are reservoirs of creativity, and the things they create are, in his words, *sociogenic*, that is, social in their origins. What this means is that the social world can create and eliminate *kinds* of people. Once created, the claim that their identities themselves are the problems is a failure to address the social dynamics of their creation; it makes them the problems instead of the society that created them. But more, that the society creates identities, popularly known, redundantly, as 'social constructions,' there is an error in condemning such constructions as fictions.

²⁶Here we find problems with the mixed-race theorists who argue for the uniqueness of biraciality. In effect, this construction functions like the "mule" construction since they cannot reproduce themselves as their identity. Two "biracial" partners would not produce a "biracial" child. They would have to find a white partner with whom to produce a "biracial" offspring. Oddly, the logic doesn't follow with finding a black partner. At most, one would say that the offspring has some mixture. For more discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, chap. 3. See also Helena Jia Hershel, "Therapeutic Perspectives on Biracial Identity Formation and Internalized Oppression," *American Mixed Race*, 169–181.

Social walls function as impasses just as well as those made of bricks and stones. The mechanisms of dismantling them and building new structures are what is different. The social ones are entirely dependent on human reality for every moment of their maintenance, but not the entirety of their being. What is *understood*, for example, if another species one day decodes our world will be the world we have created, a world that might outlive us, albeit fragmented, as do ancient ruins across the contemporary landscape.

There is much more that I can say on race, but for both matters of space and time, I should like to close with some reflections on Caribbean thought. As we will see, the discussion of race relates to but does not overdetermine those considerations.

Part III: Caribbean Thought as a Basis of Caribbean Cultural Studies

I see Caribbean thought as a species of, although not exclusive to, Africana thought. By this, I mean African-influenced thought. It is not exclusively so because the Caribbean is a convergence of many cultures, but a problem with the many other cultures is their resistance to mixture. The European elements see themselves as properly European the extent to which they exclude the others. It undergirds the racial notion of whiteness as 'pure.' A similar reality applies to Asian elements, although there are, in fact, many mixtures internal to Asian civilizations. The African and the Native American elements are, however, those that most accommodate mixture. Not only was there creolization of African languages in pre-colonial Africa and the same creolization processes among Native New World populations, but one finds that those are the communities that most manifest creolization in the New World, and they do so for obvious reasons: They have the least resources with which to dictate their identities. For them, survival requires mediations that lead to creolization. The political reality, which in turn had epistemological consequences, is that European ordering of these populations under the category of "primitive" over the past five hundred years has led to a negative zone with regard to studying what they offer the world of *ideas*. That the African-descended comprise the majority of people in the Caribbean, and the African- and Native American-descended comprise the majority in Central and South America means, as Paget Henry has shown, that a vast reservoir of epistemic contributions have been left at the wayside. In his recent writings, he argues the same about the East Indian contributions to such nations as Guyana and Trinidad.²⁷

If these elements of the creolized societies of the Caribbean were taken into account, a vast array of research will open up. It would be necessary to revisit and address, for instance, questions of myth. Myths are more complicated than simply the Greco-Roman and Mesopotamian ones that dominate our Western education and psychic life, as expressed in orthodox and semio-psychoanalysis. Asian myths are older, and we often forget that if we all came from Africa, then so, too, did the prototypes for all our myths. These African myths undergird our understanding of basic reality. For example, much is discussed today about how the lives of women are changing without an analysis of the organizing myths that situate our understanding of women and men. Women did not

²⁷See Paget Henry, "Between Naipal and Aurobindo: Where is Indo-Caribbean Philosophy?," *C. L. R. James Journal* 8.1 (2002–2003): 3–36; and "Wynter and the Transcendental Spaces of Caribbean Thought." *After Man—the Human*, ed. B. Anthony Bogues (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2005) 258–289.

always live as the subordinates of men, and in the past, there were peculiar conditions under which men emerged in leadership over women and vice versa. Nomadic, pastoral, and hunting societies lived differently than settler societies, and societies with a mixture of these elements faced complex questions on the distribution of labor. The Mediterranean, for example, is a place where northern hunters and southern agrarian communities met, and their organizing myths reveal much anxiety over the relation of the feminine to the masculine. Our world is structured by bureaucratic and market forces that provide new outlets for such myths. Today, one 'hunts' for a job, and if successful, gains tools of 'currency.' Those tools are used to 'gather' needs or amusements for the family or other basic unit. All of this is familiar to anthropologists and other students of antiquity and paleolithic periods. That most of the world today functions according to the rules of settler society renders the maintenance of patriarchy absurd, and it is no wonder that there is heightened gender conflict worldwide as some societies attempt to hold on to the permanence of values that were a function of a particular period of, say, masculine ascent.

What all this means is that theories that simply attempt to subordinate one category to another — for example, gender over all others, race over all others, class over all others, etc. — suffer from the fallacy of treating social realities as deontological or absolute, duty-bound values and meanings.²⁸ Shifts occur in societies that affect, among other things, power dynamics, and power dynamics affect social meaning. 'Power' is a term that is not often clarified by writers in cultural studies. Most often, it is Foucault's use of the term that is presumed, as if his formulations were the end-all and be-all of discourses on power. Power, we should remember, emerges in Hegel as a function of dialectical opposition of consciousness; in Marx, as capital; in Gramsci, as hegemony; in Hannah Arendt, as uncoerced exchange in a public sphere the emergence of which are deeds worthy of glory; in Thomas Hobbes and Karl Schmitt as legitimate force, which is issued only by the sovereign or the state; and in Elias Canetti, as the godlike range of actions that transcend those locked under its grip as mere mortal men, and these are but a few instances. The way in which I am using 'power' is a phenomenological revision of Canetti's view. Under this view, power begins where force ends. Think of the game of cat and mouse. When the cat catches the mouse, force is the reality of tooth and claw. But cats sometimes let the mouse go, and the mouse attempts to run away. The problem is that the cat's reach extends to the area over which it can move faster than the mouse; thus, run the mouse though with all its might, the cat will seem to pop up everywhere as if out of thin air. That "everywhere" is the sphere of influence. Everyone has a sphere of influence over his or her body and what he or she can immediately hold. That sphere is 'force.' Other people, however, have a sphere of influence that go well beyond their immediate spacial-temporal coordinates. Thus, they could be at one point of the world while influencing the activities of people at another point. They could have died many years ago, while conditioning many people in the present and the future. This is power. In government jurisdiction terms, a mayor's power has range over a city; a governor, over a state or island; a president or prime minister over a country; and the president or prime minister of an imperial nation has power over its colonies. Since today the USA is the main empire (China not withstanding and Britain delusionally so), one sees this point on the level of countries. But the point holds on levels of institutions such as corporations and nonprofit organizations, and groups of people, such as Europeans and Africans, or women and men. Whether they

²⁸For a similar critique, see John L. and Jean Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution: the Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier, vol. 2 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 18.

admit it or not, rich people are more powerful by virtue of the range of their influence always transcending their immediate selves or bodies. They could be on one point of the world vacationing while making money through someone else's labor on another part of the world. Shifts in recognition under the laws and decline in interests for certain types of activities traditionally attributed to men have led to a restructuring of the range of women's influence. What women can *do* in many contemporary societies, albeit not ideal for many women, transcends the immediacy of force. As these forces are transcended, the organizing power of different myths should come into play.²⁹

All this said, here are some considerations for rethinking Caribbean culture in terms of Africana thought.

First, thought must address its epoch, which paradoxically requires being a little bit ahead of itself, as I pointed out earlier with the argument about teleological suspensions. Genuine twentieth-century thinkers posed problems, for instance, that genuine twenty-first-century thinkers must both engage and go beyond. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century examples of such thinkers include Max Weber (with his treatment of bureaucracies and secularization), W. E. B. Du Bois (with his treatment of problematic people and double consciousness), Anna Julia Cooper (with her efficiency theory of human contribution and worth), Antonio Gramsci (with his theories of cultural capital, hegemony, and critique of common sense), along with twentieth-century luminaries such as C.L.R. James (with his theory of state capitalism and creative universality); Hannah Arendt (with her discussion of the relation of power to labor, work, and action, and the negative effects consumption has on the political), Frantz Fanon (with his argument for the semiotic and material transformation of social reality in the constitution of human reality), and Sylvia Wynter (with her persistent inquiries into what she calls the 'science of the word' and her quest for what she calls 'the human after man').

Such thinking means that we should not avoid 'grand theory.' Opposing grand theory is a level of caution reminiscent of traps set by Zeno in Greek antiquity. Zeno demonstrated that motion isn't possible because one would have to traverse an infinitesimal number of half-steps before completing a first step. The same argument was placed upon time: an infinitesimal number of halves to each unit of time. Or, for that matter, one could think of the old story of bumble bees. Bumble bees should not be able to fly. But they do. In similar kind, one's best response to Zeno is simply to go take a step, and check the change of time. There are many things that we should not be able to do *in theory*. It is a fool who clings to any validity that defies existence or, for that matter, reality. It has been a mission of thinking that humanity tries to reach beyond the limits imposed upon us. The failure of grand theories carries the paradox of their success: They enabled, even in their failure, a transformation of the human condition. What this means for Caribbean thought is that Caribbean thought should not, for instance, shun transcendental reflections because

²⁹In American popular culture, this has been happening on the level of animal totems. The male lion and bulls with flaring nostrils have been replaced by lionesses and cows. The popularity of the cow should not be underestimated. Think of how many Hollywood films with cow totems that have popped up over the past decade (e.g., Brother Where Art Thou [2000] and Me, Myself, and Irene [2000]), and in Chicago, Illinois, there was recently a cow exhibit throughout the city. Cow iconography has been popping up everywhere: cow pillows, stuffed cows, and so forth.

of their grandiosity. Such grandiose projects offer something both for constructivist Caribbean thinkers and their critics.

Caribbean thought should take seriously the critique of the rural–urban divide in Africana thought. We should recognize that thought is affected by the exigencies of space. For example, much political thought is prejudiced by its etymological foundations — namely, in the Greek *Polis* or Greek city-state. Barbarians stood outside such walls. Cities, however, required ways of organizing people that increasingly created distances between them. For matters of exigency, numbers facilitated such organization, and because of how many people occupied cities, representation proved more efficient in their administration. Rural communities, on the other hand, tend to engage each other more frequently in person, and speech functions in the organization of social life creatively. Rural communities tend to be more congenial to the practice of participatory democracy, that is, than urban ones, which are more suited for representative structures of government. That ‘democracy’ is the avowed political aim of every Caribbean society means that the rural–urban divide needs to be addressed creatively. In some islands (for example, Jamaica), the ‘country’ (rural) element is much valorized, but the reality is that the island is governed by people of the city (Kingston). But the city isn’t dealing with the complex relation to the ‘country’ in *its* country but instead with the cities of other countries. Needless to say, this is a conflict as old as the existence of cities, and the conflict continues.

The earlier discussion of power returns here in the form of the question of oppression. For it should be clear that the sphere of influence affects the life opportunities of people in each region. It affects them not only on the level of the rural to the urban, but also of the countries in relation to other countries. The political reach of each island is not equal, and none of them is equal to the political reach of North American, European, and Northern Asian nations. On the level of groups, there are groups that face oppression by virtue of the reach of their actions that transcend force. When people lack power, their sphere of influence move inward to the self to the point of *implosion*. Thus, oppression is a function of the range of “normal” actions available before process of implosion begin. An oppressing people have more options available to them to avoid implosion; an oppressed people do not. That is why oppressed people are always trying to ‘fix’ themselves. It is only sphere over which they have effective reach. One could readily see that this observation suggests that notions such as ‘victim’ and ‘innocence’ have nothing to do with oppression. Oppression is about imposed limitations; victimization is about being both innocent and harmed. An oppressed person needn’t be innocent. What is crucial is that the options in a society be such that the sphere of normative action is accessible. Normative action is the set of activities expected for a human being to live with dignity among his or her fellow human beings.

This point about dignity and living among one’s fellow human beings raises the question of freedom. Freedom, as opposed to mere liberty, is a meaning-constituting activity. Oppression is experienced in a situation of limited liberty because one’s freedom is always faced as a possibility of action. Because one can live through oppression in many ways — albeit not the most desirable way to live — poses freedom as a constant demand on human existence. That the Caribbean is a region structured by dynamics the consequence of which is neocolonialism (that is, yoked to the policies of North American and European powers) and oppression (that is, with racism) means that the question of freedom, which in the Caribbean context may mean a genuine *postcolonial* condition, must be a feature of Caribbean thought, as it is so in Africana thought.

The question of freedom also raises the question of the philosophical anthropology that it demands. The complexity of the human being as both the impediment to and the source of freedom is a case in point. Human beings both create the world we live in and are conditioned by that world. To take on such a complex dynamic, we must, then, take on the question of 'reality' in our thought. That question pertains to the relationship between our embodiment and the social world, and it relates to the question of the ontology necessitated by the emergence of social *reality*.

Looking into the reality of the social world means, as well, challenging the sacred-secular divide. This challenge, as we have seen, was understood by Edward Blyden in his African Life and Customs. Recall his observation that it is much easier to change the theology of a people than their religion. The normative underpinnings are the religious reality. In the Caribbean, the case in point is the use of the term 'Christian' on many islands. Although there are many Christians in the Caribbean, it is incorrect to say that that is all they are. One learns a lot about people's beliefs during times of birth, puberty, marriage, and death. A mere glance at many Caribbean people's rituals around these phenomena reveal the continued normative force of Yoruba, Ibo, Akan, and other African rituals. In addition, the East African and Middle Eastern influences are not limited to Christianity. The Judaic dimensions of Caribbean normative life should be taken seriously, especially among such groups as Rastafarians, and, as Paget Henry has argued, the Indo-Caribbean communities offer, as well, normative elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. In the end, Caribbean thought requires an engagement with these resources for the understanding of the self and community in the Caribbean context.

The counsel on religion applies as well to aesthetic productions. What is the Caribbean without its variety of music, dances, plastic arts; foods and drinks; clothing? And in all this are varieties of expression that contribute to the discourse on Caribbean ideas. Many Caribbean people use song lyrics as they do proverbs, and while they may not be the end-all and be-all of thought (which they need not and shouldn't be), they are at least a contribution. An insight from such production is the call to be epistemologically imaginative. By resisting in-advance rejections of such terms as 'binaries' and 'dualism,' Africana and Caribbean thought can work through such categories when they are most relevant. Could computer technology and processes premised on distinctions work without binaries? We should bear in mind that whereas Prospero Studies dominated the 'modern world,' Caliban Studies might be the future so long as we continue to fight for our freedom, so long as both such studies are teleologically suspended for the sake of freedom.

All this brings us finally to the transformation of the geography of reason. Caribbean cultural studies, as in Caribbean thought, requires a shift or expansion in the scope of reason. The geography of reason has been yoked to the path of European and American advancement. This advancement has been a familiar trope in different periods of history. Egyptians, for instance, expanded to their limit, and in their wake emerged Greece and subsequently Rome. In Rome's wake stood its aqueducts and highways that netted an entire area into the Holy Roman Empire. And in that empire's fall, emerged a series of consolidations that became Europe in the north and the Islamic world in the South and East, and in their fall came Europe's offspring America, and its two rivals — first the former Soviet Union (the East) and an imbalanced Islamic world (the East) conditioned by reactions to American policies. But no empire exists forever. The resources required to maintain them are often more than the rest of humanity can bear. In the emergence of the American and lesser eastern empires were the various slave trades, Atlantic and East

Indian and Mediterranean (Arabic). These trades, and many of their fallen empires, have left tracks that have stood as highways across oceans and sky, through which the geography of reason can be renegotiated. The question of thought in the Caribbean, of the study of culture and ideas, is a step toward this new possibility of reason, which, in the end, is the beginning of an effort toward a genuinely *new* world.

** This paper was first presented as one of the keynote addresses at the conference (Re)Thinking Caribbean Culture, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados, June 2001. Special thanks are here extended to the organizers and editors for their patience with regard to the submission of the written version of this talk.*